The Relational Account of Meaning in Life
A Critique

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Abstract

The relational account by Robert Nozick (1981; 1989) posits meaning as engaged, external connection to an array of value, and it has been widely influential in debates concerning life's meaning. Thaddeus Metz (2001; 2013; 2016) proffers several counterexamples to the view, arguing that it does not best account for what is conceptually important to meaning in life. We evaluate these criticisms, determining that while some objections are less persuasive, others are more compelling, particularly Metz's subjectivist critique which we go on to expand in developing a novel counterexample to the relational view. We conclude with positing another final counterexample—a being who accrues meaning in life solely through internal relations.

1. Introduction

In recent decades, the relational theory has been one of the most prominent accounts in the philosophical literature on life's meaning. The basic notion is simple: meaning in life requires that one intensely connects with an array of value beyond oneself. It was first made popular by Robert Nozick in his two works *Philosophical Explanations* (1981) and *Examined Life* (1989); many have subsequently adopted his approach, or at least prominent features of it, as a viable framework for grasping meaning in life (Cooper 2003: 29-30, 132; Bennett-Hunter 2014; Bennett-Hunter 2016: 1277; Benatar 2017: 18, 54).

One of the most notable critics of this view is Thaddeus Metz (2001: 145-147; 2013: 29-31; 2016). In analyzing the relational view, he makes a careful distinction between a *conception* of life's meaning ("a theory of what makes life meaningful") and the *concept* of a meaningful life ("what the competing conceptions of a meaningful life are about") (Metz 2001: 138).[1] Metz divides his counterexamples to Nozick's account by what Metz takes to be strong formulations of a relational *conception* of meaning in life and a relational *concept*

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[1] A distinction made well-known by John Rawls (1999: 5).

of meaning in life (2001: 145-146; 2013: 18-21; 28-31). Specifically, he postulates "the idea of connecting with something valuable for its own sake beyond one's person" for the former notion (Metz 2013: 28) and "the idea of connecting with final goods beyond one's animal self" for the latter (Metz 2013: 29).

We render differently a relational conception of meaning and a relational concept of it, as will be clear later (the terms "relational account" or "relational theory" encompass both these aspects). However, Metz's counterexamples will be understood as applicable to our analysis of the relational view since the central elements of intrinsic value as ultimate terminus (for the relational conception of meaning) and external connection (for the relational concept of meaning) are common to both Metz's and our characterizations. The focus of this paper will be on the aspect of external connection as it functions within Nozick's account. In other words, we do not dispute that value is needed for meaning. What we question is whether one must connect *externally* to that value in order to gain meaning (this is also the central element that Metz's counterexamples center on). Thus, even though this paper splits up a relational conception and concept of meaning for purposes of aligning with Metz's delineation, the distinction will not be important for the rest of the paper. For our critique of the crucial aspect of external connection is a criticism of both the relational concept and conception of meaning—in other words, an objection to the relational account.

We begin with a brief survey of Nozick's view and go on to consider the merits of Metz's objections. We then offer two primary challenges to the relational account: first, in comparing rival subjectivist theories, outward connections do not seem to be much of a factor in living a meaningful life, casting doubt on the claim that external relations are necessary for meaning. Second, it seems that an entity which makes purely internal connections is able to obtain meaning, again calling into question the element of outward connection that is vital to the relational theory.

2. Nozick's Relational Account

As we interpret Nozick according to the concept/conception schema that Metz uses, the concept of meaning in life is inherently relational: "We can understand the question of something's meaning, roughly, as the question of how it connects up to what is outside it" (Nozick 1981: 601). Again, Nozick writes concerning this concept of meaning, "To seek to give life meaning is to seek to transcend the limits

of one's individual life" (Nozick 1989: 166). In other words, one must connect externally, not internally, in order to live a meaningful life. Admittedly, the internal/external distinction is somewhat vague, yet it seems that enough sense can be made of the idea of something being beyond one's self in order to intelligibly discuss making meaning through external connections.[2]

