

Meaning in Consequences

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Abstract

This paper aims to respond on behalf of consequentialist theories of meaning in life to criticisms raised by Thaddeus Metz and, in doing so, demonstrates how the debate over theories of meaning in life might make progress. By using conceptual resources developed for consequentialist theories of morality, I argue that Metz's general arguments against consequentialist theories of meaning in life fail. That is, some consequentialist theories can accommodate Metz's criticisms. However, using conceptual resources developed in debate concerning consequentialist theories of practical reason, I then demonstrate how we might progress in the debate between consequentialist and nonconsequentialist theories, and in theorizing on meaning in life more generally.

1. Introduction

In his comprehensive and impressive *Meaning in Life*, Thaddeus Metz argues that we should reject any theory of meaning in life with a consequentialist structure.¹ In this paper, I argue that Metz's arguments fail to establish his conclusion by drawing upon resources developed for consequentialist theories of morality.² While I am not sure whether some consequentialist theory of meaning in life is correct, or even the best available theory, I think such theories have more going for them than Metz's discussion suggests.

Even more important than the defense of consequentialist theories, however, is the broader lesson to be learned from this defense. As this paper demonstrates, the discussion on meaning in life has much to gain by drawing on the conceptual resources available in other domains of normative inquiry. By taking advantage of these resources, we will be able to make real progress in our theorizing on

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¹ Metz (2014), pp. 197-8.

² There are limits to the fruitfulness of any distinction between types of consequentialisms. As Campbell Brown aptly notes, "'consequentialism' is a term of art used by philosophers to mean different things on different occasions, none of which is most obviously deserving of the name" (2009), p. 751.

meaning in life.

The paper will proceed as follows. In Section 2, I explain Metz's terminology. Then, in Section 3, I reconstruct Metz's arguments and demonstrate how someone who defends a consequentialist theory of meaning in life might respond. Finally, in Section 4, I explain how the failure of Metz's objections illustrates the larger point concerning progress in both the debate over consequentialist theories and the wider literature on meaning in life.

2. Preliminaries

On Metz's analysis, to talk of 'life's meaning' is to talk about some combination of the purposiveness, self-transcendence, and admirability of that life (and, perhaps, some further property a life might have as well).³ Metz cites the lives of Nelson Mandela, Mother Teresa, Albert Einstein, Charles Darwin, Pablo Picasso, and Fyodor Dostoyevsky as exemplars of lives with meaning (i.e. meaningful lives) in the sense he is after.⁴

Thus, a theory of meaning in life is an attempt to explain what feature these lives have in common such that they are meaningful. A theory is 'consequentialist' when it posits that the unifying element of meaningful lives is that it produces good consequences. More particularly, per Metz, it is the view that "the more final goodness one produces, and the more badness one reduces, wherever and however one can in the long-term, the more meaningful one's life".⁵

At this point, I wish to stop and flag a concern. In his characterization of consequentialist theories, Metz builds in a number of assumptions that proponents of consequentialism need not accept and do not when it comes to moral consequentialism. These include the assumptions that neither the distribution of goods nor the means to them are themselves relevant to the final net goodness of the consequences.⁶ However, as Metz will later capitalize on these assumptions in his objections, and much of my defense will involve

³ Metz (2014), pp. 34-5.

⁴ Metz (2014), p. 2. Some of these lives are controversially meaningful. For our purposes, however, we can set aside whether these lives are actually meaningful. We can instead say that these lives *as popularly conceived* would be meaningful.

⁵ Metz (2014), p. 184.

⁶ Metz also assumes that relationship between consequences and meaning are aggregative such that any increase in meaning requires an increase in net final goodness and vice versa. Though this assumption is not so controversial, it is worth noting that some consequentialist might deny it.

denying them, it is important that we recognize them as we proceed.

Metz, or someone sympathetic, might stipulate that consequentialist theories of meaning in life are committed to these assumptions. Any theory which does not share them is simply not the sort of theory to which the label ‘consequentialist’ applies. This reply obscures the substantive issue at stake. The question is whether, and to what extent, the goodness of consequences explains why some lives are meaningful. Stipulating the use of the term ‘consequentialist’ in this manner still leaves open the possibility that consequences are all there is to meaning in life.

