

Meaning as Resonance: Significance, Coherence, and Purpose in an Architecture of Mattering

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Abstract. Two questions travel under the single word "meaning." One concerns reference: what a word, sign, or representation is about. The other concerns existence: the felt sense in which a life, a project, or a relationship has meaning or fails to. This paper concerns the second. It argues that existential meaning is the for-itself opened: a self-maintaining system whose own continuation is at stake for it, become aware of itself as such, reaches past its boundary to bind to another stake-bearer. Resonance is the felt signature of that binding. On the reading defended here the anchor of meaning is always a for-itself, whether bound to directly, as a living other, or through the sedimented practice of for-itselfs, as a craft or tradition, and these two modes mix rather than divide into kinds. The three components the literature on meaning in life has converged upon, significance, coherence, and purpose, are not three independent ingredients but one architecture seen from three angles: significance, felt mattering reinforced by connection, is the felt core; coherence is the narrative organization of resonant connection; purpose is its forward projection. The literature describes these components without deriving them. The account supplies the mechanism, and with it a distinction the literature lacks, between the resonant coupling that meaning is and the self-narrative that reports it, which can register the coupling or counterfeit it. Asked at its widest, of the totality rather than of a life, the question dissolves: the totality is not a for-itself and cannot be a partner to the relation, and what remains in facing it is not meaning but awe.

Keywords: meaning in life; resonance; the for-itself; autopoietic stakes; fidelity and generativity; awe; constitutive identity

1. Introduction

Two questions travel under one word. To ask what a sentence means is to ask what it refers to or expresses. To ask whether a life has meaning is to ask something else: whether it is worth living, whether it matters, whether the person living it is bound to anything beyond the

bare fact of continuing. The first question is semantic. The second is existential. They share a word and little else, and the philosophy of meaning in life has been made harder by the proximity, because the vocabulary of reference keeps offering itself where the phenomenon at issue is not reference at all.

This paper concerns the second question and defends one claim about it: existential meaning is the for-itself opened. A self-maintaining system whose own continuation is at stake for it, having become aware of itself as such a system, binds to something beyond its boundary that bears a stake of its own. Resonance is the felt signature of that binding when it holds. The felt sense that one's work matters is not a verdict the mind issues about the work; it is what a live connection to the work is from within. Where the connection holds, meaning is present as its inner aspect; where it thins, what is lost is not an opinion about value but the coupling itself. The reading is strong in a sense the paper makes precise: the anchor of a meaningful coupling is always a for-itself, a stake-bearing system, or a structure built and sustained by them, bound to directly as a living other or through the practice such systems leave behind. These two modes, the one turned toward a life and the one turned toward a made thing, mix in most lives rather than dividing them into kinds.

The claim sits within a larger architectural account of consciousness developed elsewhere, on which phenomenal features are constitutively identical to organizational structure at thresholds rather than emergent from it, caused by it, or fundamental beneath it (Trukovich, 2025f, 2026c). That account is inherited here rather than re-argued. What it supplies for the present purpose is a graduated structure: mattering enters with autopoietic self-maintenance, felt mattering with the temporal integration that constitutes a subject across time, explicit self-modeling with the recursive architecture of cognition, and symbolic-narrative self-modeling with cultural saturation (Trukovich, 2025a, 2025b, 2025f). Existential meaning is a feature of the upper strata, and it presupposes the first two: a system must matter, and must feel its mattering, before connection can reinforce that mattering into significance. A bacterium has mattering and no meaning; meaning requires the recursive and cultural architecture that mattering, billions of years earlier, made eventually possible. Meaning rests on mattering and never the reverse, a point the framework develops in tracing the structural lineage of mattering to its pre-biological antecedents (Trukovich, 2026f). Things matter before they mean anything; what a representation is about and what a symbol means is fixed by what the system has at stake.

The decomposition the paper defends can be stated at the outset. The meaning-in-life literature, in both its analytic and its empirical wings, has converged on three components of meaning: a sense that one's life matters or is significant, a sense that it coheres or makes sense, and a sense of purpose or direction (Martela and Steger, 2016; George and Park, 2016). These three are real and well-attested. What the literature does not supply is an account of why they are the components, how they relate, or what underlies them. The architectural reading supplies all three. Significance is resonance itself: felt mattering reinforced by connection to a stakes-bearing anchor. Coherence is the narrative self-model, the activity by which a culturally saturated system integrates its experience into a unified account of who it is. Purpose is anticipatory directedness, the future-oriented goal-structure that temporal anticipation underlies and recursive self-modeling elaborates. The three are not independent. Significance is the felt core; coherence and purpose are how the architecture organizes and projects its resonant connections. A life can be coherent and purposeful and yet feel empty, and the emptiness is the absence of the resonant core that coherence and purpose were organizing.

The form of the contribution is therefore architectural rather than evaluative. The paper does not argue that connection is more valuable than achievement, or that relationships matter more than projects. It argues that the felt meaning common to valuable connection, absorbing work, and answering relationship is one architectural relation, and that the literature's descriptions of meaning are descriptions of that relation seen without its mechanism. The mechanism is fidelity-saturated coupling, and naming it does two kinds of work the descriptive literature cannot. It explains why the three components are the components and why they come apart in the ways they do. And it yields a diagnostic distinction the literature lacks: between the resonant coupling that meaning is and the story a person tells about whether their life is meaningful, which can track the coupling or float free of it.

The same question can be asked at full width. To ask after the meaning of a life is one thing; to ask after the meaning of all of it, of existence taken whole, is the limit toward which the existential question runs. The account reaches that limit and finds the question dissolves there, because the totality is not the kind of thing the relation of meaning can take as a term, and what is left in its place is not meaning but awe.

