Good Fit versus Meaning in Life

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Abstract: Meaning in life is too important not to study systematically, but doing so is made difficult by conceptual indeterminacy. An approach to meaning that is promising but, indeed, conceptually vague is Jonathan Haidt's 'cross-level coherence' account. In order to remove the vagueness, I propose a concept of 'good fit' that a) captures central aspects of meaning as it is discussed in the literature; b) brings the subject of meaning under the survey of the dynamicist or 'embodied-embedded' philosophy of cognition; and c) allows the theoretical discussion on meaning to become more focused and systematic. The article addresses two apparent problems with the idea of 'good fit,' namely the fact that both challenges and relations of an agent with the outside world are central to meaning. It is finally pointed out which implications adopting the concept of 'good fit' instead of 'meaning' would have.

Keywords: meaning in life, embodied-embedded, cross-level coherence, agent

Introduction

Meaning is arguably the most important thing in the world. We are speaking here of 'meaning,' not in its linguistic or representational sense, but in the sense of 'meaningfulness,' or 'meaning in life.' If meaning is absent, we are indifferent, apathetic, bored, cynical, alienated, disoriented, frustrated, or desperate; and if we are, it seems that no further thing can have any value for us either.

So one would expect meaning to be a key subject of discussion and research in the philosophy of mind, meta-ethics, normative ethics, and psychology. Now, representational meaning is a mainstream subject of study, and so are separate aspects of meaning, such as depression, intrinsic motivation, attachment, or morality. But not meaning as such: the subject is elusive and the concept is indeterminate, and this makes systematic theoretical discussion or empirical research on meaning difficult.

An approach that nevertheless seems promising is Haidt's account of meaning in terms of coherence (Haidt 2006, Ch. 10). At issue here is so-called 'cross-level coherence,' i.e., coherence among the diverse levels of a person's life and self: body, mind, and society and culture. Haidt claims: "People gain a sense of meaning when their lives cohere across the three levels of their existence" (Haidt 2006, 227).

Haidt's approach, I submit, is attractive for at least three reasons. First, the idea of coherence as generating a sense of meaning seems intuitive. Second, the approach provides a workable angle for people in search of meaning: they can start looking for ways to achieve more coherence, rather than for less achievable things such as fame, a lasting legacy, or perfection. Third, this approach alerts us

to features of our living conditions that make achieving or maintaining coherence difficult for us.

Conceptually, however, Haidt's account remains sketchy. What exactly is it that people with coherent lives gain a sense of? Haidt does distinguish different senses of 'meaning,' and the sense that is relevant here is that of 'purpose within life' (Haidt 2006, 213-217). But what exactly is 'purpose within life' and how does it relate to coherence?

Below, I will myself articulate a coherence-based concept called 'good fit.' 'Good fit' is here abbreviatory for 'dynamically conceived multiple-context fitting-in with an agent's embodied-embedded mode of being.' 'Good fit' is here a seemingly trivial but crucially important notion that rides on the back of an 'embodied-embedded' conception of agency that I will here refer to as 'dynamicism.' I hope to demonstrate that this concept can do at least some of the work usually done by the concept of 'meaning,' but do it better. The concept of 'good fit' is intended a) to capture central aspects of meaning as it is discussed in the literature; b) to bring the subject of meaning under the survey of dynamicism; and c) to allow the theoretical discussion on meaning to become more focused and systematic.

However, the aim of introducing the concept of 'good fit' is not the reduction or elimination of the concept of 'meaning.' For it is precisely the indeterminacy of this concept that keeps us sensitive to important but hard-to-articulate aspects of living well. There is health, and happiness, and beauty, and virtue; and then there is also this further important but elusive thing called 'meaning.' We thus keep our horizons open, and this is a good thing. The 'good fit' account is just an attempt to redeem those parts of the subject matter that do allow of more systematic treatment, but under current dialectical conditions remain hazy.