3. Three Arguments against Consequentialist Theories of Meaning in Life

Metz argues primarily against a utilitarian theory of meaning in life on which final goodness and badness are solely a function of what is good or bad for people. In this paper, I am not interested in defending any particular consequentialist theory of meaning in life such as those advanced by Peter Singer or Irving Singer.⁷ I set aside any particular arguments against them (and grant their conclusions) except where relevant to Metz’s broader objections to consequentialist theories. Rather, I am more interested in Metz’s general rejection of a theory “because of its consequentialist structure”.⁸

3.1: Meaning in Means

In his own words, Metz’s first criticism of consequentialist theories is that “bringing about final value *with any (permissible) mechanism whatsoever* does not exhaust the respect in which realizing it can confer meaning on life”.⁹ The reasoning is as follows:

1. The means by which goods are produced cannot increase net final goodness.
2. The means by which goods are produced can increase net final meaningfulness.
3. So, there is more to meaningfulness than net final goodness (i.e.

⁷ See Singer (1995) and Singer (1996).

⁸ Metz (2014), p. 12.

⁹ Metz (2014), p. 198.

consequentialism).

Metz's characterization of consequentialist theories implies the first premise. Metz justifies the second premise by appealing to two thought experiments. The first, originally created by Robert Nozick, calls us to imagine a machine which can bring about any result with the push of a button. The second calls us to compare two individuals, one who donates inherited wealth to charity to benefit some impoverished community, and the other who works to benefit that community. In both experiments, Metz judges that, "*ceteris paribus*, promoting goodness for its own sake in a robust, active, or intense way would confer more meaning".¹⁰ That is, using the machine or one's inherited wealth for some meaningful end – such as the benefit of an impoverished community – would be less meaningful than the alternative where achieves that end via robust, active, or intense work.

For the sake of argument, I accept Metz's judgement about both cases and that they establish his premise.¹¹ The central problem remains that Metz fails to motivate his characterization of what it means for a theory to be consequentialist. As such, a consequentialist might simply deny the first premise by allowing that robust, active, or intense means contribute to the final goodness of the consequence they produce. It is better – they might say – when someone works hard. Even if we wish to resist saying that hard work itself is a good, we might still say that the good results of hard work are made even better by that work than they would have otherwise been. To see how this might work, consider G. E. Moore's principle that "*The value of a whole must not be assumed to be the same as the sum of the values of its parts*".¹² In this way, hard work might enhance the value of an 'organic whole' (to use Moore's language) without being valuable itself.¹³

3.2: Meaning in Distribution

Metz's second objection to consequentialist theories of meaning in life is that "the instruction to promote as much objective value wherever one can is too

¹⁰ Metz (2014), p. 198.

¹¹ Ben Bramble argues that these cases contain confounding details which undermine them as counter-examples to consequentialist theories of meaning. See Bramble (2015), pp. 5-7.

¹² Moore (2015), §18.

¹³ Moore (2015), §20.

crude” and “there would often be most reason of meaning to realize it *in oneself*”.¹⁴ The reasoning here is:

1. The distribution of goods produced cannot increase net final goodness produced.
2. The distribution of goods produced can increase net final meaningfulness.
3. So, there is more to meaningfulness than net final goodness.

As before, the first premise follows from Metz’s characterization of consequentialist theories. To support the second premise, Metz offers a thought experiment concerning a wife and her husband. In it, the two (quite impressively) calculate that more total goods will be “produced in the long run if the wife stayed home and supported the husband in his professional career, more than if he instead took care of the household or if they both worked and shared the domestic labor”.¹⁵ However, Metz finds the consequentialist implication that the wife would thereby lead a more meaningful life in her domestic role counterintuitive. It matters for the meaningfulness of a life whether the goods produced are in that life or in some other person’s life.

In this case, I share Metz’s intuition but doubt that our shared judgment supports the second premise. The case contains details that, I suspect, confound my judgment and, perhaps, others’ judgments as well. The detail that most concerns me is the gender and relationship of the individuals in the case. As the case is constructed, optimal behavior comports to traditional patriarchal norms about the role of women in marriage. On these norms, wives are expected to make personal sacrifices to support their husbands. As a critic of such traditional patriarchal norms – a position I suspect I share with many other academics – I cannot be sure my judgment about the meaningfulness of the wife’s life is not being influenced by the appearance of these norms. When I modify the case to be about two teammates rather than a wife and her husband, I am less willing to say that teammate who sacrifices for the other thereby lives less meaningfully. This difference in judgment between the two cases indicates that in the married couple case, my judgment is tracking something irrelevant to the second premise. To be clear, I am not accusing Metz of subscribing to these patriarchal norms.

¹⁴ Metz (2014), p. 195.

¹⁵ Ibid.

Nor am I suggesting that his thought experiment supports such norms. I am merely suggesting that there is reason to doubt our intuitions support the second premise, especially the intuitions of those who strongly oppose traditional patriarchal norms.