However, Nozick's relational account does not stop there. He fleshes out this framework with his conception of what makes life meaningful, namely the idea that meaning in life requires that one strongly connects outside oneself to worth (Nozick 1989: 167-168). Worth is the category he classifies value and meaning under, although he sees value as that which primarily endows meaning, particularly intrinsic value (Nozick 1981: 610-613). The rationale for value's primacy is that if meaning were the only aspect of worth that one could link to in order to acquire meaning, a regress problem would occur that would be difficult to stop (Nozick 1989: 167-168). This is because intrinsic meaning is hard to fathom given meaning's inherently relational nature—there is always another connection that needs to be made in order for meaning to accrue (Nozick 1981: 599). He writes, "We need not look beyond something to find its (intrinsic value), whereas we do have to look beyond a thing to discover its meaning…The regress of meaning is stopped by reaching something with a kind of worth other than meaning—namely, reaching something of value" (Nozick 1989: 167-168).[3]

Regarding these outward relations, it is not mere connections that matter. They must be strong ones that interact in some important way (e.g. passion, engagement, etc.) with the non-trivial thing connected to (Nozick 1989: 168). And the greater the diversity of value one connects to outside oneself, the more meaning one accrues: "This meaning will depend upon the array of external or wider values connected with it and upon the nature of the connections, their strength, intensity, closeness…The meaning of a life is its place in a wider context of value" (Nozick 1981: 611). Thus, in summary of Nozick's conception of a meaningful life: in order to live such a life, one must substantively link beyond oneself to worth—particularly, a wider context of value where intrinsic value ultimately grounds one's transcendent relations toward meaning.

One question that arises under this framework is whether one must connect to

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[2] For instance, other philosophical debates such as epistemic internalism/externalism or personal autonomy find ways of having sensible discussion centering on what is internal or external to one's self despite the oftentimes unclear nature as to what counts as internal or external to the self.
[3] Nozick also considers the notion of a deity as a meaning-conferring destination for linkages; ultimately, he thinks this schema a coherent but insufficiently plausible idea (Nozick 1981: 609).

intrinsic value in order to gain meaning, or whether one can link to instrumental value or even just another meaningful, non-intrinsically valuable entity in order to gain meaning. Certainly, Nozick envisions that chains of meaning must eventually end up with intrinsic value, otherwise the regress never stops. However, he still adheres to a traditional intrinsic/instrumental framework of value (along with some novel categories he stipulates) (Nozick 1981: 312-313). Given this retention, perhaps gaining meaning through instrumental value is also what he has in mind, such as when he writes, "Meaning is a connection with an external value, but this meaning need not involve any connection with an infinite value; we may well aspire to that, but to fall short is not to be bereft of meaning. There are many numbers between zero and infinity" (Nozick 1981: 610-611).

Or consider something that is non-intrinsically valuable yet meaningful. One prime candidate of this sort is chess, about which Nozick states, "An example of value without importance is chess…By connecting up with larger themes of combat, games might be said to have meaning also…But the game is not, I think, important. It does not have any impact beyond itself, even though it is an activity that can dominate someone's life" (Nozick 1989: 170-171). Nozick considers chess to be somewhat meaningful because it connects to themes of combat. Additionally, it is arguable that he sees chess as non-intrinsically valuable as well, since he describes it as lacking importance, "any impact beyond itself," and something that fails to deepen the lives of those who participate in it (Nozick 1989: 171)—logically consistent yet hardly fitting descriptions for something which is supposed to possess the highest sort of value.[4] Given that one seems able to gain meaning by connecting to something meaningful since meaning is a variety of worth (it just can't be meaning *all the way down*), it is plausible to think that meaning can be gained also by linking to something meaningful without intrinsic value. Thus, although intrinsic value is the ultimate foundation for meaning because it is the final terminus for meaningful connections, it seems that on the relational theory, some meaning can be gained via linkages to non-intrinsically valuable entities.

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[4] Not to mention chess's arguably low degree of organic unity which depends on "the degree of diversity and the degree of unity to which that diversity is brought" (and for Nozick, something possesses intrinsic value "to the degree that is organically unified") (Nozick 1989: 164).

3. Metz's Objections—Possible Rebuttals

Metz objects to the relational view with a flurry of counterexamples regarding activities that grant one meaning in life but fail to involve any external connection:

> Consider that the following could in principle make one's life somewhat more meaningful: publicly standing by what one reflectively believes to be right, exhibiting courage and performing a difficult act because it is right, being true to oneself, overcoming addiction, not letting oneself be bossed around, discovering new particles and confirming the existence of certain laws of nature. Since integrity, virtue, authenticity, autonomy, self-respect, and knowledge are internal to a person, or at least do not essentially involve a relationship to an external final good, and since they are *prima facie* candidates for a meaningful life, the concept of a meaningful life cannot just be that of an existence that has 'a connection with an external value' (Metz 2013: 29).