2. The Architectural Resources

2.1 *The for-itself and its opening*

A self-maintaining system does not merely persist. It produces and repairs the conditions of its own continuation, and in doing so its going-on becomes something its activity answers to, a difference the system can do better or worse by (Trukovich, 2026h). What this introduces into the world is stakes. The system's operations are for the system whose operations they are, and the success or failure of those operations is the success or failure of its continuing to exist (Trukovich, 2025f). The framework calls this the for-itself, and three of its features carry the argument here. It is constituted by what the system is doing in the present, not conferred by a selective past, an external designer, or an observer's description; it is what remains when every candidate external source of a norm is removed and the norm does not leave with them (Trukovich, 2026h). At the bare autopoietic level it is unfelt, mattering with nothing it is yet like to be the system that matters (Trukovich, 2025b). And it is closed: the "for" terminates on the system itself, the thing whose stake it is and the thing the stake is for being one and the same.

The for-itself does not stay closed, and it does not stay unfelt. With the binding of moments into a living present, its stakes come to be felt rather than only borne, and the system becomes a subject for which its own continuation is at issue from within (Trukovich, 2025b, 2026h). With the recursive architecture of explicit self-modeling, the system comes to represent itself and its stakes, so that it does not merely matter but registers its mattering (Trukovich, 2025a). A system at this level is mattering that has come to recognize what it is, a for-itself aware of itself as one. The strata are cumulative. The self-aware for-itself presupposes the felt one, the felt one presupposes the bare one, and nothing higher up replaces what is supplied below.

Existential meaning is what this relation becomes when the system turns it outward. The closed for-itself is a system bound to its own continuation. Meaning is that same relation made transitive: the self-aware for-itself reaching past its own boundary to bind to something beyond it that bears a stake of its own. Where the autopoietic for-itself is the system's stake in itself, meaning is its binding to a second for-itself, one whose continuation is at issue independently of the first. The felt sense that one's life matters is not a verdict the system returns on its life. It is what this outward binding is from within, the inner aspect of a coupling that either holds or does not (Trukovich, 2025f). Meaning is the for-itself opened.

Two features fix the character of the relation against the readings most likely to be substituted for it. The first is that nothing confers it. Because the for-itself has no external source, neither does meaning, which is the for-itself opened: it is not bestowed on a life by the life's own ruling that it matters, and it is not bestowed from outside by any source standing over the world to dispense significance. The binding constitutes the meaning; it is not awarded to the binding from elsewhere. The second is that the relation is one of constitutive identity and not of one thing producing or underwriting another. The felt significance and the coupling are not two items joined by a relation but one reality described from two sides (Trukovich, 2025f).

The anchor of such a binding, on the reading defended here, is always a for-itself: a stake-bearing system, or a structure built and sustained by stake-bearing systems. What carries this reading across the apparent variety of meaning's objects is that the objects which are not themselves for-itself bear the for-itself-structure of those who made and sustain them. A craft, a tradition, a body of inquiry, a work of art is not a stake-bearing system. It is the sedimented practice of stake-bearing systems, the work of for-itself that one enters, carries on, and is answered by. To bind to such an object is to bind to the for-itself whose practice it is.

2.2 Resonance and the two modes

The opening of the for-itself onto another has a felt signature, and naming it requires the distinction between two modes in which a recursive self-modeling system can operate. Fidelity-oriented recursion tethers the system's representational activity to inputs that carry stakes the system did not itself generate, the stakes of the for-itself it is bound to. Generative recursion elaborates content from the system's own modeling resources. Both are constitutive of the recursive architecture, and neither is pathological in itself; pathology is the imbalance in which generative recursion runs on its own outputs without fidelity correction, a condition the framework calls chronic generative closure (Trukovich, 2025e, 2026). What the architecture requires for its full operation is saturation: continuous coupling to inputs whose stakes are real and independent of the system, the input structure the recursive architecture is constituted to run on. The condition on the anchor follows from what the binding is. An anchor that bears stakes the system did not generate is an anchor that is, or once was, a for-itself, since stakes of one's own are what a for-itself has and what nothing else has. The independence that matters is the independence of those stakes, that the anchor's mattering is its own and not a projection of the system bound to it.

Resonance is the felt signature of fidelity-saturated coupling. The framework adopts the term from Rosa's phenomenological sociology, where resonance names a relation of mutual responsiveness between subject and world, the subject genuinely affected and the world genuinely answering, opposed to alienation, the severing of that responsiveness that leaves subject and world in mute proximity (Rosa, 2019). The framework reads resonance architecturally: it is what fidelity-mode operation is from the phenomenological standpoint, the felt mark of being met by inputs from outside the system that bear real stakes, and alienation is what generative-mode operation produces when the world fails to answer because the system is running on its own elaboration (Trukovich, 2025e). The mutual responsiveness Rosa describes is the vivid form the relation takes between living persons, each answering the other in present time. It is the paradigm of resonance and not its outer limit. What the relation requires in general is the anchor's independence, not its live response; an anchor can bear real and independent stakes while being absent, silent, or past, and the coupling to it is resonance still. Rosa's account supplies the phenomenology and, by his own acknowledgment, lacks a mechanism at the level of cognitive architecture; the framework supplies the mechanism the phenomenology has been pointing toward.