Nevertheless, the truth of the second premise would not diminish the deeper problem. As with Metz's previous objection, it is again open to a consequentialist to deny the first premise. A consequentialist can allow that the net final goodness of a consequence depends in part on how the distribution of goods ends up. Examples from the literature include Larry Temkin, who holds that an equal distribution is better, Derek Parfit, who maintains the good of a distribution which prioritizes the least well-off, and Shelly Kagan and Fred Feldman, who have each claimed (in their own way) goods are better distributed according to desert.¹⁶

3.3: *Meaning in Attraction*

Metz's third objection is that "*bringing about* what is non-instrumentally desirable is not the only way to relate to it so as to accrue meaning in life".¹⁷ The problem for the consequentialist is that "although subjective attraction is not *necessary* for a condition to be *pro tanto* meaningful, it would *increase* its meaning".¹⁸ Metz reasons:

1. Someone's attitude towards their life cannot increase that life's net final goodness.
2. Someone's attitude towards their life can increase that life's net final meaningfulness.
3. So, there is more to meaningfulness than net final goodness.

The first premise follows from Metz's understanding of what consequentialism *is* such that "According to the standard form of consequentialism, exhibiting a propositional attitude [...] can have only instrumental value".¹⁹ He supports the second premise with another series of

¹⁶ See Temkin (1993), Parfit (1997), Feldman (2004), and Kagan (2012).

¹⁷ Metz (2014), p. 198.

¹⁸ Metz (2014), p. 196.

¹⁹ *Ibid.*

thought experiments. We can imagine “a Mother Teresa who helps others enormously but is alienated from her work”.²⁰ Metz thinks that, in such a case, Mother Teresa’s life would be *more* meaningful were she not so alienated. Since, as I take it, her alienation is a function of her propositional attitudes towards her work, the second premise follows.

Metz considers a consequentialist objection to the second premise. A consequentialist might assert that Mother Teresa’s life would be better for her absent alienation and life going better for someone does not necessarily make their life more meaningful. Thus, we can explain why Mother Teresa’s life would be preferable absent alienation without thinking it would be more meaningful and, thereby, committing ourselves to the second premise. Metz denies that her life going better completely explains what’s preferable about Mother Teresa’s life absent alienation. As he puts it “It is not a matter of *welfare* to exhibit attitudes such as identifying closely with a project, or concentrating intently on it, or setting an end and realizing it. And even if it were, I submit that these subjective conditions have an additional, non-welfarist property that is the factor conferring meaning on the agent’s life”.²¹ For the sake of argument, I once more accept Metz’s judgment about this case and his response to this objection.

But again, the consequentialist can deny the first premise. The world is an even better place when people appreciate the work they do to improve it. There are a number of plausible explanations for why this might be so. For example, failure to appreciate the worth of one’s actions might consist in a form of ignorance. If it is better that we have true beliefs about the world then it would be better to appreciate the worth of our actions.²² Alternatively (or additionally), failure to appreciate the worth of one’s actions might consist in a failure to pursue things for the right reasons. If it is better that we do so, then appreciating the worth of our actions is again better.

4. Progress

Metz’s objections to consequentialist theories of meaning in life systematically underestimate the flexibility of the consequentialist approach.

²⁰ Ibid.

²¹ Metz (2014), p. 197.

²² See Lynch (2004) for the view that it is better we have true beliefs.

Consequentialist theories are compatible with a wide range of results about cases. Aaron Smuts provides an illustrative example. On his good cause account, “One’s life is meaningful to the extent that it promotes the good”.²³ What promotes the good? Smuts mentions an open-ended list of, “various kinds of goods that matter, such as achievement, moral worth, perfectionist value, and aesthetic value”.²⁴ Such a list provides Smuts the resources to respond to counter-example by insisting that there is some “value to be found”.²⁵

Though Smuts does not discuss the extent of this flexibility, this feature of consequentialism has been the subject of some discussion among those interested in consequentialist moral theories.²⁶ For example, consider what has been sometimes called ‘consequentializing.’ As Douglas Portmore explains “we consequentialize a nonconsequentialist theory by constructing a substantive version of consequentialism that yields, in every possible world, the same set of deontic verdicts that [the nonconsequentialist theory] yields”.²⁷ With regard to morality, this can be accomplished as follows: “Take the very feature that the nonconsequentialist says determined which act should be performed [...] and claim that this feature determines which outcome the agent should prefer”.²⁸ While the method needs to be expanded to capture other moral concepts like permissibility, agent-relative restrictions (e.g. rights), supererogation, and moral dilemmas, Portmore, at least, is confident that “for any remotely plausible nonconsequentialist theory, we can construct a version of consequentialism that is deontically equivalent to it”.²⁹

Such a method works just as well for consequentialist theories of meaning in life. A consequentialist can take the feature the nonconsequentialist says determines the meaningfulness of a life and claim that this feature determines which outcomes we should admire, regard as purposive, or self-transcendent. In fact, the method is much more straightforward for these theories as there are no equivalents to moral permissibility, dilemma, and supererogation within the evaluation of meaning in life.