Below, I will first discuss the concept of 'meaning' as it is currently discussed, and highlight its indeterminacies (Section 2). Next I will, on the basis of Haidt's account (see above) explain the dual idea of psychological health as 'coherence' and meaning as 'good fit' (Section 3). As we will see here, developing a workable concept of 'good fit' requires that two problems be solved. First, our conception of 'good fit' must allow a positive role for anomalies, adversity, discord, struggle, emotional turbulence, and obstacles – all things that typically do not seem to fit an agent well, yet can be very meaningful, and for precisely that reason. Second, 'good fit' must be understood in such a way that it is not just the counterpart of internal coherence, but also that of an agent's relations with the outside world. That is, we must be able to say that these relations can fit the agent well, and this must mean something different from saying that the agent fits in with the outside world. I will try to solve these two problems by outlining what agency and good fit amount to in the theoretical framework of dynamicism (Sections 4 and 5). I will finish by discussing a range of issues that will bring into focus what adopting the concept of 'good fit' would amount to (Section 6).

2. The Trouble with 'Meaning'

Systematic philosophical discussion on meaning (e.g., Baggini 2004; Cottingham 2002; Eagleton 2008; Klemke and Cahn 2008; Messerly 2013; Metz 2014) is rare compared to that on, say, semantics, rationality, happiness, or morality; attempts to make such discussion empirically informed and interdisciplinary (e.g., Baumeister 1991; Flanagan 2007; Wolf 2010) are even rarer; and empirical research on meaning (e.g., Battista and Almond 1973; Reker and Woo 2011; Steger, Frazier, Oishi and Kaler 2006) is scant in comparison to research on health, happiness or wealth.

The point is not that theorists rarely discuss meaning. Many do, as an aside to or part of a different main subject; and meaning – or something like it, or an element of it, or something closely related to it – is also discussed under different names, such as 'authentic happiness' (Sumner 1996), 'intrinsic motivation' (Deci and Ryan 1985), or 'psychological health' (Haidt 2006, Ch. 7; see below). All the same, systematic inquiry into this specific subject is relatively marginal.

The likely reason for this, I submit, is conceptual indeterminacy. For 'meaning' seems to be a concept with too many different, and sometimes conflicting definitions, and it seems very hard to decide, for the purposes of systematic inquiry, on a characterization that is not overly controversial. Consider the following sample of attempts:

> Meaning, if there is such a thing, is a matter of whether and how things add up in the greater scheme of things (Flanagan 2007, xi).

> Meaning is that special, personal insight of how the world is connected to us. (…) (W)e have to learn who we are and what it is we want, what we need, what each change in reality implies for us – for our goals, our appetites, our fears and desires. (...) Meaning equals importance. It confers the royal kiss of significance on the outpouring of sense manufactured by the cortex. And it grows and consolidates in a nearby part of the brain: not the cortex, but the limbic system (...) (Lewis 2012, 35).

> A human person's life is more meaningful, the more that she employs her reason and in ways that positively orient rationality towards fundamental conditions of human existence (Metz 2014, 222).

> *Personal meaning* is defined as the cognizance of order, coherence, and purpose in one's existence, the pursuit and attainment of worthwhile goals, and the accompanying sense of fulfillment (Reker and Woo 2011, 1).

> Meaning (…) enables people to interpret and organize their experience, achieve a sense of their own worth and place, identify the things that matter to them, and effectively direct their energies (Steger 2010, 680).

Although these characterizations show some overlap, they do not seem to converge on one thing. And the sample might have included characterizations that stress further aspects of meaning that seem important: being part of

something larger (e.g. Seligman 2011), love (e.g. Wolf 2010), or narrativity (e.g. Velleman 1991).[1]

Consider, in this light, how Steger et al. (2006) investigate meaning empirically. They do this by way of a survey called the Meaning in Life Questionnaire. Respondents here have to rate, on a 7-point scale, questions such as: 'I understand my life's meaning,' or: 'My life has a clear sense of purpose.' The authors explain:

> We defined meaning in life as the sense made of, and significance felt regarding, the nature of one's being and existence. This definition represents an effort to encompass all of the major definitions of meaning and allows respondents to use their own criteria for meaning (Steger et al. 2006, 81).

Now, it might be that indeed, only a very loose definition like the one just given is workable. Something more specific but not overly controversial may just not be available, and there are three reasons to believe this is the case.

