The meaning of “life’s meaning”

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Life's meaning is a deeply important yet perplexing topic. It is often unclear what people are talking about when they talk about life having “meaning”. This paper attempts to clarify things by articulating a schema for understanding claims about meaning. It defends a theory according to which X means Y iff Y is a correct interpretation of X—i.e., if Y is a correct answer to an interpretive question, Z. I argue that this (perhaps surprising) claim has impressive explanatory power. Applying this schema to life explains the many ways in which people seem to think and talk about life’s meaning, and common claims in the philosophical literature. It also makes sense of empirical findings from psychological research on perceived meaning in life.

1 Introduction

It is commonly thought that the search for life’s meaning reflects a deep human need (Frankl, 1971). In fact, the feeling that one’s life is meaningful has been linked with so many indexes of mental and physical health that it has been called a “flagship indicator of well-being” (Steger, 2017; Steger et al., 2013). Thus, it’s clear that life’s meaning is very important to us. What’s not clear is what it is.

Philosophers interested in this topic frequently jump straight to the question of what makes life meaningful, breezing past the prior question of what we are even talking about when we talk about life’s meaning (see Metz, 2013, Chapter 1 for an exception). This is surprising, given that philosophers typically pride themselves on conceptual clarity and
precision. One obvious reason to start with the conceptual question is that doing so would help us assess substantive theories. It is difficult, after all, to assess a theory without a clear understanding of what it’s a theory of. The trouble, and reason for aversion, is that the topic is notoriously slippery. Indeed, in many circles, it is something of a joke. (Think of the Monty Python film, or the countless comic strips featuring mountaintop gurus.) We seem to talk about life’s meaning in many different—and often vague—ways. Some think that there is no, or at least no coherent, concept of life’s meaning (Oakley, 2010). But the standard response to the apparent disorder is simply to take no stand on what, if anything, unifies these different ways of thinking and talking about the subject. That is, many contemporary philosophers interested in life’s meaning attempt to isolate and clarify just one of the things we sometimes seem to be talking about (e.g., Wolf, 2010), or propose revisionist theories not intended to capture ordinary ways of thinking or talking at all (e.g., Calhoun, 2015; Višak, 2017).

This paper takes the conceptual question head on, searching for the signal in the noise. It is an attempt to make sense of the myriad ways in which we think and talk about life’s meaning by integrating them into a more general account of meaning. After all, the term “meaningful” is applied to words, sentences, stories, natural signs (e.g., the rings in a tree trunk), events, activities, and entire lives. For some reason, philosophers have tended to claim that life’s meaning is unrelated to these other kinds of meaning.1 “Clearly,” Antti Kauppinen writes, “life doesn’t have a meaning like words or signs do. It… would be misleading to look for meaning of life in this direction” (2012, pp. 352–353; see also Martela, 2017, p. 234). Of

1 There are some exceptions (Goldman, 2018; Thomas, 2019; Willison, 2017).
course, words and lives are not meaningful in the same way. But, then, neither are words and signs. Such differences do not imply that these notions “have nothing to do with” each other (Kauppinen, 2016, p. 282). The different uses of “meaning” do not appear to be like the different uses of “bank” (the financial institution and the side of a river). In fact, I will defend a view on which there is an underlying unity: what something means is what one would learn if one interpreted it properly. Life, like a word or natural sign, has meaning because it admits of correct interpretation.²

To clarify this view, I’ll first discuss interpretation (§2), and then consider how we interpret life in particular (§3). Life has meaning(s), I argue, because it admits of interpretation. The many ways of thinking and talking about life’s meaning reflect different ways of interpreting life, and different things that “life” can refer to. Finally, I’ll review what I take to be the merits of this theory (§4), and some puzzles it raises (§5).

2 What is interpretation?

According to the Oxford English Dictionary, the term “meaning” first appeared in English in the 14th century. Meaning was said to be possessed by linguistic terms, stories, dreams, as well as signs and omens. Meaning was often understood to be something non-obvious, and in some cases even mysterious. For instance, only those with special powers

² This does not entail that things are meaningless until they are interpreted. Just as kale is nutritious even if it rots in the fridge, a note can be meaningful even if it slips underneath the fridge and is consequently never interpreted. The kale is nutritious because, if it’s eaten, it nourishes. The note is meaningful because, if it’s interpreted, it reveals meaning.
could decipher the meanings of divine signs or omens. But in all cases meanings were messages or information derived from meaning-bearers. Something is meaningful when, as it were, it has something to tell us. The process of “getting at the message” (Kuhns, 1960, p. 7)—i.e., deriving meaning—is called interpretation.