However, it seems that these sorts of examples could plausibly be construed as giving meaning because of a linkage to an outward good even if they do not necessarily involve an external connection. For example, in the case of scientific discoveries, they could be meaningful because they are explanations that connect with what the world is really like, that is, they accurately represent the "facts" of the physical world (Kim 1988: 225). Nozick's own tracking theory of knowledge is similar to this picture: "Knowledge is a particular way of being connected to the world, having a specific real factual connection to the world: tracking it" (Nozick 1981: 178). Additionally, externally connecting to facts is the sort of thing that confers meaning on Nozick's view. He writes, "For a life to have meaning, it must connect with other things, with some things or values beyond itself…Tracking, *either of facts* or of value, is a mode of being so connected, as is fitting an external purpose" (emphasis mine) (Nozick 1981: 594-595).

Or in the case of possessing virtues, agents may live meaningful lives *qua* virtuous because they link up to an objective moral reality that counts virtues like justice and courage as objective goods. For instance, if one were to do as Nozick does and seriously consider how a Platonic account might interact with the relational view, then one could say that to be virtuous is to participate in the Form of the Good (Nozick 1981: 595). This is the form that for Plato was the ultimate

grounding of truth and virtue which gave the other forms, such as justice, their goodness (Santas 1989: 144). Being virtuous through connecting oneself to the Form of the Good would presumably be an external link given that it is an entity we should distinguish "from everything else" (*Republic* VII.534b), is "independent of any desires, attitudes, or interest a sentient being may take in it" (Santas 1985: 239), and described as something whose "remoteness…is a metaphorical version of the thesis that value is not in the world…" (McDowell 1979: 347).

In other words, under the present realist analysis, what makes actions meaningful like acquiring scientific knowledge or living virtuously is that the agent engages with something outside himself—in this instance, facts of the world and objective values, respectively. And we do not think this is an implausible view. In fact, it seems that one of the main motivations for holding a realism about any given X (realism conceived of as linking to the "really real") is that such a stance provides a kind of significance and motivation to the pursuit of X that could be characterized as giving meaning to it.[5] Thus, the relational notion of connecting to something else that has value seems flexible enough to adequately characterize many of Metz's counterexamples as meaningful through external linkage.

Metz does offer more difficult counterexamples against the relational account which are harder to construe as making external connection in producing meaning. These are supernaturalist accounts where "a person's life is meaningful insofar as she honours her soul or realizes what she essentially is *qua* spiritual substance endowed with a freedom independent of the laws of nature" (Metz 2013: 29). Since on these ultra-mundane frameworks a person's soul seems very much internal to individuals and engagement solely with the soul seems conceptually capable of making life meaningful, such cases are more challenging for the relational theory to explain.

We think these are better counterexamples. However, in giving the relational view a run for its money, it still might plausibly account for the dynamics of meaning in instances of honoring one's soul or realizing one's spiritual substance.

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[5] For an example of the phenomenon I am describing here, see Michele Moody-Adams's criticism of Richard Rorty's claim that the pursuit of justice needs no referent outside our own desires: "Could the student or the freedom rider engage in these activities [for justice], if they accepted Rorty's view? Rorty wants to say they could and that all you need is solidarity, I want to say that that's just nonsense…I think that you need the idea that at some point human moral inquiry could be progressing closer and closer to the grasp of an objective truth. Could be, but not necessarily is. You need that aspiration, you need that hope in order to be able to carry out the activity" (Moody-Adams 1998: 131).

To start, one might take Metz's notion of meaning gained through realizing one's higher nature as a form of self-knowledge, that is inquiring into the self (i.e. knowing the self's nature)—this can be conceived of as "self-awareness [which] yields a grasp of the material or non-material nature of the self" (Gertler 2020). This sort of self-knowledge would involve propositions as its object, namely propositions concerning the true nature of the self.

Thus, in the case of realizing one's ensouled nature, let p be the proposition that one is a soul with freedom independent of the laws of nature and let q be someone who is a soul endowed with a freedom independent of the laws of nature. Thus, if q gains meaning through realizing p, q gains propositional knowledge of p. But propositional knowledge stands in a relation to the knower; indeed, the idea of a relation holding between knower and proposition is typically seen as a basic feature of attributions of propositional knowledge (Blaauw and Pritchard 2005: 119; Hornsby 2005).[6] Moreover, the connection between p and q can be credibly construed as an external relationship. A soul is not typically thought of as composed of propositions, particularly under substance dualism (Moreland 1987) or the Platonic doctrine of the soul as a metaphysically simple entity (van Inwagen 2002: 171; *Phaedo* 78b-80e) (i.e. propositions are not substances nor are metaphysical simples composed of propositional parts).[7] In other words, under the framework at play, propositions are external to souls, even if the latter incorporates the former, such as with a mind intaking propositional content. Alternatively, under a traditional knowledge/reality divide, propositions, as contents of statements, are representations while souls are things to be represented—they are distinct things (Kim 1988: 225).