First, as was already suggested, the word 'meaning' is precisely useful as a wildcard that enables us to refer to a range of things that we do have a sense of, but that we find hard to articulate. An example here might be a victim of injustice whose only foothold is the idea that 'there must be some meaning to all this'; or a deeply unfulfilled person who can tell herself that she might someday find 'meaning.'

Second, the word 'meaning' is highly ambiguous. It may refer to the presumed meaning of existence, of all that exists, of life in general, or of human life; to the meaning of a life, or lives, in particular; and also to something internal to lives – meaning in, not 'of' life, or lives. And it may of course refer to representation, reference, symbols, and so on. So, extensive exercises in disambiguation are always necessary. Metz, indeed, opts for

> (...) a 'family resemblance' view, holding roughly that theories of meaning in life are united by virtue of being answers to a variety of related and substantially overlapping questions that cannot be reduced to anything simpler (Metz 2014, 11-12).

Third, 'meaning' is a word that carries deep-seated moral intuitions and commitments. So, theorists are not going to let a word with such import be used improperly: on any proposed definition they will see important aspects of meaning fall by the wayside or, alternatively, see irrelevant aspects encroaching, and will protest that the definition fails to describe meaning properly so-called.

The main dialectical fault lines here seem to be the following. Most theorists insist that meaning must be experienced subjectively, but some disagree (e.g. Metz 2014, Par. 10.2.1). Many theorists would say that subjective concern for things that are obviously trivial is not genuine meaning, but some disagree (e.g. Haidt 2007). So meaning is often claimed to involve both objective

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[1] Also compare Jackendoff (2012, 32–50). Taylor (1989, 18) speaks of 'polysemy.'

value and subjective concern (e.g. Wolf 2010 and Reker and Woo as cited above). But others (e.g. Nagel 2008) will insist that seen in a broader perspective, even lives of subjective concern for objectively valuable things are pointless. Meanwhile, some (e.g. Singer 1993) hold that morality is the essence of meaning, while others (e.g. Kekes 2008) allow that immoral lives may be meaningful. Also, while virtually all conceptions of meaning seem tacitly anthropocentric (and some frankly so, e.g. Metz 2014, 222), it can – and probably should – be insisted that all living entities can live meaningfully each in their own way.

Viewpoints such as these are not easily reconciled. And the result is that the theoretical debate on meaning does not and cannot proceed beyond ethics and descriptive psychology. Attempts to make 'meaning' an explanatory notion in psychology, to discuss meaning in the context of biology, to investigate it empirically, to make it the basis of therapeutical programs, or to make it politically salient and relevant, all may exist in some form, but such attempts are severely hampered by conceptual indeterminacy.

3. Coherence and Good Fit

The idea of 'good fit' as a way to break free from this impasse derives from what seems to be a quite intuitive notion, namely that of a coherent agent (i.e., organism or person). A healthy, happy, flourishing or virtuous agent, it seems, is a coherent, wholehearted, or harmonious agent – one not torn apart by conflicting impulses, incompatible goals, self-defeating commitments, inconsistent beliefs, or an unstable self-conception.[2]

What seems crucial here is that we ourselves, rather than something external to us, should be coherent. That is, the coherence must be existential rather than merely perceived. We can perceive a story, a piece of music, or a piece of furniture as coherent. But this is not the same thing as experiencing oneself as coherent. Mere perceived coherence or non-coherence can either move us deeply or leave us indifferent, depending on whether or not we care about it. But it seems that our own coherence or non-coherence cannot leave us indifferent: experienced coherence will amount to a sense of well-being or fulfillment, while experienced non-coherence will amount to suffering. If we do seem entirely indifferent, for instance, in a case of severe depression, this very fact will be unbearable.