So, how does this process work? Charles Taylor writes that interpretation “is an attempt to make clear, to make sense of an object of study… [it] aims to bring to light an underlying coherence or sense” (1971, p. 3). Interpretation is a “sense-making” process, and making sense of something involves fitting it coherently into a web of background knowledge. To illustrate, suppose I’m driving down the road, when I see some orange cones and quickly realize their meaning: that the left lane is closing up ahead. How did I do this? As a result of my visual experience, I formed a new belief that there were cones arranged in a certain configuration in the road. This belief was then integrated into a much larger web of beliefs about traffic cones and road maintenance, the rules of the road, and so on. Situating my new belief into this web allowed me to make sense of the cones. The new belief linked up with the old ones in such a way that I could do things like predict what would happen down the road.

This account of interpretation is empirically grounded. As a couple of psychologists put it, interpretation involves “linking something new or perplexing to existing knowledge structures… The interpreting mind takes the target stimulus and thinks how it relates to what it already believes” (Baumeister & Landau, 2018, p. 5). These “knowledge structures” are sometimes explicitly called “meaning frameworks” (George & Park, 2016). They are understood to be networks of claims (either implicitly or explicitly accepted) about what the world is like and how it works. In short, the picture of interpretation that we get from
psychology is this: “When individuals encounter something… that is not currently related to an existing framework… it said to be meaningless… [it only appears] meaningful once a relationship… is discovered or imposed” (Proulx & Heine, 2006, p. 310). And thus, “[w]hen we ask what something means, we are trying to locate that something within our web of mental representations” (Martela & Steger, 2016, p. 537).

It’s important to clarify that these “webs”, “frameworks”, or “networks” of beliefs aim to represent facts. They are supposed to be veridical, and only lead to correct interpretations to the extent that they are. One can interpret something “correctly” by the standard of one’s beliefs, yet still misinterpret it because those beliefs are mistaken. For instance, in the driving example, if I believed that orange cones were only used to draw drivers’ attention to potholes, I would have concluded something erroneous about their meaning. In light of my mistaken beliefs, the erroneous conclusion might have been justified. But it would nevertheless have been a misinterpretation. I would not have seen the true meaning of the cones. To understand what makes an interpretation correct, we need to consider the point of interpretation.

We interpret in order to answer questions. This does not require that one have a specific question consciously in mind. But it does require one to be, at some level, trying to answer a question by situating an object into a larger context. Consider scientists interpreting

3 People are constantly interpreting the world around them, and the vast majority of this is done non-consciously (Griffin & Ross, 1991; Ross, 2014). Presumably, the more practiced one is at a certain kind of interpretation, the more automatic the process becomes. Someone learning a new language might, in interpreting a word, need to consciously ask what it refers
data. They might be trying to answer any number of questions. For instance: (1) “How are variables A and B related?”; (2) “What best explains these results?”; or (3) “What predictions do these data enable us to make?” (1) is about the internal structure of the dataset. Answering it involves situating individual datapoints in the context of the set, noticing patterns and interrelationships. (2) is about the origins or causes of the observations, and (3) is about their impact or effects. Answering these questions involves situating the data in the context of a larger body of knowledge (e.g., a theory) about the phenomena in question. We might call the answers to these sorts of interpretive questions *natural meanings* (Grice, 1957).

Many of the things that we are interested in interpreting are products of intentional agency. For instance, we might interpret an artifact in order to answer, “What is this for?”, or human behavior in order to answer, “What are they trying to do?” Answering such questions involves situating interpretive objects in a context of agents’ intentions or purposes. Thus, we might call the answers to such interpretive questions *purposive meanings*.

Finally, one obvious reason to interpret is to answer questions about value or importance—e.g., “What is this good for?” or “Why does this matter?” Call the answers to

4 Since folk psychology posits intentions as proximate causes of many of our actions (Ravenscroft, 2016), purpose-questions might be reducible to origin-questions. But I won’t explore this possibility here.
such interpretive questions *ethical* meanings. Ethical questions can sensibly be asked of many interpretive objects (including datasets, behaviors, and artifacts). Answering them involves situating interpretive objects into a context of values or ideals. It will also typically require knowledge of the object’s natural and/or purposive meanings, since answering a question about something’s value or importance often requires knowing its causes, impact, and the purposes behind it. Indeed, I suspect that an interest in ethical meaning underlies much of our interest in natural and purposive meanings. After all, why answer questions about something’s origin, impact, or purpose if not to better understand its value, or determine whether one should care about it? This may be why people sometimes treat “meaningful” as practically synonymous with “important” or “matters”. A question like, “Are these data actually meaningful?” can be a way of asking whether they tell us anything important.