Accordingly, it seems plausible to say that p is external to q, and so when q accrues meaning via p, q does so by making an external connection outside q. To be clear, we do not necessarily hold the assumptions and commitments put forth

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[6] For a (somewhat) dissenting perspective, see Fodor (1978), for whom propositional attitudes are relational, but to say that "propositional attitudes are relations to propositions" is unclear since this relation must be mediated by internal representation (see especially p. 520).

[7] One might respond by saying that propositions may somehow be located within oneself so that when one realizes one's spiritual substance, one is internally connecting. However, the notion of internality and externality we are using in this instance centers not around location but composition. A pacemaker may be internal to the body but is compositionally external to it, based on the usual conception of composition that a thing's component parts must be of the same category of the thing which they compose (Lowe 2002: 236). However, if one makes a case for how propositions are in the same ontological category as souls or that the former can compose the latter, then Metz's supernaturalist counterexamples would gain persuasiveness.

here, such as the claim that propositions must be external to souls. Instead, what we offer is a possible framework through which the relational theory could rebut the soul-based accounts of meaning in life that Metz suggests are ways of gaining meaning without going outside oneself. To summarize, the counterargument to Metz is the following:

1. If q acquires meaning via p, then q connects to p.
2. Propositions (such as p) are not internal to souls (such as q).
3. Thus, if q acquires meaning via p, then q connects externally to p.

4. Metz's Objections—Expanding on the Counterexamples

Having laid out some disagreements and possible replies to several of Metz's counterexamples, we do think that other objections he presents to the relational account are much stronger. For example, he writes, "Conceiving of meaning as merely a function of connection with something external is not sufficient to capture the evaluative dimension of meaning, and, more generally, does not express anything fairly exclusive to meaning in life" (Metz 2013: 28). It is this last bit about the deficient generality of the relational theory that we find compelling. If meaning in life just is that phenomenon which results when one connects to value, it is unclear what work the relational theory of meaning is doing. Value talk (and other variations) seem able to do all the conceptual work that relational meaning is supposed to perform. In discussing the good life, if one speaks of connecting to value and another speaks of connecting to value which is also accompanied by meaning, the latter notion does not seem to add any salient dimension to the conversation—nothing seems to be lost by dropping talk of meaning.

In other words, making meaning in life as generic as connecting to value makes meaning superfluous. Other concepts can easily fulfill the light theoretical responsibilities that meaning is supposed to handle. For example, consider Stephen Darwall's discussion of human welfare, where in the spirit of Aristotelian *eudaimonia,* he claims "that a person's welfare is enhanced, her life is made better for her, through active engagement with and appreciation of values whose worth transcends their capacity to benefit (extrinsically or intrinsically)" (Darwall 2002: 76). He goes on to say that "the most beneficial human life consists of activities involving the appreciation of worth and merit" (Darwall 2002: 80). Pleasures such

as musical performance or parenting are important to our welfare because "through them, we are connecting with things that matter. The benefit comes through the appreciation of agent-neutral values—worth and merit—with which these activities connect us" (Darwall 2002: 95).

It is hard to ignore the fact that Darwall's notion of welfare is almost identical to Nozick's relational theory of meaning. Both center on non-trivially connecting with things of value (and most of Darwall's examples of welfare-endowing connections can be seen as external linkages). But if the idea of welfare (or *eudaimonia* as Darwall likens welfare to) can perform the same type of theoretical work in pursuing the good life that meaning claims for itself, then there seems to be little philosophical room left for the relational notion of meaning in life as engaged, external connection to a wider context of value. It is this weakness that we take to be the central merit of Metz's objection that the relational account "does not express anything fairly exclusive to meaning in life" (Metz 2013: 28). Introducing concepts in value theory with non-unique capabilities are apt to be redundancies of limited use in theorizing the good life.