Although a conceptual linkage between coherence and psychological health seems intuitive, one between coherence and meaning is a bit more elusive. Let us first consider Haidt's construal (Haidt 2006, Ch. 10). Haidt discusses

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[2] Compare Antonovsky's phrase 'sense of coherence' for the experience of one's world as understandable, manageable, and worthwhile (Antonovsky, 1990). Coherence is also the basis of Haidt's discussion of posttraumatic growth (Haidt, 2006, Ch. 7). This discussion stresses the formative role that adversity can have, and it dovetails with the idea that agents need challenges.

coherence among three levels in a person's life: a physical, a psychological, and a sociocultural level. By way of an example, Haidt describes the tight integration of the bodily, psychological and sociocultural aspects of Brahmin purification rituals (Haidt 2006, 227-229). The idea is that such rituals will be experienced as meaningful, not just because of a Brahmin's intellectual understanding of what the rituals mean, but also by a regular practice that involves rich bodily experience, due to which the understanding becomes 'visceral' (Haidt 2006, 228). Also contributing to meaning is the Brahmin's sense of belonging to a community and participating in an old tradition. As we already saw, Haidt concludes that "(p)eople gain a sense of meaning when their lives cohere across the three levels of their existence" (Haidt 2006 227).

We could argue here that what Haidt is really discussing is psychological health, not meaning. Or perhaps the coherent person does indeed experience meaning due to her coherence, but then the question arises why this should be so. At this point it should be noted that 'coherence' and 'meaning,' or 'coherent' and 'meaningful' cannot be treated as synonyms, like 'coherent' and 'healthy.' A coherent agent is not a meaningful agent, but rather an agent who experiences meaning. And an agent who experiences coherence does not experience meaning, but rather fulfillment or happiness.

But we can here take the step of conceiving of meaning, not as coherence, but as good fit. Note that good fit is the counterpart of coherence, in the sense that insofar as the constituents of an entity fit together – or insofar as any constituent fits the rest of the entity – this entity is coherent. Then, an event, action, person or object that is meaningful to us can be said to somehow fit us well – say, fit who we are, fit how we see the world, or fit the story we tell about our life. Haidt's idea was that if a Brahmin's life coheres across levels, he will experience a purification ritual as more meaningful than otherwise. We can now explain why this should be so: given such coherence, the ritual will fit the Brahmin better than otherwise. For it will fit him in not just one, but in three respects: a bodily, psychological and socio-cultural one.

We now have a notion of 'good fit' that does the work of 'meaning,' at least as Haidt presents it. But if 'good fit' is to cover the same subject matter as 'meaning,' two issues must be resolved. The first one has to do with the fact that at least for human beings, coherence is typically hard-won: only coherence after some struggle seems really worthwhile. Indeed, some of the most meaningful things in our lives are things that do not fit us well at all: anomalies, difficulties, conflicts, adversity, emotional shocks, and so on – things we may call 'challenges.'

The second issue is about internal and external relations. 'Coherence' and 'good fit' are notions that suggest that agents must cohere internally, regardless of how such agents themselves are related to the outside world. Meaning, however, seems to be very much about agents' relations with the outside world. For instance, having social roles or being part of something larger seems to be

key sources of meaning. Of course, we mentally represent the world around us, which makes it tempting to claim that meaning is about coherent representations, rather than about de facto external relations. But such an account is solipsistic, and it invites counterexamples based on scenarios of people who are locked up in webs of illusions. So I assume that appealing to representations is not going to be of much help here.

In the next Section, I will offer a dynamicistic account of agents that resolves the two above issues. We will see here that agents, unlike mere objects or machines, are essentially developmental entities; and that as a consequence, challenges are essential requirements for the coherence-maintaining activity of each agent. In this sense, challenges make of agents what and who they are, and while they do not fit them well the moment they occur, they do fit them well in their quality as developmental beings – in particular, challenge-overcoming and self-narrating beings. We will also see that something analogous can be said about external relations: agents are necessarily embedded entities, so that in their case, internal organisation and external relations presuppose each other, and external relations make of them the beings they are just as much as their internal organisation.[3]

4. Agents

When thinking about agents and coherence, we may be tempted to draw analogies such as those between agents and smoothly running machines, agents and logically consistent beliefs, or agents and well-made furniture. But agents are entities of an entirely different type than non-agents. This, at least, is what dynamicism teaches us. Accordingly, coherence for agents amounts to something different from coherence for non-agents, and we will see that it crucially involves challenges and external relations.