We are now in a position to see what makes for a correct interpretation. Since interpretation aims at answering questions, interpreting correctly requires answering correctly. Formally, X means Y iff Y is an interpretation of X which correctly answers an interpretive question, Z. This is why false beliefs can lead to misinterpretation. They can lead

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5 Joshua Thomas’ (2019) view, which is quite similar to mine, accounts for natural and purposive meaning, but not ethical. This is, in my view, a serious omission for a theory that aims to illuminate life’s meaning. I’ll discuss Thomas’ view further in §4.3.

6 If, for some reason, interpretive questions had no answers, then there would be no meanings. Similarly, if we didn’t have epistemic access to the answers, then we would never know any meanings. The interpretation theory is an account of what we are doing when we think and
the interpretive process to yield incorrect answers, even when the process itself was otherwise faultless. To illustrate, consider a decline in gasoline prices. To know the meaning of this price drop one must see how it fits into the complex interactions of the economy. If “Oil production has recently increased” is a correct answer to “How did this happen?”, then that’s one meaning of the price drop. If “Carbon emissions will rise from increased fuel consumption” is a correct answer to “What effect will this have?”, then that’s another meaning. Someone with mistaken beliefs (e.g., that prices drop when production decreases, or that consumption declines when prices drop) would probably answer these questions incorrectly, thereby misinterpreting the price drop.

As this shows, on the interpretation theory, most things will have multiple meanings. A single object might yield answers to numerous interpretive questions. And those questions often admit of multiple correct answers. For instance, “What is he doing?” might correctly be answered by: “Hammering a nail”, “Building a wall”, “Building a school”, or “Building something that will benefit future generations”. (The difference between these answers seems to arise from the scale of the context into which the movements are placed.) Of course, people do talk of the meaning of X. But, it’s quite common to use definite articles despite multiplicity. For instance, when Brits talk about “the queen”, they mean the British queen. It would be silly to object, “What do you mean the queen? There are multiple queens.” Indeed there are. But context makes clear which individual is relevant. Similarly, since interpreters are talk about meaning and is thus compatible with error theories or skepticism about meaning. My thanks to an anonymous reviewer for pressing me on this.
motivated to answer particular questions, they will be looking for particular meanings. The meaning of X is thus the meaning one was looking for, the answer to the question that motivated the interpretation.

When something lacks the kind of meaning one is looking for, conversational norms will recommend claiming that it is without meaning (Grice, 1975). For analogy, consider two Americans, Abe and Bea, vacationing in a foreign country. They stop at a vendor’s stall. Abe asks Bea, “Do you have any cash?” Bea replies, “Yes,” and hands Abe U.S. dollars. Bea is either obtuse or trying to be funny. Abe was looking for cash, but he was clearly not looking for U.S. dollars. Thus, the appropriate thing for Bea to say is that she has no cash. While she does have some, she doesn’t have the relevant kind. Similarly, when something lacks the sought-after kind of meaning—i.e., when it doesn’t answer the operative interpretive question—it will be appropriate to say that it is meaningless, even if it has other kinds of meaning. This suggests that, besides correctness, interpretation is also subject to a norm of relevance. A satisfactory interpretation of X will not merely answer some interpretive question—though this would yield a genuine (if irrelevant) meaning. It will answer the question(s) that motivated the interpretation in the first place.

3 How do we interpret life?

According to the interpretation theory, understanding what people are talking about when they talk about meaning requires specifying: (1) what they are interpreting; (2) what question(s) are of interest; and (3) what network of facts the interpretive object is being placed into. Applying this schema to talk of life’s meaning explains why the topic is so confusingly multifarious. But it should also ameliorate the confusion. “Life” can refer to a number of
things. So, there are a number of potential interpretive objects. Depending on which of these one is interpreting, and depending on the interpreter’s interests, different questions will be more or less relevant, and different contexts will make more or less sense.

Sometimes “life” refers to a person’s activities. For instance, when an angsty teenager tells her parents to stay out of her life, she is telling them to be less involved in her affairs. We can think of these as parts of a life: the projects, decisions, failures, triumphs, and so on that compose a life; or even whole “chapters” of a life, like one’s childhood or time in college. These are, I think, typical interpretive objects when people talk about meaning in one’s life. (Relationships, projects, etc. are things going on in a life.)