Metz's more central criticism against the relational theory is its inability to account for prominent subjectivist conceptions of meaning in life, such as the one proposed by Richard Taylor where what matters for a meaningful life is the satisfaction of one's desires (Taylor 1970). Using the ancient Greek myth of Sisyphus who is condemned by the gods to roll a stone up a hill *ad infinitum,* Taylor says that if the gods were to inject in Sisyphus the voracious desire to roll stones up hills, then Sisyphus' life would have meaning because he would be doing exactly what he wants to do with his life. On Taylor's view, the meaning of life is to do whatever it is that we have a deep and abiding interest to fulfill. Metz says that Taylor's desire-satisfaction subjectivism has been quite influential and extensively discussed, "probably the most widely reprinted and read discussion of the meaning of life in the past 40 years" (Metz 2013: 31). Because of this, the weakness of the relational view is that its concept of meaning simply must deny that Taylor's view even counts as a theory of meaning in life since on his desire-satisfaction framework, agents accrue meaning without connecting with anything beyond themselves. Metz concludes that it "is difficult to rest content with an analysis that entails that the many who consider Taylor's theory to be about meaning are conceptually confused" (Metz 2013: 31).

Although we do not hold this specific criticism that Metz makes, we do agree with his broader critique that Taylor's subjectivism poses a problem for the

relational view since desire-satisfaction illuminates how external connection does not quite capture the definitive features of meaning in life. Our novel version of the objection is simple. Imagine that the gods rescind their punishment and instead implant in Sisyphus the deep desire to simply do nothing, from which he will experience immense pleasure (or happiness). Consequently, Sisyphus lies down unconscious for some time at the top of the mountain and experiences great pleasure and satisfaction from his total inaction. In other words, he connects to nothing external in his blissful idleness (call this Sisyphus 1). Now consider Nozick's experience machine where one can plug into a contraption to simulate any assortment of desirable and pleasurable events for as long as one wants (Nozick 1974: 42-45). This would be connecting with something valuable outside oneself, since the machine is external to the individual. And this is not just any type of value but plausibly intrinsic or final value, as pleasure is widely categorized as such among hedonists and non-hedonists alike (Goldstein 1989: 273; Hurka 2001; Feldman 2004: 31; Goetz 2012: 14; Metz 2013: 29).[8] Furthermore, imagine that in this alternate world, Sisyphus 2 climbs down from the mountain and temporarily hooks up to the experience machine, encountering the same magnitude of pleasurable/happy fulfillment he experiences in the case of desire-satisfaction from complete idleness.

Before moving to the substance of the objection, it is worth pointing out that Nozick considers a lifetime committed to the experience machine as un-meaningful, but not because the machine lacks value. He does think that there is value to the machine, if it is used limitedly.[9] He writes the following:

> Notice that we have not said one should never plug in to such a machine, even temporarily. It might teach you things, or transform you in a way beneficial for your actual life later. It also might give you pleasures that

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[8] There is a distinction sometimes made between something having *intrinsic* value (value in itself) and *final* value (value for its own sake), with the former specifying the location or source of the value, while the latter refers to the object's value as an end (Korsgaard 1983: 170). It seems that the concept of final value is the one that philosophers have generally found more important (Rønnow-Rasmussen 2015: 34), although some deem "intrinsic value" an appropriate reference to final value's denotation (Kagan 1998: 293; Zimmerman and Bradley 2019). In this paper, the terms "intrinsic value" and "final value" refer to Nozick's idea of intrinsic value as the value something "has in itself apart from or independently of whatever it leads to or its further consequences" (Nozick 1981: 311).

[9] Whether he thinks the machine has intrinsic value is unclear since that would depend on its organic unity, Nozick's measure of intrinsic value. A point in favor of its possessing intrinsic value, however, would be *qua* source of pleasure, arguably an intrinsic good.

would be quite acceptable in limited doses. This is all quite different from spending the rest of your life on the machine; the internal contents of *that* life would be unconnected to actuality" (Nozick 1989: 108).

Herein lies the primary reason why Nozick rejects a lifetime hooked to the machine. Such an act privileges the value of pleasure in a way that makes no room for other values, most importantly, connecting to reality. He writes, "I am saying that the connection to actuality is important whether or not we desire it—that is *why* we desire it—and the experience machine is inadequate because it doesn't give us *that*" (Nozick 1989: 107). In other words, a lifetime in the machine fails to connect to a "wider context of value," one of the key aspects of a meaningful life on the relational view (Nozick 1981: 611). He goes on to say concerning a life solely constituted by pleasure and happiness, like the one the experience machine provides, that a "life cannot just be happy while having nothing else valuable in it" (Nozick 1989: 113).[10] Although "[o]f course we wish people to have many such moments and days of happiness," Nozick writes, "it is not clear that we want those moments constantly or want our lives to consist wholly and only of them" (Nozick 1989: 117). While pleasure is valuable, a life totally consumed by it is limited in meaning because such an existence is constrained regarding the diversity of value it can link with.