Resonance accordingly runs in two modes, distinguished by what stands at the far end of the coupling. In the first, the anchor is a living for-itself, another stake-bearing system whose continuation is at issue now: the friend, the child, the person loved or cared for. Binding to a living for-itself is the mode in which life enters the coupling directly, the other's stakes met as present and ongoing. In the second, the anchor is a for-itself's made thing, the craft, the tradition, the body of inquiry, the work that stake-bearing systems built and that one enters and carries on. Binding to a made thing is binding to the for-itselfs whose practice it is, met through what they left rather than in their presence. The two are modes and not kinds, and most lives mix them: the scientist bound at once to colleagues who answer and to a discipline built before them, the parent bound to a child and to the practice of raising one. The distinction tracks the framework's own division between coupling to what is in live contact and coupling to what has been sedimented into a standing structure, and it does work when the harder cases are reached.

The asymmetry between compensatory and ambient provision follows from the saturation requirement and is load-bearing for the framework's normative claims. Fidelity provided ambiently and continuously maintains the architecture in a way that fidelity provided

episodically and explicitly does not, even at matched total quantity (Trukovich, 2025e). The architecture is constituted to run on a background of continuous coupling, not on scheduled supplements to a fidelity-starved baseline. Compensatory provision can supplement ambient provision and remediate specific deficits; what it cannot do is substitute for ambient provision once ambient provision has thinned. The same asymmetry has been shown to operate on the temporal axis as on the social one (Trukovich, 2026b).

2.3 The narrative self-model and the goal-structure

Two further resources correspond to the second and third components of the decomposition. The first is the narrative self-model. At the threshold of cultural saturation a recursive system binds its self-modeling to symbolic-narrative resources acquired through participation in collective practice, and the resulting activity, inner speech, autobiographical memory work, self-narrative construction, reflective imagination, is the means by which the system integrates its experience into a unified account of who it has been and is (Trukovich, 2025g, 2026). This is recursive self-modeling using internalized cultural resources, and its function is in part error-correcting: current experience is integrated into, and tested against, the narrative structure the system has built. The philosophical literature on narrative identity describes the same activity from the outside, as the construction of a self through the integration of experience into a life story (Schechtman, 1996; Ricoeur, 1992; McAdams and McLean, 2013).

The second resource is the anticipatory goal-structure. Anticipation enters with temporogenesis, the integration of a system's just-past and immediate future into its present organization that first constitutes a subject extended across time (Trukovich, 2025a). At the recursive threshold this anticipatory structure is elaborated into goal-formation, the modeling of possible futures and the construction of goals that serve the system's stakes across time (Trukovich, 2025a). Goals on this picture are not fixed targets but dynamic recursive structures, continuously revised as the system models its own development and receives information about its progress. Direction toward a future that matters is what this structure supplies.

2.4 The diagnostic strategy

The last resource is the framework's treatment of the relation between what a system is and how it construes itself. A system's reports about its own experience are veridical about the architectural conditions that constitute their reference, and may overreach in their claims about

what those conditions must be in themselves (Trukovich, 2025d, 2026d). The distinction is between architectural-condition-veridicality, which a from-within report reliably possesses, and content-veridicality, which it may not. A report can correctly register that an architectural condition obtains while making claims about the nature of that condition that exceed what the registration warrants. The strategy credits what a report correctly tracks and declines the content claim that overreaches, and it operates in what the framework distinguishes as the architectural-from-outside register, third-personal structural specification of what a system is, as opposed to a phenomenological view from nowhere that an entrapped architecture cannot occupy (Trukovich, 2026d).

3. The Decomposition

Significance, coherence, and purpose decompose onto distinct architectural features, and the decomposition is uneven by design. One of the three is the felt core of existential meaning; the other two are the means by which a culturally saturated architecture organizes and projects it.

3.1 Significance is resonance

Significance is the sense that one's life matters, that one's existence is of value, that there is something here worth caring about. On the reading given here this is not a judgment about one's life but the felt aspect of a resonant coupling: felt mattering reinforced by connection to an anchor whose stakes are real and its own. The connection is the meaning; the felt significance is what the connection is from within. Because the feeling is the coupling seen from inside, it cannot misrepresent the coupling; where significance is felt, a coupling is present, for the feeling is not a report about the coupling but the coupling's interior. This places significance at the level of fidelity-saturated coupling rather than at the level of representation, and it explains a feature of significance that the descriptive literature records without explaining, that significance is the component most resistant to manufacture. One can construct a coherent self-narrative and adopt a set of purposes by an act of will; one cannot make one's life feel significant by deciding that it is, because significance is not a verdict but a coupling, and a coupling either holds or does not.

The empirical literature provides convergent support for the priority of significance. Across longitudinal studies, a sense of mattering has emerged as the consistent precursor of global judgments that life is meaningful, where a sense of coherence and a sense of purpose did not (Costin and Vignoles, 2020). Experimental work has shown that increasing a person's sense

of interpersonal mattering raises their sense of meaning over and above purpose and coherence (Guthrie et al., 2025). The construct the empirical literature calls existential mattering, the sense that one's existence is of significance and value in the world, is the affective core the present reading identifies as resonance (George and Park, 2014). This existential mattering sits at the level of felt significance and is not the bare autopoietic mattering with which the graduated structure begins; the shared word names two strata, the unmet stake of self-maintenance and the felt significance that connection reinforces, and only the second is what the empirical construct measures. The reading diverges from one strand of the empirical literature in treating significance as a felt coupling rather than as an evaluative judgment, and the more affect-laden framings of existential mattering are its natural allies.