Consider someone wondering whether their work is meaningful. One question they might be trying to answer is, “Is this a project of worth?” An especially salient context in which to interpret a part of one’s life is the whole of it. Thus, one might try to see how the project fits with one’s values and aspirations, whether it is coherent with the rest of one’s life story, whether in pursuing it one is being true to oneself, etc. Empirical research has found that, in interpreting their experiences, people do typically use “life-schemas”—their sense of who they are and their life story—as the interpretive framework (Janoff-Bulman & Berg, 1998; Park, 2010; Thompson & Janigian, 1988). But a person might also try to answer this question by situating their projects into larger contexts. For instance, one might think that one’s work would only truly be of worth if it has value for others. In that case, one might try to determine whether one’s work will make a valuable contribution to a local community, or some larger or more distant group. If one harbors grandiose ambitions, one may even try to interpret the
project in the context of global or cosmic history. (Though, the project is likely not to have meaning at that scale. I return to this issue in §4.1)

Another referent of “life” is a whole life: Albert Einstein’s, say, or Nelson Mandela’s. Whole lives seem to be the interpretive objects involved in talk about the meaning of a life. When I think about the meaning of Mandela’s life, I’m not considering specific decisions or events. I’m considering the whole thing. When interpreting whole lives, common questions might include: “Did this life have good effects?” (Smuts, 2013), “Did it go well?” (Cahn & Vitrano, 2014), and “Did it make a valuable contribution to society?” (Martela, 2017). Natural contexts in which to interpret whole lives would include a family and its history (Velleman, 2005), a community, a country, or perhaps even human history broadly. Indeed, paradigmatically meaningful lives (e.g., Einstein’s and Mandela’s) are ones that provide strong, affirmative answers to such questions, even in relatively large contexts.

Finally, “life” can refer to something even larger—not a specific life, but life itself. This expression might refer to the existence of humanity, or of living beings of any kind. This seems to be the interpretive object when people talk about The Meaning of Life. Such people are not focused on any particular life, or even any group of lives, but on something grander (Levine, 2005).

7 This is not to say that the meanings of wholes and parts are independent. The meaning of a sentence is determined partly by the meanings of the words that constitute it and how those words are arranged. But its meaning is not identical to the meaning of any individual word. Similarly, the meanings of Mandela’s life depend on, but are not identical to, the meanings of the events in it and how these parts are arranged.
If that's so, then the context in which one interprets life itself would need to be quite large: the entire world or cosmos. This is presumably why “What is the meaning of life?” is often called the “cosmic question” about life’s meaning (Martela, 2017; W. Wong, 2008). Interpreting life itself might involve asking: “Why does life exist?” or “For what purpose was humanity created?” This would explain why people tend to think that one needs a religious worldview in order to think that life itself has meaning. For it’s not entirely clear whether these questions have answers in the absence of a divine plan, or some such thing. (I’m not claiming that this is so, just noting that it’s not clear, which would explain why some people think this. More on this point in §5.)

I have suggested some questions, drawn largely from the philosophical literature, that people typically try to answer by interpreting life. The majority of them were ethical questions about life’s value, what ideals a particular life exemplifies or how well it went, etc. In other words—unsurprisingly—people are mostly interested in life’s ethical meaning. However, natural and purposive meanings can also be of interest. For instance, an orphan might seek answers to questions about their origins. Learning about their biological parents might help them to see new or different meanings in their life. People also seek, and some think they have found, a “life purpose” (i.e., an answer to the question, “Why am I here?”) that constitutes a meaning of their life. Moreover, with respect to life itself, perhaps the most natural interpretive questions are about origins (“Where did we come from?”) or purposes (“What are we here for?”).
Merits of the interpretation theory

The interpretation theory explains many ordinary intuitions and practices, and thus much of what goes on in the philosophical literature. It also fits quite nicely with empirical research on individuals’ experiences of meaning in their lives. And, finally, it has a noteworthy advantage over similar, recently proposed theories.

4.1 Making sense of the philosophical literature and ordinary practice

The interpretation theory, again, claims that X means Y iff Y is an interpretation of X that correctly answers an interpretive question, Z. Sometimes X is an utterance, sometimes the rings in a tree, and sometimes life. By unifying the various forms of meaning, the theory explains why we would call such different things “meaningful”. This is something others have had to assume was a—rather incredible—coincidence (Kauppinen, 2012; Martela, 2017). It also explains why there are three similar but distinct locutions for talking about life’s meaning: people sometimes talk of meaning in a life (when X = a part of a life), the meaning of a life (when X = a whole life), and the meaning of life (when X = life itself). By noting that Z also varies, we are also able to explain why many philosophers think that questions about life’s meaning are “amalgams of logically diverse questions” (Hepburn, 1966, p. 262). A question like, “Was this life meaningful?” is thought to be “not so much a single question but a place-holder for a whole set of questions” (Baggini, 2005, p. 1; see also Metz, 2001). This is because interpreting something (including a life) can involve answering a range of questions.