Hence, on Nozick's view, the experience machine is valuable in the sense that pleasure is a value that can appropriately be part of a meaningful life as long as other values (like linking to reality) are present. With this background, our contention is that the two scenarios of our Sisyphus counterexample indicate that connecting to value outside oneself is not what is fundamental for meaning in life. Under the relational theory, Sisyphus 2 accrues more meaning in life than Sisyphus 1 since the latter experiences value (pleasure) without external linkage while Sisyphus 2 connects to a machine outside himself in experiencing the value of pleasure. In fact, Sisyphus 1 gains no meaning whatsoever since no external connection with value is made. But are these implications plausible? Is the mere fact of external connection the decisive difference in the meaningfulness of the two lives? We think that the basic intuition here is that Sisyphus 1 and Sisyphus 2 are more or less equivalent in overall meaningfulness (whether the degree is high or low). The mere fact that Sisyphus 2 involves an external relation in

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[10] Nozick doesn't carefully distinguish between pleasure and happiness but seems to classify pleasure as a type of happiness (Nozick 1989: 108).

experiencing pleasure while Sisyphus 1 encounters the same sort of desire satisfaction absent linkage outside himself does not seem to be a decisive (or even relevant) factor in evaluating the meaningfulness of the two Sisyphuses. And if this is so, then external connection to value is not what is definitive for meaning in life, contra the relational account.

Another way to put forward the basic intuition that undergirds our objection is this: many would consider meaning in life to be a highly desirable good. Now imagine if people were told that they must spend the rest of their lives either as Sisyphus 1 (pleasure without transcendent connection) or Sisyphus 2 (pleasure via the experience machine). Thus, if meaning is a great good and conceptually relational, then would not people have strong reason to prefer the experience machine over idle pleasure lacking external connection if the degree of pleasure is the same in both cases? It seems to us that people would not have an overwhelming preference for the experience machine option since it exhibits no greater virtue over the alternative, particularly in the dimension of meaning. Of course, there might be reason not to prefer either option but given a forced choice between the two, the fact that one scenario includes external connection and the other does not seems insufficient as an important, rational consideration to persuade either way. So if meaning in life is conceptually relational and generally considered a great good, but it is not consistently favored, then this gives some reason to believe that perhaps a relational understanding of meaning is not quite capturing what is necessary for it. Hence, we conclude that meaning as external connection to value does not adequately explain what is important for meaning in life.

5. Meaning via Internal Connections: A Triune God

In this section and the next, we attempt to provide a case of a life that is meaningful through solely internal connections, thus providing a counterexample to the relational view's claim that for "a life to have meaning, it must connect with other things, with some things or values beyond itself" (Nozick 1981: 594).[11] Our

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[11] Another deity-involved counterexample which we do not explore is positing that God just "glows meaning," exactly the kind of explanation about which Nozick incredulously asks, "How in the world (or out of it) can there be something whose nature contains meaning, something which just glows meaning?" (1981: 593). Perhaps God has the Form of Meaning in the divine mind (i.e. meaning as an abstract object constituted by God's thought) (Welty 2014: 81) so that God simply emanates meaning as part of the divine nature, making the meaning of God's life an entirely non-external affair. Or maybe

first example is the Christian Trinity. Of course, many do not think that contemporary models of the Trinity are logically coherent or consistent with biblical and creedal formulations (Winter 2013; Tuggy 2016). However, our counterexample does not assume any one model of the Trinity nor its general coherence; rather, it supposes that the basic structure of the Trinity is coherent enough to speak of as one entity, formed by three persons, and which gains meaning through solely connecting with itself.[12]