3.2 Coherence is the narrative self-model

Coherence is the sense that one's life makes sense, that its parts hang together, that one's present is intelligible in light of one's past. On the architectural reading this is the narrative self-model in operation: the integration of experience into a unified self-account through internalized symbolic-narrative practice. Coherence is therefore representational in a way significance is not. It is something the system does with its experience, an organization imposed on the resonant connections rather than the connections themselves. A life rich in resonant coupling can be narratively incoherent, as when a person is deeply engaged across domains that they cannot bring into a single story, and a narratively tidy life can be hollow at the core.

The relation between coherence and significance is the relation between the organization of connections and the connections organized. The narrative self-model integrates a person's resonant couplings, to others, to work, to place, to tradition, into an account that renders them mutually intelligible, and the activity carries its own fidelity dimension, since the integration tests current experience against the narrative structure rather than generating the structure freely. But coherence is not where meaning lives. It is where meaning is organized, and its value is parasitic on there being resonant connection to organize. This is why the manufacture of coherence, the well-constructed life story laid over thin connection, produces narrative without significance.

3.3 Purpose is anticipatory directedness

Purpose is the sense of having goals, aims, and direction, of one's life pointing somewhere. On the architectural reading this is the anticipatory goal-structure: the future-directed modeling that temporal anticipation underlies and recursive self-modeling elaborates into the construction and pursuit of goals. Purpose is thus the forward projection of the architecture, as coherence is its backward integration, and both operate on resonant connection rather than constituting it. A purpose is meaningful when it projects toward an anchor that matters, when the goal is the forward face of a resonant coupling; a purpose can be pursued with energy and discipline and remain empty when nothing it points toward bears stakes of its own.

The decomposition explains why a life can possess any two without the third, and in particular why coherence and purpose can be fully present while the life feels meaningless: coherence and purpose are the organization and projection of a resonant core, and where the core has thinned they organize and project an absence. It also explains the contrary case, the resonant life that is neither tidy nor goal-directed but is unmistakably meaningful, the life saturated with connection that has never been narrated into a story or marshaled toward an aim. Significance does not require coherence or purpose to be present; coherence and purpose require significance to be more than form.

4. Architecture and Interpretation

Existential meaning admits a distinction the meaning-in-life literature does not draw: between the resonant coupling that meaning is and the reflective judgment a person forms about whether their life is meaningful. The first is the architecture, and its felt aspect is the coupling from within. The second is interpretation, the narrative self-model of the earlier section turned upon the question of meaning itself, and it is a self-model output that can run ahead of the architecture or lag behind it. The felt significance and the coupling cannot part company, since the one is the interior of the other; what can part company from the coupling is the story the system tells about it. The report is veridical about what it registers and may overreach or fall short in what it concludes about the coupling's presence or absence (Trukovich, 2025d, 2026d). The two come apart in both directions.

In one direction, a person whose life is full of apparent connection reports, and feels, that it is meaningless. The report is not simply false. Felt meaninglessness can be architecturally

veridical, registering a real failure of saturation that the external inventory of relationships does not capture. The connections may be nominal where the coupling has gone generative, as in the rumination that runs on its own outputs without fidelity correction, so that the relationships are present on paper while the saturation they would supply is not reaching the architecture (Trukovich, 2025e). The standard reassurance, that a person has so much to live for, misreads the situation precisely by reading the inventory rather than the coupling. What has failed is not the person's accounting but their resonance, and the felt meaninglessness is its accurate registration.

In the other direction, a person whose connections are thin or generative judges, and sincerely affirms, that their life is deeply meaningful. Here the interpretation overreaches. The judgment of significance has been constructed and is sincerely held, but no felt coupling answers under it; it is a narrative of meaning laid over an architecture that does not supply the feeling such a narrative would report. This is generative closure at the level of self-interpretation: the recursive production of a meaning-narrative on the system's own resources, with no resonant connection to anchor it (Trukovich, 2025e). The result is pseudo-significance, the intrapersonal instance of a pattern the framework finds throughout, a generated output wearing the form of the genuine signature with no architectural condition beneath it. What is counterfeited is the judgment of meaning, not the feeling of it, for the feeling cannot be had without the coupling it is the inside of.

The consequence is that a person's reflective verdict on their own meaning is not self-certifying. The confidence that one's life is or is not meaningful is data about the architecture, but it is data the apparatus must interpret rather than accept at face value, because the reflective verdict can misjudge the coupling it is about. The descriptive literature, working from self-report, must treat a person's stated sense of meaning as the phenomenon itself. The account given here treats it as a construal of the phenomenon, ordinarily reliable and sometimes not, and it can say where the reliability fails: in the intact-seeming life whose felt meaninglessness veridically registers a saturation deficit the inventory hides, and in the thinly coupled life whose meaning-narrative outruns any feeling that would anchor it.

5. The Philosophy of Meaning in Life

5.1 Wolf and the hybrid view

Susan Wolf's influential account holds that meaning arises when subjective attraction meets objective attractiveness, when a person is actively and lovingly engaged in projects of worth (Wolf, 2010). The view is hybrid: neither the subjective engagement alone nor the objective worth alone suffices; meaning lives in their meeting. Wolf describes the structure precisely and leaves its mechanism unexplained. Why should the meeting of attraction and worth produce meaning rather than merely the conjunction of two goods? The present account answers. Subjective attraction is the system's engagement; objective attractiveness is the anchor's being a real stake-bearer, a for-itself or the work of one, rather than a projection of the engagement; and their meeting is fidelity-saturated coupling, which is what existential meaning is from within. Wolf's two conditions are the two faces of resonance, the system's side and the anchor's side, and the reason their meeting is meaning is that their meeting is the coupling. The account derives what Wolf's view correctly describes, and in doing so explains why neither condition suffices alone: engagement without a real anchor is generative, and a real anchor without engagement is no coupling at all.