The theory also explains why life’s meaning is often considered “deep”. Depth imagery is very common in discussions of interpretation. For instance, interpretation “aims to bring to light an underlying coherence or sense” (Taylor, 1971, p. 3) and reveals what is...
“below the surface” (Skinner, 1972, p. 394). Meaning feels deep because it is revealed by this process. Moreover, by understanding interpretation as a sense-making process, the view also explains why, in other languages, expressions translatable as “life’s meaning” usually employ the language of sense-making. For instance, in French the expression is, “le sens de la vie”, and in German “der Sinn des Lebens”. This is not a Western phenomenon either. “Yiyi” and “imi” from the Chinese and Japanese expressions for “life’s meaning” (“shēngmíng de yìyì” and “jinsei no imi” respectively) are commonly translated as “sense”.

The theory offers a neat explanation for the non-additivity of meaning. For contrast, pleasure is plausibly an additive good. If one wanted to know how pleasant yesterday was, one could take each individual moment of the day, measure how much pleasure one felt at that moment, and simply add these momentary scores to calculate the pleasantness of the whole. Many think that this picture is not plausible when it comes to meaning (Brännmark, 2003; Kauppinen, 2012; McMahan, 2002, pp. 174–182; Velleman, 1991; W. Wong, 2008). One can’t calculate the meaning of a life by adding up the meaning of its constituent time slices. One can’t even assess the meaning of a part without knowing how it fits into the larger picture of one’s life. One doesn’t know, for instance, how meaningful a relationship is without at least knowing how it ends. The meaning of each part of a life depends (partly) on what came before and what comes afterwards, on how all the parts hang together. Or so many people think (Seachris, 2011). These claims sit quite nicely with the interpretation theory. Something’s meaning depends on how it should be interpreted. And interpreting something involves situating it into a network of facts—that is, seeing how it fits into a larger picture.
Many philosophers, for related reasons, appeal to narratives in theorizing about life’s meaning (Fischer, 2005; Kauppinen, 2015; MacIntyre, 1981; Seachris, 2009; Velleman, 1991; W. Wong, 2008). For instance, on Alan Goldman’s view, “meaningfulness in life is a matter of narrative intelligibility” (2018, p. 127). This makes sense, given that many of our beliefs are structured as narratives (Baumeister & Newman, 1994), and we often make sense of things by telling stories about them (Niles, 2010). Many people think about the universe in terms of a narrative—starting with a divine creation, perhaps, or the big bang. The same is true of the way people think about their country or nation (natural contexts in which to interpret whole lives—e.g., Jefferson’s or Mandela’s). Of particular relevance are self- or life-schemas (Markus, 1977; Thompson & Janigian, 1988). People tend to think of themselves as the protagonists in stories of their own making, and use these stories to interpret their experiences (McAdams, 2001; McLean & Pasupathi, 2011; Pals, 2006; Thompson & Janigian, 1988). Thus, the desire for a meaningful life partly reflects the fact that many people “care intensely for the narrative of [their] own life and very much want it to be a good story, with a decent hero” (Kahneman, 2011, p. 387). There is some evidence that people with a clear sense of narrative identity tend to experience their lives as more meaningful (Bauer et al., 2008), the same goes for people who think more about their past and future (Baumeister et al., 2013), and about different ways in which their life story could have played out (Kray et al., 2010).

However, though the interpretation theory explains why so many people see a connection between life’s meaning and narrative, it does not claim that a life’s meaning just is a matter of its narrative properties (as, e.g., Goldman does). Goldman, rightly, claims that something’s meaning depends on how it fits into a larger whole (2018, pp. 119–121).
However, that larger whole needn’t be a story. Interpretive frameworks can be non-narrative in structure. There are apparently some people who don’t see themselves as protagonists in a unified life story (Strawson, 2004), and therefore will not use such stories to interpret their lives. Yet, according to the interpretation theory, such people will be able to see meaning in life—even if it’s not the same meaning that narratively-minded people would see.