With 'dynamicism' I am referring to a blend of principles from physics, chemistry, biology, mathematics, information theory, and theoretical psychology, that has been articulated in different ways and with different emphases by authors such as Deacon (2011), Juarrero (1999), Kauffman (1996), Kelso (1995), Thelen and Smith (1994), and Thompson (2007). Although I am confident that my account of agents will capture the gist of accounts such as these, I do not pretend it to be the canonical view (if there exists one), or to express the views of any of these authors in particular. Nor will the account be anywhere near comprehensive. For it is intended to distill just those elements of dynamicism that are directly relevant to the subject of meaning.

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[3] We could note that 'internal' is here not a spatial, but an organisational notion: whether a process belongs to an agent is not a matter of whether it takes place inside or outside the skin or membrane, but to what extent it is integrated with the other processes (Millikan, 1993, 159). But I assume that this observation would not resolve the issue of 'external relations.'

On dynamicism, agents are dynamic entities that are incessantly active in generating, protecting, restoring, and developing their own organisation. Such agents are not objects or systems with a structure, i.e., they are not spatial arrangements of detachable parts, but rather sets of processes with a dynamic organisation. In being process-like entities that are kept going by thermodynamic disequilibria, they are more like fires, vortices or hurricanes than like machines.

True, even lifeless objects appear process-like when studied at a micro-scale. But unlike lifeless objects, which do have a structure, but are entirely passive in their quality as processes, agents actively maintain an organisation. What this means is that processes such as blood flow and brain activity, and subprocesses such as metabolism and cell growth, sustain each other, and that the continuation of each process is required for the continuation of other processes that are also required for the agent's continued existence.[4]

Such organisation is possible due to nested sets of boundary conditions, which are constraints on what processes can and cannot take place in the agent. These boundary conditions are established over time by phylogenetic and ontogenetic processes – the so-called 'architecture' of the heart, or the 'wiring' of the brain – and, in the case of human agents, also by environmental structures such as intensive-care units or books, i.e., by technology.[5]

When we say that an agent maintains its own organisation, 'maintaining' means generating, protecting, restoring, and developing. That is, an agent does not merely keep itself in good shape or heal itself when injured; an agent also grows and changes. The ontology of an agent is thus profoundly temporal: agents are not just process-like, but also developmental beings – beings who remain themselves by changing all the time.[6] If their development stalls, this does not make them static: in such a case, decay sets in.

Accordingly, the key notions of 'organisation,' and (its opposites) 'disruption' or 'disintegration,' must here be understood dynamically and developmentally. If the key notions here were 'order' (in its information-theoretic sense of 'compressibility of description') and 'disorder' (in its sense of 'randomness,' or 'entropy'), this would amount to thinking in static terms. Indeed, neither instances of order (such as simple shapes, or regular sequences), nor instances of randomness (such as garbage, or noise on the radio) have, by themselves, anything to do with agency. It is true, of course, that agency and

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[4] A phenomenon that is given names such as 'autopoiesis' (Tompson 2007) or 'teleodynamics' (Deacon 2011). Dynamicism is here indebted to Kant's principle of 'intrinsic finality' (Kant 1790, Sect. 64–66), which Deacon (2011, 302) calls 'the most prescient and abstract characterization of the dynamic logic of organism design.'

[5] This latter example derives from Deacon's discussion of 'teleodynamic work' (Deacon 2011, 360).

[6] Note that this is not an account of agents as 'space-time worms': on dynamicism, agents are individuated by their organisation, not by their spatiotemporal boundaries.

organisation do require the imposition of order on a substrate. But rather than mere order, organisation is the ongoing renewal, emergence and disappearance of order in many varieties. For an agent's very own dynamics generates tensions that cannot be resolved under present conditions of organisation, and that push the agent into new regimes.

Agents, however, do not just develop by way of such internal tensions. Even more important in this respect is their responding to intrusions of randomness. They need such intrusions for their development, because these give them leverage for change. So short of outright threats or damage, agents need manageable excitements, challenges, and opportunities. That is, apart from a nondisruptive, supportive, nurturing and stimulating environment, agents also need obstacles, nudges and sometimes even severe blows that enable them to keep developing.