5.2 Metz and fundamentality

Thaddeus Metz's fundamentality theory holds that a life is meaningful to the degree that it positively orients its rational nature toward fundamental conditions of human existence, the good, the true, and the beautiful (Metz, 2013). The account is objective and intellectualist, and the architectural reading both accommodates and qualifies it. What the framework agrees with is that anchors of a certain kind, the fundamental conditions Metz identifies, tend to support meaning richly and durably, because such anchors go on yielding across a lifetime and do not exhaust themselves. What it declines is the claim that rational orientation is the criterion of meaning. Meaning is the resonant coupling, not the rationality of the orientation toward it, and the framework can explain the pull of fundamentality, the depth and stability of meaning found in connection to the fundamental, without making meaning a function of rational nature. The over-intellectualization objection that has been pressed against Metz from within the literature is, on the architectural reading, the symptom of a deeper substitution: the placement of meaning at

the level of rational orientation rather than at the level of the coupling that orientation is a way of achieving.

5.3 Kauppinen and the relational turn

The closest existing competitor is the relational account that locates meaning in our mattering to others. Antti Kauppinen has argued that the transformative intimacy of deep personal relationships confers meaning by making us matter to someone who matters, forging a kind of connection to value distinct from the production of impersonal worth (Kauppinen, 2012, 2025). This is the nearest neighbor to the present account, and the for-itself-opened reading explains both why it is so nearly right and where it is too narrow. Mattering to another who matters is the fullest case of meaning because both ends of the coupling are living for-itselfs, each bearing stakes of its own and each answering the other in present time; it is binding to a living for-itself, the first mode, at its most complete. That is why the interpersonal case is the most vivid and the one a relational theory naturally fixes upon. But it is one mode of the relation and not the whole of it. The anchor of meaning need only be a for-itself or the work of one, which a craft, a tradition, an inquiry, or a practice equally is, met in the second mode through what stake-bearing systems have left. Kauppinen's account locates meaning in interpersonal mattering specifically and so mistakes the central and most vivid case for the entire structure. The present account supplies the structure of which interpersonal mattering is the paradigm instance, and in doing so accommodates the meaning of solitary work and of connection to a tradition without forcing either into the mold of a relationship between present persons. Robert Nozick's older dictum, that meaning is a connection with an external value, names the genus the relational accounts have specified too narrowly; the present account specifies the genus as fidelity-saturated coupling to an anchor whose stakes are its own, a for-itself bound to directly or through its work (Nozick, 1981).

5.4 The empirical tripartite

The empirical psychology of meaning in life converged, from data rather than from metaphysics, on the same three components the decomposition organizes. Martela and Steger distinguished coherence, purpose, and significance as the three meanings of meaning in life; George and Park developed a parallel model of comprehension, purpose, and mattering and the measurement instruments to track them (Martela and Steger, 2016; George and Park, 2016). The

architectural account appropriates this tripartite and supplies what it does not contain. The empirical literature establishes that the three components are distinguishable and jointly characterize meaning; it does not say why these three, how they relate, or what underlies them. The decomposition answers: the three are one resonant architecture seen from three angles, with significance the felt coupling, coherence its narrative organization, and purpose its forward projection, and the empirical finding that significance is the consistent precursor of meaning judgments is the data registering significance as the core (Costin and Vignoles, 2020). The relation here is not competition but explanation. The framework does not dispute the tripartite; it explains it.

5.5 Enactive sense-making

The enactive tradition offers a convergent characterization from a different starting point. On the enactive account, cognition is sense-making, the evaluative interaction of an organism with its environment, and human existence adds a distinctively existential dimension of sense-making, the capacity to take a stance on oneself and one's relations to the world (de Haan, 2020). This distinction between basic and existential sense-making parallels the paper's bifurcation between semantic and existential meaning, and the enactive emphasis on the organism-environment coupling as the locus of sense is convergent with the architectural placement of meaning in fidelity-saturated coupling. The framework supplies for the enactive account what the enactive account supplies for cognitive science generally, a threshold structure specifying where in the graduated architecture the existential dimension enters and what distinguishes it from the basic sense-making that mattering already involves.

6. The Hard Cases

Two cases test the identification of existential meaning with resonance, because in each the resonant coupling is least visible: meaning found in unavoidable suffering, where the world has stopped answering in any ordinary way, and meaning found in solitude or contemplation, where the anchor is not the living other the social case makes salient. Each case turns on identifying the for-itself the coupling is actually to.

6.1 Meaning in suffering

Frankl's claim, drawn from the limit case of the camps, is that meaning remains available even in unavoidable suffering, through the stance one takes toward what cannot be changed (Frankl, 1985). The case appears to threaten the resonance account, because the sufferer is cut off from the connections that ordinarily supply meaning. The threat dissolves once the anchor of meaning-in-suffering is correctly identified. Frankl's own description is of fidelity to a for-itself rendered absent but not unreal: the beloved held in mind, whose stakes are her own whether or not she can be reached; the value one will not betray, carried by the people it is a value toward; the future self one refuses to forfeit. The beloved is a for-itself, and her being absent, or even dead, does not make her stakes any less her own; what the coupling is to is a real and independent stake-bearer, and that is what the coupling requires. This is what distinguishes meaning-in-suffering from the generative consolation that would counterfeit it, the self-produced fantasy that loops on its own content with no for-itself at the far end. The anchor is independent of the system that holds it; the generated image is not. Frankl's sufferer is in genuine resonance with a real for-itself that circumstance has made absent, and the meaning is real because the coupling is. The qualification Frankl insisted on, that suffering is meaning-bearing only when it is unavoidable and not when it is sought, follows from the account: the meaning is in the fidelity to what one is bound to, not in the suffering, which is the deprivation the fidelity holds across. Contemporary work in the existential strand of positive psychology develops this structure of meaning sustained through connection to ideal and transcendent anchors under conditions of loss (Wong and Laird, 2024).