Before getting into the concept of the Trinity, we wish to make a few prefatory points. First, although we do not delve into what constitutes a person, we think that the three individuals of the Trinity fulfill most mainstream criteria for personhood. These include being "a thinking intelligent being, that has reason and reflection, and can consider itself as itself" (Locke 1689/2017: 115), having a capacity for a "first-person perspective" (Baker 2000: 20), and possessing a will that is able to form "second-order desires" (i.e. desires for desires) (Frankfurt 1971: 6-7). Second, despite the plurality of persons, we deem it coherent to conceive of a triune deity as a single being that can be characterized as having a unitary life. One way to think of this notion is through the mythological dog Cerberus who has three heads but is one biological organism (this is the illustration that William Lane Craig and J.P. Moreland offer in explicating their "Trinity monotheism" model of the Christian God) (2017: 592). Similarly, one can speak of the Trinity having three persons but existing as one, united being, since the Godhead is a single "divine organism." The members of the Trinity can also be thought of as a single life in being "necessarily united in their purposes and in their actions towards the world," (Hasker 2013: 257) since the unity of one's mind and intentions is often seen as central to living one life as opposed to several.[13] In these ways, we deem it sensible to discuss the notion of meaning in the Trinity's life, while also speaking of the relations among the persons as

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God just creates meaning, like how God creates the world (although this particular case might run into the "bootstrapping objection" found in discussions of divine aseity where God might already need to possess a property, like meaningfulness, in order to create it) (Craig 2016: 60-61). At any rate, these sorts of scenarios at least seem conceptually possible and (mostly) unproblematic. There seems to be no obvious reason for a theist to reject them. However, we will not further pursue such an easy line of objection.

[12] This position is consistent with speaking of particular aspects of meaning in the life of each individual person of the Trinity as well.

[13] This is why those who display very different purposes and conduct in one setting as opposed to another are called "two-faced" (if they act with hypocrisy) or accused of living a "double life" (if certain elements of secrecy are involved).

"internal connections" (i.e. internal to the one life of the triune God).[14]

The concept of the Trinity has historically been that there is one God made of three persons—Father, Son, and Spirit. The starting point for this idea comes from various Christian creeds, such as the Athanasian Creed (c. A.D. 500) which states, "Yet there are not three almighty beings; there is but one almighty being. Thus the Father is God, the Son is God, the Holy Spirit is God. Yet there are not three gods; there is but one God." Accordingly, Christian philosophers are generally united on this essential framework of the Trinity. For example, Michael Murray and Michael Rea state that "[f]rom the beginning, Christians have affirmed the claim that there is one God, and three persons—Father, Son, and Holy Spirit—each of whom is God" (Murray and Rea 2016).[15] Similarly, William Hasker writes, "Yet the question, 'One what?' also needs to be answered, if we are to have a satisfying answer to the metaphysical problem of the divine three-in-oneness. To be sure, the question can easily be answered, 'One God,' and all trinitarians will agree to that" (Hasker 2013: 50). In other words, the Trinity is three persons that integrate into one entity with a single existence, whether that three in one is conceived of as three properties of divine personhood with the same divine substance (Rea 2009: 419), three centers of self-consciousness with one soul (Craig and Moreland 2017: 593), or three divine individuals who jointly establish a collective, single source of the being of all else (Swinburne 1994: 180). For our purposes, it does not matter what precisely explains this three-in-oneness. All we need to establish is that the Trinity, at the very least, is one completely unified being that "is not a single person, but the closest possible union and communion of the three divine persons" (Hasker 2013: 258).

Our claim is for the conceptual possibility of a triune God possessing a meaningful life via purely internal connections, without transcending outside Godself.[16] To begin, imagine that the members of the Trinity have always

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[14] As in the previously discussed case of propositions being external to souls in the sense of being compositionally external, the three persons of the Trinity are internally situated because they compose the Godhead. To reiterate, a simple notion of composition is that for x to compose y, x and y must be in the same ontological category. The three persons of the Trinity fulfill this criterion because they are of the same divine substance as the Trinity (at least according to most models of the Christian God). Hence, it is plausible to think that the act of one person of the Trinity relating to another, while external to the two, is internal to the one life of the Trinity. Here, the "one life" of the Trinity is understood by extending the notion of self to include multiple persons within a single being.

[15] For a dissenting view of the Trinity's theological history, see Tuggy (2016).