Finally, the interpretation theory explains why people often think that human lives are meaningless from the point of view of the universe (“sub specie aeternitatis”—even if they can be meaningful from a more human point of view (e.g., Blackburn, 2002, p. 79; Nagel, 1971; Tolstoy, 1899; for contrary views, see Seachris, 2013; Landau, 2011). Adopting different points of view influences assessments of meaning because it involves changing the network of facts into which one situates the interpretive object. One might initially think one’s life is meaningful, because one is interpreting it in the context of a local community. Thinking about the vastness of the universe or the distant future can suddenly produce a feeling of meaningfulness. But, as Nagel put it, this “is just a way of seeing your life embedded in a larger context” (1987, p. 96). While seeing meaning requires locating something within a larger context, if “the bigger picture” gets too big the interpretive object disappears into the background. It is hard to see (unless, perhaps, one is religious) how human life could be noteworthy in the vastness of the cosmos. We seem imperceptibly small at that scale. Hence, life’s meaning—like linguistic and other kinds of meaning—is context-sensitive. Our lives can have meanings in local contexts, even if they don’t in global or cosmic contexts.
4.2 Making sense of the empirical literature

Psychological research on life’s meaning goes back several decades (Baumeister, 1991; Crumbaugh & Maholick, 1964; Frankl, 1971). And, with the rise of positive psychology, the literature has mushroomed (Steger, 2013; P. T. Wong, 2013). This research “aims to look at the subjective experiences of human beings and asks what makes them experience meaningfulness in their lives” (Martela & Steger, 2016, p. 532). What this research has found is that the people who judge their lives to be meaningful also feel: a sense of coherence or comprehension; purposeful, that they have goals, projects, and direction; and that their lives and/or activities are valuable and significant (George & Park, 2016; Martela & Steger, 2016).

The interpretation theory can explain these correlations. To interpret life is to make sense of it. Thus, interpreting life will produce a corresponding sense of coherence or comprehension, a feeling that one has made sense of something. The accompanying feelings of purpose and significance reflect the kinds of questions that people are likely to try to answer in interpreting life. People will generally be most interested in knowing about the point or purpose, and value of life. Consider again the questions that I suggested people ask. One set (“Is this a project of worth?”; “Did this life make a valuable contribution to the world?”; “Did this life have good effects?”) is clearly about importance or value. Questions about purpose are also common. These kinds of questions can be asked about the parts of a life (“Does this project advance my larger life plans?”), a whole life (“What was this life all about?”), or life itself (“Does life have a, perhaps divine, purpose?”). Of course, questions about purpose and value are related. Usually, goals are only adopted when they are thought to be good things to pursue and achieve. Moreover, it will be hard for many people to see their lives as being
valuable if they aren't doing anything with them. Hence, the interpretation theory predicts what psychologists have discovered. If thinking about life's meaning involves locating life in a larger context in order to answer questions about origins, impact, purpose, or value, then one would expect people who experience life as meaningful to experience accompanying feelings of comprehension, purpose, and significance.

It is perhaps no surprise, then, that psychologists have begun appealing to interpretation in their theoretical discussions (Baumeister & Landau, 2018; George & Park, 2016; Martela & Steger, 2016; Proulx & Heine, 2006). For instance, Roy Baumeister claims that the search for life's meaning “reflect[s] the desire to construct some interpretation of… life” (1991, p. 61). Other psychologists have appealed to interpretation without using the term—for instance, by claiming that meaning is the “output of having made sense of something” (Rosso et al., 2010, p. 94; Pratt & Ashforth, 2003). Indeed, the editors of a research handbook write that “all accounts of meaning converge at sense making” (Markman et al., 2013, p. 4). In addition to its explanatory power, then, another merit of the interpretation theory is that it provides common ground between philosophy and psychology, which could facilitate greater interdisciplinary collaboration.

### 4.3 An advantage over recent proposals

Alan Goldman (2018) and Joshua Thomas (2019) have recently defended theories quite similar to the interpretation theory. Like me, they think that there is an underlying unity between life’s meaning and other kinds of meaning (e.g., semantic and natural), and that seeing something as meaningful requires locating it in a larger whole. Goldman notes that a word’s meaning depends on its role in a sentence; a sentence’s meaning depends on its role
in a discourse; etc. Thomas claims that meaningfulness is “sensefulness”. Given that interpretation is a sense-making process, this makes his view very similar to mine. Despite the similarities, however, the interpretation theory differs from these recent proposals in several ways. I will highlight what I take to be the most important difference, and the resulting advantage that the interpretation theory has over these alternatives.