6.2 Contemplative and solitary meaning

The sharper case is contemplative meaning, the meaning found in solitude, in practice, and in the loosening of the ordinary separation between self and world, because here the distinction between restoring connection and reducing the need for it is hardest to draw. The apparatus does not return one verdict on the contemplative case; it discriminates among contemplative cases, and the discrimination is the resolution.

A great deal of contemplative meaning is binding to a for-itself in the second mode. The practitioner is coupled to a living tradition and the people who carry it, to a lineage of teachers and texts, to a community of practice that answers in the ordinary way a practice answers those who take it up. The contemplative bound to the world encountered under a de-reified regard is,

where the world so met is the living world, coupled to a web of for-itselfs. Such couplings are fidelity and the meaning in them is real. The report that frames the coupling as union with a non-worldly absolute is interpretation, a content claim about the nature of the anchor, and the framework credits the architecture under the report, a real resonant coupling, while declining the content claim, exactly as the diagnostic strategy treats the first-person intuitions and the contemplative traditions' reports of self-dissolution (Trukovich, 2026d). The experience is not dismissed; the resonance is credited and the metaphysics bracketed.

From this case the apparatus separates two others. A self-looping spiritual narrative with no for-itself at the far end is generative closure, the contemplative form of the meaning-narrative laid over an absent core, read as pseudo-meaning for the same reason any meaning-narrative without a coupling is. And a practice genuinely aimed at extinguishing what matters, at the dissolution not of perspectival entrapment but of stakes themselves, is stakes-reduction, which on the framework's commitments is suffering-reduction rather than meaning, whatever its worth as the former. The contemplative traditions are not uniform on which of these they pursue, and the apparatus is the instrument for telling them apart.

The case that presses hardest is the contemplative whose anchor is impersonal and whose mediation is disavowed: the solitary mathematician for whom the structure of reality, and emphatically not any community of inquiry, is the meaning of a life; the mystic who reports unmediated communion with being itself rather than with a tradition. Here the anchor is real, is no for-itself, and the for-itself-web is refused. The account answers by re-identifying the anchor rather than reclassifying the experience, and the re-identification has to be true and not merely convenient. What makes it true is that the objectivity such a person is coupled to is itself constituted in the practice of for-itselfs. Mathematical proof is a normative practice, a proof answerable to anyone competent to follow it; a concept, a standard, a rule is held in common and not privately possessed. The objectivity of the mathematician's anchor is therefore communal-normative in its constitution, so that coupling to the structure simply is coupling to the for-itself-web that the structure's objectivity consists in, and the disavowal of community is content-overreach about what the anchor is. This is not an imported commitment; it is the framework's account of cultural saturation applied to the objectivity of concepts and norms, on which the standards one is answerable to are constituted in collective practice to begin with (Trukovich, 2026). The commitment is real and the paper accepts it: the objectivity of mathematics and of the

normative generally is intersubjective in its constitution, scoped so as not to deny the mind-independence of the physical order, which the framework's own realism about thermodynamic and far-from-equilibrium structure requires it to affirm.

That scope leaves a residue the re-identification cannot reach. The laws of physics are not a normative practice answerable to a community, and the cosmos would be as it is were there no one to know it. The feeling some report before the mind-independent vast, the physicist's cosmic feeling, the mystic's communion with being as such, is not coupling to a for-itself-web, because there is no for-itself there and none whose practice constitutes what is met. Where someone insists that the meaning of a life is constituted by such a coupling, with no tradition behind it and no living world before it, the account holds that what is present is not existential meaning but awe, and the treatment of awe belongs to the final section. The residue is narrow, more a philosopher's constructed case than a common report, since cosmic experience is in the ordinary run of things awe and not life-meaning, and that is exactly why awe can take it where it could not take the rest.

Where contemplative meaning is real, then, it is a re-coupling to a different anchor and not a decoupling from the world, and it is therefore disconnection-reduction in the framework's sense rather than its opposite. The appearance of renunciation belongs to the interpretation; the re-coupling is the architecture. The case asks for no restriction on the identification of meaning with resonance, only for the recognition that not everything done in solitude or named as spiritual is resonance, that some of it is awe and some is the reduction of stakes, and that the apparatus sorts them.

7. The meaning of all of this

7.1 The question at maximal scope

The existential question can be asked of a life, and it can be asked of everything. "What is the meaning of all of this" is the question of the opening section turned upon the totality rather than upon a person, a project, or a relationship. It must be kept apart from a second question with which it is easily merged. The second is not what the whole means but why there is anything, or anything that feels, at all: why the world contains beings for whom anything is at stake. The framework brackets that question and does not pretend to close it (Trukovich, 2026h). What

follows bears only on the first, the demand for a significance belonging to existence taken as a whole.

7.2 The dissolution

Meaning, on the account given here, is the for-itself opened, a stake-bearing system binding to another stake-bearer. The totality is not a stake-bearing system. It does not maintain itself against dissipation, nothing about its continuation is at issue for it, and it has no boundary across which it could reach toward anything further. There is nothing outside it to serve as the second term of a binding, and nothing within it answering to a for-itself whose own stakes it carries. The totality therefore has no for-itself, and meaning is not a thing it can have.