Agents thus characterised are also, and necessarily, situated or 'embedded' entities. Not only do agents need to exchange matter and energy with the outside world; 'agent' and 'environment' are also complementary notions, and the nature and identity of an agent cannot be understood in abstraction from what environment the agent has, and how it interacts with this environment. Thus, what constitutes an agent is not just its internal dynamics, but also its interrelatedness – its dynamic couplings or co-evolution – with the outside world. Accordingly, being an agent not only consists in managing one's internal dynamics, but also, so to speak, in managing one's self-nonself relations. Both make the agent into what and who she is, and neither can be dispensed with.

To sum up: an agent must maintain its coherence, not just by maintaining its internal organisation, but also by maintaining its embeddedness and its development. This is the type of entity an agent is: agents are not machines that are created once and get worn down, or that can be unplugged and sit still. No matter whether agents are in full action or asleep, they are always active. They must renew themselves each moment, must develop, and must keep interacting with their environments. If they do not do so, they quickly disintegrate.

The above should suffice to resolve the two issues that were raised earlier on in the context of Haidt's coherence account of psychological well-being and meaning. If 'good fit' is the counterpart of coherence, not in the sense of static order, but in the sense of dynamic organisation, then challenges and external relations turn out to be key aspects of good fit in the sense that is appropriate for agents. In that sense, an accident or illness can fit a person well – not when it occurs, but in the course of a life –, and so can membership of a community or the continuation of a tradition.

It should be noted that a complete account of agent coherence or good fit would require that we addressed a more profound issue: that of explaining how agents can experience their own coherence. Of course, our own experience suggests that coherence is pleasant and lack of coherence unpleasant. But this

presupposes that agents can assess what does and what does not fit them well, and this in turn presupposes that agents' experience is guided by norms of good fit. Then, what do such norms amount to, and where do agents get them from? However, I will here leave this issue alone.

5. Contexts of Fit

At this point, we have seen that the counterpart of agent coherence or psychological health is good fit; that properly (i.e. dynamicistically) understood, agent coherence (hence good fit) requires challenges, and that external relations define an agent just as much as its internal organisation. But especially human beings, with their intricate minds and complicated lives, need to harmonise many potentially conflicting aspects of their mode of being, and they can be coherent or non-coherent in different respects, involving different contexts of fit: contexts relative to which things can fit or not fit the agent well, hence appear as meaningful. What we have discussed so far is the first and primordial type of coherence, namely physiological or bodily coherence. There are, however, further respects in which things can fit an agent, i.e., there a various contexts relative to which there may be good fit or lack of fit. Good fit will then typically be the fitting in of something (an event, object, experience, activity, person, or whatever) with an agent's mode of being with respect to multiple contexts. Without the pretention of being complete or accurate, let us distinguish the following contexts:

An emotional context. At issue here is emotional health or balance. We are always busy regulating our emotional lives, acknowledging or suppressing, amplifying or damping, approving or disapproving, or choosing to act or not act on this or that emotion. Disruption here consists in inappropriate or disproportionate emotionality, as in depression or phobias. Emotions also have temporal shapes that feel either natural or unnatural (Dewey 1980, 57–58; Johnson 2007, 41). This type of emotional coherence is most salient in music, literature or film: a good piece will give emotional satisfaction, while an ill-chosen abrupt ending of a play, for instance, makes no emotional sense. In our emotionality, the coherence of we ourselves is at stake: while emotions fluctuate and non-disruptive emotional imbalances will be part of who we are, disorganised emotionality is destructive.

An epistemic context. At issue here is the coherence of our web of beliefs, understood as an evolving 'force field' in the sense of Quine (1951). Arguably, the coherence of our web of beliefs is also the coherence of us ourselves: our urge to know and to understand, i.e., to solidify, update and expand our model of the world seems every bit as powerful as our urge to maintain our bodily coherence. Most of us are curious, we dislike contradictions and indeterminacies, and we feel deep satisfaction when things fall into place (Gopnik 2000). And while epistemic disruption (confusion, disorientation, or 'losing one's mind') threatens our identity, epistemic coherence strengthens it.