Both Goldman and Thomas think that meaning is highly subjective, a matter of what particular individuals think. Goldman claims that meaningfulness is a three-place relation: \( X \) means \( Y \) to \( S \). “For an event to mean something in someone’s life, it must mean something to a subject who experiences it in some way”, and what that meaning is “depends only on one’s own interpretation” (2018, pp. 125, 143). Goldman notes that some interpretations are better than others, but only because some are not psychologically possible or sustainable. So, if it were possible for me to interpret a root canal as meaning that I was going to be eternally happy, then the root canal would actually mean this. At least, it would mean this to me, and subject-relative meaning is the only kind of meaning that Goldman countenances. Similarly, on Thomas’ view, a meaning is a link or relationship in a network of mental representations. “What meanings something has will thus be relative to certain individuals, or rather certain groups of individuals who share the same mindset and beliefs about the world” (2019, p. 12). One can try to reason with people who disagree about something’s meaning (i.e., try to change their mindset and beliefs). But their contrary perceptions of meaning are no better or worse than one’s own. Thomas even claims that the idea of “objective meaning” is incoherent (2019, p. 12).
In contrast, on the interpretation theory, objects have meanings even if they aren’t actually interpreted, much less interpreted correctly (see note 2). Perhaps, if there were no beings capable of apprehending meaning (i.e., of interpreting), then there would be no meaning. But this does not entail that X means *whatever anyone takes X to mean*. On my view, X means Y iff Y is a correct answer to an interpretive question, Z. And an answer’s correctness will not typically depend on what some particular individual thinks. It will depend on what’s true. The view does recognize a kind of subject-dependence. The fact that objects have many meanings entails that different people can see different meanings in the same life, and both can be right. But what makes such meanings genuine is not simply a matter of what is going on in a person’s head.

This strikes me as a serious advantage for the interpretation theory. It seems clear that people can be mistaken about meaning. Recall the gasoline price example. Someone who thought that the price drop meant that oil production had declined would be wrong. It would *seem* to them that the price drop had that meaning. But that appearance is misleading. Similarly, semantic meaning, famously, “ain’t in the head” (Putnam, 1975). Very few people would say that a word’s meaning is whatever meaning I see in it.8 Subject-dependence is also very unpopular in substantive theories of life’s meaning. A common (possibly majority) view is that “[t]hinking your life is meaningful doesn’t make it so. We are not infallible about meaning” (Kauppinen, 2014, p. 164). Thus, the fact that Goldman and Thomas do not

8 One of my favorite lines from the cult-classic film, *The Princess Bride*, is: “You keep using that word. I do not think it means what you think it means.”
recognize a distinction between perceptions of meaning and meaning itself seems like a serious weakness for their views.

5 Puzzles for the interpretation theory

Having enumerated the merits of this theory, it’s time to highlight a couple of puzzles it faces. These are potential weak points in the view, which I will attempt to address.

The first is that the view makes meaning ubiquitous. Anything, including any life, that can be correctly interpreted has meaning. Some may object to this, claiming that life’s meaning is supposed to be hard to come by, precious and elusive. Yet psychologists have found that most people take their lives to be pretty meaningful (Heintzelman & King, 2014). That is, the average person reports moderate agreement with claims like, “I understand my life’s meaning”, and “I am able to spend most of my time in meaningful activities and pursuits”. So, it seems that individual lives and their parts are widely regarded as having meaning.

That said, some people do think meaningful lives are rare. So, what’s going on with these people? The interpretation theory suggests two possibilities. First, such people might be employing especially large interpretive contexts. As discussed in §4.1, if the context is too large, interpretive objects can disappear into the background. A typical human life may be meaningful when interpreted in local (e.g., familial or community) contexts. But only a rare few will be meaningful when interpreted in very large contexts. Someone employing a global context might find that their life is meaningful in a generalized, abstract sense, but not in the specific, localized contexts that matter to them personally.

9 These come from the Meaning in Life Questionnaire (Steger et al., 2006), and Perceived Personal Meaning Scale (P. T. Wong, 1998) respectively.
context will therefore consider meaningful lives to be few and far between. And someone employing a cosmic context may think that no life has meaning. A second possibility is that such people are seeking answers to presumptuous questions. To illustrate, suppose an interpreter is trying to answer, “What lasting contribution did this life make to humanity?” This question will frequently suffer from presupposition failure. Most lives do not make such contributions and will therefore not yield answers to that question. Hence, our interpreter will not consider them meaningful (see the final paragraph of §2).