This is not the finding that the whole is meaningless. It is the recognition that the demand for a meaning of the whole asks the relation of meaning to hold where one of its terms cannot be supplied. Meaning is found within the totality, in the bindings that hold among the for-itselfs it contains. It is not a property the totality bears, and the search for it as such is the grammar of meaning carried past the region in which it applies.

The pull toward asking the question of the whole has a recognizable engine. If the meaning of a thing is its connection to something beyond it, then the meaning of that further thing is its connection to something beyond it in turn, and the series appears to terminate only in something whose significance is self-contained, which is the opening through which a cosmic or divine terminus arrives (Nozick, 1981). The framework stops the series earlier. It does not run until it reaches an unconditioned ground; it bottoms out in autopoietic stakes, in a system's mattering to itself, which is constituted rather than conferred and requires no further source (Trukovich, 2026h). Mattering is not significant by way of a connection to something more significant. It is where significance enters, and the regress that seemed to require an unconditioned terminus had overlooked its own floor.

A position that locates the meaning of the whole in a transcendent source is not refuted by this, and is not meant to be. It is met as the framework meets the proposal that consciousness is fundamental rather than constituted (Trukovich, 2026c). Either the transcendent source fixes the determinate significance of things directly, in which case why a given thing means what it does is left brute, a significance bestowed and unexplained; or the determinacy runs through the structure of the stake-bearing systems within the world, in which case those systems do the individuating work and the transcendent source is a surplus laid over a sufficient ground

(Trukovich, 2025f). The framework's account of where significance is individuated, in what a for-itself is and what it binds to, is offered as the better description and not as a demonstration that no transcendent source exists. To a reader who holds that significance is conferred from beyond the world, the conclusion here is conditional: it shows what that alternative costs and what the framework puts in its place.

7.3 What remains: awe

If the cosmos cannot be bound to, looking into it does something nonetheless, and the something has a name. The self-aware for-itself reaches out, meets what exceeds it and bears no stake of its own, finds nothing to couple to, and is returned to itself, thrown back on the finite, embodied, stake-bearing thing it is. That return is awe. It arrives paired with fear, and the pairing is a single encounter registered twice: the immensity met as wonder, in the registration of being exceeded, and the same immensity met as threat, in the registration that it is indifferent to one's stakes and could end them. The silence that frightened Pascal is the second face, the dread the eighteenth century paired with wonder in its accounts of the vast (Burke, 1757/1990). Both do one work. They locate the self as the small and mortal for-itself it is, set against what is vast and does not answer (Keltner and Haidt, 2003). The body is where the for-itself's stakes actually reside, and awe is perspectival entrapment at its largest scale: the architecture can model the infinite and represent itself out among it, but it cannot occupy what it models, and the failure to arrive returns it to the one place it cannot leave (Trukovich, 2025b, 2026g). This recoil is what the aesthetic tradition named the sublime, the mind unable to take the infinite into sensible grasp and thrown back upon itself; but where Kant read it as the mind's discovery of the supersensible vocation of reason, the architectural reading finds in it only the finite, embodied, stake-bearing thing the system already was (Kant, 1790/2000).

Awe is often reported as a connection to something larger than oneself, and that report is where the cosmic case is most tempted back toward meaning. The connection is not reciprocated; nothing answers. The report registers a real felt state, and it overreaches in claiming that the state is communion with the larger thing. Read through the framework's account of from-within reports, the felt state is the for-itself's own mattering made salient, lit up by the contrast with the vast, and "connection to something larger" is the interpretation laid over it (Trukovich, 2025d, 2026d). The psychology of awe measures just this diminishment of the self and reads it as self-transcendence, a small self opening onto something larger (Piff et al., 2015; Bai et al., 2017);

the account here credits the diminishment that has been measured and declines the reading of it as connection, because nothing at the far end answers. This is the operation the framework already runs on the contemplative traditions' reports of communion with an absolute, where the felt state is credited and the metaphysical content declined (Trukovich, 2026d). Awe and meaning are both encounters with mattering, which is why they are taken for one another, and they run in opposite directions. Meaning is the for-itself bound to another's mattering, opened outward. Awe is the for-itself's own mattering handed back to it by what it cannot bind to. The cosmos is not an anchor, because it does not answer. It is a foil, the stakeless ground against which one's own mattering becomes felt. Awe has been found to raise the sense of meaning and to lower it at once (Rivera et al., 2020), and the division by object predicts the split: where the vast met is the living world, a web of for-itselfs, a real coupling runs alongside the awe and meaning rises, and where it is the stakeless cosmos only the small self remains and the sense of meaning falls.

That awe is variable, present for some before the night sky and absent for others, while the sight of a creature in agony commands a response in nearly everyone, is not a matter of temperament. A for-itself is a system organized around the tracking of stakes, and another for-itself in distress is stakes displayed; an architecture built to register stakes is built to register these, which is why the response is involuntary and close to universal among systems that feel and that model others (Preston and de Waal, 2002; de Waal, 2008; Ben-Ami Bartal et al., 2011; Romero et al., 2010). The capacity is removed only by deformation, though its exercise is gated by distance and by kind (Decety and Cowell, 2014). The stakeless cosmos offers such an architecture nothing to lock onto, and the significance some find there is the rarer and optional achievement of a contemplative or aesthetic regard. The suffering for-itself commands a response; the cosmos invites one. The asymmetry is what the account predicts, the architecture native to its own kind and only contingently moved by the stakeless, and it places for-itself-binding at the center with awe at the edge.