The underappreciated upshot of this method is that the general debates

²³ Smuts (2013), p. 1.

²⁴ Smuts (2013), p. 14.

²⁵ Smuts (2013), p. 17.

²⁶ See Vallentyne (1988), Oddie and Milne (1991), Dreier (1993), Louise (2004), Portmore (2009), Smith (2009), Brown (2011), and Hurley (2013).

²⁷ Portmore (2009), p. 330.

²⁸ Portmore (2009), p. 329.

²⁹ Portmore (2009), p. 336.

between consequentialist and nonconsequentialist theories of meaning in life can only make minimal progress with the use of thought experiments to produce counter-examples. While particular consequentialist theories remain susceptible to such counter-examples, there will always be some consequentialist theory that avoids the counter-example and thereby remains extensionally adequate.³⁰

How, then, are we to progress the debate between consequentialist and nonconsequentialist theories of meaning in life? We will need to develop criteria for what a good explanation of meaning in life will look like, apart from extensional adequacy. I recommend we look to normative theory for assistance.

Consider Elizabeth Anderson's reply to commentary from Nicholas Sturgeon where similar issues are raised regarding consequentialism about reasons for action (which Anderson calls 'C').³¹ Anderson writes:

My objection to C is not that it gives us the wrong ends. Sturgeon is right to suppose that with enough ingenuity in defining the structure of valuable states of affairs and in postulating causal connections, C can end up recommending almost any aim and thereby mimic the causal consequences of any other theory. My objection to C is rather that it fails to articulate an adequate rationale for the ends it recommends. It turns into a brute evaluative fact what begs for an explanation.³²

Here we see Anderson criticizing a consequentialist theory of reasons for action (i.e. theory of practical reason) on the grounds that it fails to explain *why* the moral ends are as they are. This is because a consequentialist understanding of which ends are valuable subordinates the value of people to the value of states of affairs (or possible worlds). Why? It is simply a brute fact that some states of affairs are more valuable than others. Anderson favors an alternative view on which everything derives its value from the value of people. Specifically, something is valuable just in case people can, on intersubjective reflection, have the evaluative attitudes they do towards the things they value for the reasons they value those things.³³

³⁰ Brown argues, convincingly to my mind, that this is not true for moral theories on one plausible and common understanding of 'consequentialism.' See Brown (2009).

³¹ Paul Hurley connects this debate with the debate over consequentialist theories of morality. See Hurley (2013).

³² Anderson (1996), pp. 541-42.

³³ Anderson (1996), p. 540.

It is beyond the scope of this paper to evaluate Anderson's complaint and whether her alternative ultimately succeeds. Rather, I use her discussion to demonstrate *how* we might criticize consequentialist theories of meaning in life (and to indicate how they might respond in turn) such that progress can be made. Her remarks suggest a criterion of adequacy for any theory of practical reason: an adequate theory will be able to explain why something is more valuable than another without brute appeal. We might adopt a similar criterion of adequacy for theories of meaning in life and see whether consequentialist and nonconsequentialist theories fare. Alternatively, we might judge that there is something about meaning that differentiates it from practical reason in general such that different explanatory burdens obtain for their respective theories.

To develop this latter point, a theorist about meaning in life might take themselves to only be discussing a certain class of practical reasons – reasons of meaning in life – and this class is, at least partially, distinct from other classes of practical reason (e.g. moral reasons, prudential reasons, etc.). These classes have different features (e.g. moral reasons relate to deontic requirements like rightness and wrongness) such that explaining why certain reasons belong to the class they do will require different criteria. Either way, our discussion of meaning in life will be all the richer for considering these issues.

All of this is to demonstrate what I take to be the ultimate lesson of this paper. We should seek to understand the structural similarities between our idea of meaning in life and other normative concepts, like morality. Insofar as they are similar, we should draw upon the conceptual resources to be found in the wide literature on those subjects to inform our discussion of meaning in life. This paper itself exemplifies the fruitfulness of this method.

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