[16] Although there is controversy over differentiating what is internal or external to God, particularly concerning abstract objects, we think that the examples we have chosen in this section of God's meaningful life through solely internal connections are clearly divine aspects and relations internal to

intensely loved each other. In fact, this is an argument often given for a plurality of persons within the Godhead (Swinburne 1994: 190-191; Swinburne 2008: 28-38; Craig and Moreland 2017: 593). It is claimed that since God is a perfect being, God must be essentially loving since love is a necessary attribute of a morally perfect being. Hence, there must be several divine persons for God to ceaselessly express this attribute of love. So if the Trinity has been in thoroughly loving relationships within the Godhead's three persons since eternity past, it seems that a triune God's enduring interactions of complete love is a viable possibility for at least a somewhat meaningful life. And this three-person love within the one God would be through solely internal connections, as prior to any creational act, God would be existing alone in all reality, with each member of the Trinity bestowing great love upon the other. Thus, we think that the notion of a triune God exclusively connecting internally through ceaselessly loving Godself through inter-relations of love within the Trinity is a "*prima facie* candidate" for a meaningful life (Metz 2013: 29). Accordingly, the relational account's requirement that connections beyond oneself are needed for meaning seems inadequate for capturing what is at the heart of having a meaningful life.

But perhaps one may be skeptical that the case of the Trinity is a strong counterexample to Nozick by virtue of the plurality of persons present in the scenario. One might say that the "one life" of the triune God accrues meaning externally because the divine persons obtain meaning outside themselves. While we have tried to emphasize that it is from the perspective of the one *Godhead* that the connections to value are internal (not from the perspective of any individual divine person, where linkages will be external), we present another variety of meaning via internality for those yet unpersuaded.

6. Meaning via Internal Connections: An Aristotelian God

Imagine that instead of the Trinity, Aristotle's "most good" deity is the one who reigns supreme (*Metaphysics* 1072b30). For Aristotle, this is the sort of individual who does nothing but contemplate Godself since the divine is the most excellent thing to direct one's thoughts, and to contemplate anything else would be to engage in a less-than-perfect activity (Steenberghen 1974: 557; Craig 1980: 35). In fact, in the *Nicomachean Ethics,* Aristotle cites God's rational activity as

God (e.g. interrelations among the members of the Trinity), and so we hope to sidestep the aforementioned debate (Craig 2016: 81-82).

the standard for human flourishing: "Therefore the activity of God, which surpasses all others in blessedness, must be contemplative; and of human activities, therefore, that which is most akin to this must be most of the nature of happiness" (X.1178b21-24). Furthermore, he says concerning this act of divine contemplation that "it must be itself that thought thinks (since it is the most excellent of things), and its thinking is a thinking on thinking" (*Metaphysics* XII.1074b33-34).

It is of course difficult to know exactly what Aristotle speaks of with the phrase "thinking on thinking," but suppose that God's contemplation here is utterly simple, non-relational, and unconnected to propositional knowledge (Beere 2010: 27). In this sort of scenario, we deem an Aristotelian God as still being able to have a meaningful life solely through this type of contemplative internal connection. Suppose the deity's eternal self-contemplation is the most excellent expression of reason imaginable while also being highly pleasurable. It seems that this type of divine life is not incapable of meaning, as it would fulfill many traditional conceptions of meaning in life which stipulate activities such as intense engagement with rationality or experiencing great pleasure as sufficient for meaning. At any rate, what we hope to have shown is that it is difficult to characterize an Aristotelian God's life as deficient in meaning simply because the deity's connections to value are internal instead of external. If the difficulty looms large enough, then our counterexample should persuade those partial to the relational theory to reconsider whether external linkage to value is necessary for meaning in life.

7. Conclusion

In summary, we think that although the relational account is more resistant to some of Metz's counterexamples, it is less resilient against others and the variations of them that we have developed in this paper, particularly our subjectivist example of Sisyphus 1 and 2. It also seems that life could be meaningful through solely internal relations, such as a triune God's existence of love only among the persons of one Godhead living a single life or an Aristotelian deity's perpetually exercising rational self-contemplation. As said at the outset, it is the idea of external connection being needed for meaning that this paper disputes. Now, all this does not mean that the relational theory has nothing to offer regarding how to best grasp meaning in life. For instance, one could take Metz's

suggestion that perhaps "meaning can be essentially relational without being exhaustively relational" (Metz 2016: 1252). In other words, the relational theory could explain how meaning increases through one's reaching beyond oneself while not limiting all avenues of meaning to external connections. This is quite possible, especially when considering the fact that most paradigmatic examples of meaning-making, like family relationships or aiding the poor, involve relating to entities beyond oneself. What looks less attractive, though, is the idea that transcendence beyond oneself toward a wider context of value is all there is to meaning in life. In our opinion, there must be more to life than that.

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