A practical context. At issue here is the fit among our capabilities, actions and goals. Coherence in a practical respect is what is often called 'purposiveness' (e.g. Steger 2009, 680). One way of being purposive is by being competent, or efficacious (Deci and Ryan 1985). Here, the experience of 'flow' (Csikszentmihalyi 1991) seems to be a paradigm of practical coherence. Another, more ambitious way is striving not to have lived in vain, i.e, to leave a legacy (Belliotti 2001). Disruption here comes in the form of inactivity, helplessness, frustration, futility, indecision or a divided will. The coherence of ourselves in our very quality of agents seems here at stake: we shape our identities by committing ourselves to values and by making things happen.

A narrative context. At issue here is the self-conceptions we humans develop, not by images or theories, but by way of stories, or self-narratives (Fireman, McVay, Jr. and Flanagan 2003, 4–5). A nonhuman life cycle may take care of itself, but as human beings, we need to know where we come from, where we stand, and where we are going. Our lives are complicated, we need to direct ourselves, and others expect us to justify our choices to them. For this we need a coherent self-narrative, one with continuity, central themes, and a direction. These self-narratives are typically embedded in collective narratives, i.e., the myths that our culture imposes on us.

A social context. At issue here is the way we are connected to others – our emotional ties to specific individuals, our roles in communities, and the coordination of our behaviour with that of others. Disruption here comes in the form of lack of communication, persistent misunderstanding, social exclusion, alienation, loneliness, or Durkheimian *anomie*. Note that this listing does not include challenges (see above), such as temporary misunderstandings, conflicts, or even animosity: these do not disrupt us, but rather form us. Obviously, social coherence is a matter of external relations. But the coherence of ourselves is at stake in our social lives even so. We have a need to belong; the disruption of an intimate bond can be every bit as painful as physical injury; our self-conception and sense of personal identity require recognition from others; and much of our behaviour and cognition is shaped by our education and by the rules and institutions of our community.

6. How Adopting 'Good Fit' Will Work Out

The above listing of contexts of fit, and the – admittedly sketchy – account of what is at stake in each case, should demonstrate that the idea of 'good fit' can cover a range of things commonly associated with meaning. But to see how adopting it would work out, let us finally apply the idea to some key themes.

Sisyphus. A classic scenario in the debate on meaning, brought up by Camus (1942) and discussed further by Taylor (2000) and many others is that of Sisyphus, condemned by the gods to futile labour. Sisyphus's life has deliberately been rendered pointless, but we might all be like Sisyphus, and what if Sisyphus

would build a temple rather than just move a rock, or what if he found intense pleasure in pushing his rock uphill?

This scenario is central to the debate on the meaning of life, but it would be much less relevant to debates on 'good fit.' The reason is that virtually all aspects of Sisyphus's life that are relevant to good fit – personality, family and friends, art, faith, and so on – are absent from the scenario. Of course, Sisyphus can be pictured as a forever-lonely prisoner in a gloomy underworld, but then his – utterly dire – predicament does not seem relevant to most real-world agents. From a 'good fit' perspective, the only interesting thing about this scenario is that it reminds us that our living conditions can be perversely rigged – not by the gods but by, say, modern society – in such a way that achieving coherence is made difficult for us.

The experience machine. Another classic scenario, originally developed by Nozick (1974, 42-45) against hedonism, but often discussed in the context of meaning subjectivism, involves a contraption that makes people falsely believe that they are leading interesting lives. People connected to the machine would subjectively experience meaning, or think they did, but it seems that their lives would not really be meaningful at all.

The 'good fit' account, with the part about 'external relations,' would here run parallel with meaning non-subjectivism. In the experience machine, good fit would be lacking because people's beliefs and feelings do not bear on their actual behaviour. We might even say that the scenario is not about 'agents' worth the name. In general, the 'good fit' account is not subjectivistic, since it is not just about coherence among agents' mental states, but about the coherence of agents' embodied-embedded mode of being. And this includes agents' being socio-culturally embedded, i.e., their relating to value systems that are not of their own making.

Trivial concerns. Agents can be absorbed in activities that, from a more detached perspective, seem trivial. Then, can these activities still be meaningful? Some people compulsively shop, play video games, or watch all their online friends' moves. Meaning subjectivists and non-subjectivists disagree here on the relative importance of either subjective concern or objective worth. Again, the 'good fit' account runs parallel with meaning nonsubjectivism: trivial pursuits may be absorbing, but they will not fit most people's considered values well. On the 'good fit' account, however, the – non-solipsistic – perspective of the agent is pivotal and not, as on nonsubjectivist accounts of meaning, objective worth.