A related puzzle for the interpretation theory is that some people (e.g., Craig, 2000) think that life would be meaningless if metaphysical naturalism were true—i.e., if the natural world is all that exists. This is a puzzle because life is no less interpretable within a naturalistic worldview. So, why would naturalism be thought to entail nihilism? One reason is because a person’s worldview is their most comprehensive interpretive framework (Koltko-Rivera, 2004). In contemplating the truth of naturalism, someone who holds a non-naturalist worldview is contemplating the disintegration of the very thing that enables them to interpret life. They will therefore have trouble seeing meaning in it. However, let’s consider someone who can effectively interpret life within a naturalistic worldview and who thinks that, within that framework, life has no meaning. This response might also result from presupposition failure. Some people think that if naturalism were true “nothing would matter” (e.g., Parfit, 2011, p. 619). In other words, naturalism entails an ethical error theory. If that were true, then any ethical questions that might motivate us to interpret life (see §3) would lack answers.

My thanks to an anonymous reviewer for bringing this to my attention.
Similarly, for religious people the important questions about life will tend to reference the divine (e.g., “What is God’s plan for my life?”). If naturalism were true, these questions too would lack answers. Hence, life would not have the meanings these people seek.

A third puzzle is that the interpretation theory might be thought to suggest that meaningfulness is a binary property (something either has meaning or it doesn’t). But, when we think about the meanings of lives, we often ask how meaningful they are, and expect gradable answers. Unlike words, which seem to simply have or lack a meaning, lives seem to be more or less meaningful. However, as indicated at the start, we talk about life’s meaning in many ways, and only sometimes do we expect life’s meaning to come in degrees. Questions like “What was the meaning of Mandela’s life?” or “What is the meaning of life itself?” don’t call for gradable answers. But it’s true that we do sometimes expect meaningfulness to come in degrees. So, this is something that the interpretation theory should explain.

According to the view, meanings are messages, or answers to interpretive questions. Thus, more meaning might come from more answers, from stronger or clearer answers, or perhaps from answers in more or larger interpretive contexts. If an interpreter were interested in several related questions (e.g., “What was this life all about?”; “What valuable difference did it make?”; “Was it well-lived?”), then a life that yielded answers to more of them might be considered more meaningful than a life that yielded answers to fewer. A life that gave clear, strongly affirmative answers to those questions might also be considered more meaningful than a life that didn’t enable one to answer them clearly, or where the answer was ambivalent or negative. For instance, if the question were “Did this life make a positive difference in the world?”, Mandela’s life would yield the answer “Absolutely”. Many lives, however, would
yield, “Not really”, “Unclear”, or “Not at all”. These lives might, for this reason, be seen as less meaningful, even if they were not regarded as meaningless. Similarly, one thing that might lead one to see Mandela’s life as more meaningful than most is the fact that it provides an affirmative answer to such questions, even in relatively large interpretive contexts. Mandela’s life made a positive difference not just in a local community, but in his nation’s history, and arguably even global history. While many lives might not have meaning at that scale, his does. This might explain it’s being more meaningful.

6 Conclusion

This paper offered a theory of the many meanings of “meaning”. The basic idea is that a meaning is what one learns when one correctly interprets something. Interpretation involves making sense of something by situating it into a framework of facts in order to answer a question. Life can be meaningful, therefore, because it is an object of interpretation. Discourse surrounding life’s meaning is confusingly complex because “life” can refer to different things, each of which can be interpreted to answer many questions.

This view explains: why so many kinds of things are called meaningful; why questions about meaning seem to be amalgams of different questions; why meaning feels “deep”; why meaning is non-additive; the relevance of narrative to meaning; why a cosmic context leads to a loss of meaning; and why meaning is subject-independent. It also fits well with the empirical finding that perceptions of meaning are highly correlated with perceptions of comprehension, purpose, and significance. The view faces a few puzzles: (1) Why do some people think meaning is elusive or rare? (2) How might naturalism entail nihilism? And (3) why does life’s meaning come in degrees? My responses were: (1) Most people don’t think
meaning is rare. Those that do must be using too large of a context or interested in questions that don’t have answers. (2) Naturalism would entail that questions about divine purposes, and perhaps also ethical questions, have no answers. Thus, if it were true, then several forms of meaning might be absent. And (3) lives are more meaningful when they answer more (relevant) interpretive questions, or when they provide stronger or clearer answers to those questions.

The paper has done what the theory describes. It took something puzzling (talk of life’s meaning) and answered a question (“What is this about?”) by integrating it into a larger context (a general theory of meaning). The interpretation theory thus offers an interpretation of discourse about life’s meaning. If it is a correct one, then it should reveal the meaning of “life’s meaning”.
Acknowledgements

This paper was inspired by a talk given by Rob Willison and subsequent conversations with him. It owes him much. I would also like to thank Susan Wolf, Luc Bovens, and Sarah Stroud, for their guidance, as well the anonymous reviewers at Philosopher’s Imprint for their helpful comments.

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