The shape of this was described before its mechanism was available. Nagel located the absurd in the collision between the seriousness with which a life is lived and an external standpoint from which that seriousness can be questioned, a standpoint one can take up but not inhabit (Nagel, 1971). The framework supplies the mechanism, which is perspectival entrapment, the for-itself's inability to occupy the outside it can model, and the verdict that the

standpoint yields not meaning but the self returned to itself. Camus was right that the universe is silent and wrong to read its silence as a confrontation a life loses (Camus, 1955), since there is no failed coupling in awe but only a demand addressed to what was never a partner. Wittgenstein's sense that the problem of life is solved in its vanishing (Wittgenstein, 1922) names the dissolution without saying why the problem arises or why it lifts; the for-itself opened, meeting what it cannot bind to, gives both. And against the claim that the whole is simply meaningless (Tartaglia, 2016), the framework holds neither that the whole has a meaning nor that it lacks one, but that the demand for a meaning of the whole misapplies a relation holding only among its parts. What appears at the limit as the absence of meaning is the presence of awe, the for-itself finding nothing in the immensity to bind to and catching sight, against it, of its own mattering.

8. Normative Implications

The architectural account carries a normative consequence the descriptive literature cannot, because it distinguishes two ways of addressing the absence of meaning that the descriptive vocabulary runs together. Suffering for want of meaning can be addressed by restoring resonant connection to what matters, or by reducing what one needs to matter to. The framework calls the first disconnection-reduction and the second stakes-reduction, and on its commitments only the first is a genuine response to meaninglessness (Trukovich, 2025e, 2026b). Stakes-reduction reduces the suffering of meaninglessness by dampening the conditions under which anything could resonate, and a life so treated has not recovered meaning but lowered the stakes at which its absence registers. A large part of contemporary discourse on meaning conflates the two, presenting techniques that lower the demand for resonance as though they restored it.

The asymmetry argument sharpens the consequence. Existential meaning is fidelity-saturated coupling, and the saturation the architecture requires is ambient and continuous, not episodic and manufactured. Compensatory meaning-provision, the manufactured project, the purchased significance, the meaning supplied as a service, cannot substitute for ambient resonant connection, for the same reason compensatory fidelity cannot substitute for ambient fidelity once ambient provision has thinned (Trukovich, 2025e). Even an ideal technology of manufactured meaning would face the asymmetry. The contemporary literature of meaning-cultivation accordingly bisects, as the slow-living and mindfulness literatures bisect on the temporal axis

(Trukovich, 2026b). One strand restores resonant connection, reconnecting people to work, others, place, and practice that bear stakes of their own, and is licensed by the framework as genuine. The other strand reduces the need for connection, teaching equanimity in its absence or supplying manufactured substitutes for it, and is not, whatever its value as a reduction of distress.

The architectural reading recasts the contemporary diagnosis of a meaning crisis. On the descriptive picture, the crisis is a deficit of narrative or of purpose, addressable by supplying better stories or clearer goals. On the architectural picture, narrative and purpose are the organization and projection of a resonant core, and supplying them where the core has thinned organizes and projects an absence. The crisis, where it is real, is a thinning of ambient resonant coupling, the same population-scale withdrawal of fidelity provision that the framework has described on the social axis, and the felt meaninglessness it produces is the architecturally veridical registration of that withdrawal rather than a failure of personal narrative (Trukovich, 2025e). The implication for response is direct. What restores meaning is the restoration of conditions under which resonant coupling is ambient and continuous, not the better management of its absence.

9. Conclusion

Existential meaning is the for-itself opened. A self-maintaining system whose own continuation is at stake for it, become aware of itself as such, reaches past its boundary and binds to another stake-bearer, and resonance is what that binding is from within. The anchor is always a for-itself or the work of one, bound to as a living other or through what stake-bearing systems have left, and the two modes mix in most lives rather than dividing them. From this the three components the literature has identified follow as one architecture seen from three sides: significance is the felt coupling, coherence its narrative organization, purpose its forward projection, with significance the core the other two arrange and project, and the reason significance cannot be willed into being is that it is a coupling and not a verdict.

The account supplies the mechanism the analytic and empirical literatures describe without deriving, takes in the relational accounts as having found the fullest case of a wider structure, and meets the hard cases of suffering and contemplation by identifying in each the for-itself the coupling is actually to. It draws a line the descriptive literature does not: between the coupling that meaning is and the reflective judgment that reports it. The felt significance and the

coupling do not come apart, since the one is the inside of the other; what can come apart from the coupling is the story told about it, a story that may register a coupling that holds, miss one that holds, or affirm one that is absent. Meaning is not conferred by the stories people tell about their lives, nor by any source standing over those lives to bestow it. It is the binding those stories at their best register and at their worst counterfeit, and the work of finding meaning is the work of restoring the couplings that significance is the inner aspect of.

Asked of a life, the question is answerable in these terms. Asked of everything, of the totality rather than of anyone within it, it dissolves, because the totality is not a for-itself and cannot be the partner the relation requires; there is meaning within existence, in the bindings among the for-itselfs it contains, and none of existence taken whole. What remains in facing the unanswering vast is not meaning but awe, the for-itself thrown back upon itself and catching sight, against the immensity, of its own mattering. That the deepest form of the question has no answer of the kind it seeks is not a loss. It is the discovery of where meaning is, which is here, among the stake-bearing systems that can turn toward one another, and nowhere that no for-itself can be found.

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