This difference becomes visible when we think of a dog who fetches sticks thrown by her boss. Nonsubjectivists might dismiss this activity as trivial. But this activity does seem to fit the dog well: it is challenging yet doable; it is emotionally satisfying; and it strengthens the dog's bond with her boss. Of course, dogs do not seem to self-narrate like humans do, so this type of fit will be absent. But that is just what a dog's mode of being is like. So on the 'good fit' account there will be an important difference between dogs fetching sticks and rich

ladies' fetching expensive handbags, while such a difference will not be salient on 'objective worth'-oriented meaning accounts.

Anthropocentrism. What about tapeworms or plants? Intuitions may diverge on the meaningfulness of the activities of dogs or small children, but speaking of 'meaning' in the case of so-called 'primitive' organisms will sound patently odd.[7] But this is precisely the problem: 'meaning' is an anthropocentric notion that inherits all the insoluble demarcation problems raised by anthropocentrism. By contrast, the notion of 'good fit' does not seem burdened in this way – compare attributing 'good fit' and attributing 'experience of meaning' to a microbe. An obvious advantage of this non-anthropocentrism is that the study of meaning will be easier to integrate with dynamicist cognitive science and biology.

Perfect coherence. Consider a person who is healthy, well-liked, well-connected, successful, famous, emotionally stable, and who has a track record of heroic feats. It might be thought that such an extraordinarily accomplished agent is a case of all-round and perfect coherence: everything fits, and fits neatly. But such a construal does not make sense here: the confusion is between 'organisation' and 'order.' As we have seen above, organisation is supposed to be 'ongoing renewal, emergence and disappearance of order in many varieties.' This implies that dynamic organisation is incompatible with all-round and perfect coherence, and that the idea of a perfectly coherent agent is an oxymoron.

Immorality. Consider a murderer who does not have a conscience and carries out his crimes in perfect secrecy. The 'good fit' account seems here to run parallel with meaning subjectivism: given the murderer's overall mode of life, the murders may be fitting this agent well. They may not fit him socially – he has secrets to conceal – but the need for deceit and secrecy might be challenges by which he can achieve personal growth – of course by his own standards. But cases of coherent crooks seem largely fictional, hence of questionable relevance. Real-world antisocial people do not seem to be harmonious or free from inner conflicts at all, and they face regular ostracism and punishment. In analogy with Tiberius (2008, Ch. 8) we might say that the 'good fit' account renders morality contingent, but not arbitrary.

Explanation. 'Good fit' might be a notion with more explanatory power than 'meaning.' Consider that there are two categories of human behaviour, namely those of existential decisions and nonmoral values, that may be best explained by an appeal to meaning. The right answers to 'Why did Peter become a priest?' or: 'Why do we love unspoilt nature?' might be, respectively: 'Because Peter was in search of meaning,' and: 'Because unspoilt nature is meaningful to us.' Taken by themselves, however, these answers are not very informative. They each require the telling of a more detailed story.

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[7] Not, though, of 'pointlessness': see, e.g., Wiggins (1988), Nagel (2008), or Taylor (2000).

Now compare: 'Because becoming a priest fit Peter emotionally, epistemically, socially, and narratively,' and: 'Because unspoilt nature fits us bodily, emotionally, and narratively.' These answers, too, require a more detailed story, but they do seem more specific than the 'meaning'-answers.

Scientific study. As already suggested, the concept of 'good fit' seems to allow for more theoretical integration with other fields than one of 'meaning,' so it might make meaning more empirically tractable. For instance, a Good Fit Questionnaire, in analogy with the Meaning in Life Questionnaire by Steger et al. (2006) might contain specific questions about the fit, or lack of fit, respondents experience between their beliefs, emotions, values, actions, social life, and life story.

That said, neither 'meaning' nor 'good fit' seems to lend itself particularly well for straightforward quantification and measurement. The appropriate methods for studying good fit will be of a hermeneutical and phenomenological, rather than quantitative character.

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