

# Theorizing About Meaning in Life

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## Abstract

Theories of meaning in life surprisingly often provoke deep dissatisfaction. Deep dissatisfaction is not a matter of finding a theory merely inadequate but of thinking that it has altogether missed the target and is, really, a theory of something else such as excellent, admirable, significant, authentic, worthwhile, or happy lives. My main projects are to explain why deep dissatisfactions are likely to arise in this domain of theorizing. I explore the question of whether ‘meaningfulness’ is an essentially contested concept, the absence of success conditions for theories of meaningfulness that ethical theories have, what makes conceptions of meaningfulness conceptions of the same concept, and the importance of attending to the underlying justificatory concerns that motivate our interest in making correct judgments about what lives and activities are meaningful.

It is surprisingly difficult to construct a theory of meaning in life that a significant portion of theorists *don't* find deeply unsatisfying. It may be useful, then, to step back from theory construction and advocacy and ask why such deep dissatisfactions arise and whether there is a way of thinking about the concept of meaningfulness that makes deep dissatisfactions misplaced. I'll begin by explaining, in Section 1, what I mean by ‘deep dissatisfaction.’ In sections 2, 3, and 4, I'll use a comparison with theorizing in normative ethics to illuminate why deep dissatisfactions are likely to arise in theorizing about meaningfulness. That discussion will bring to the fore the importance of determining what, if anything, unifies different conceptions of meaningfulness as conceptions of the same thing. In Sections 5 and 6, I propose a way of thinking about both the concept ‘meaningful’ and its apparent polysemy, and in Section 7 spell out the implications of that proposal. One implication is that deep dissatisfactions are misplaced.

## 1. Dissatisfaction: Deep and Not

Any account of that in virtue of which something counts as an X invariably offers opportunities for *some* dissatisfaction and thus the thought that there is a better account to be had. But there is a difference between, on the one hand,

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recognizing that an account is an account of X, just an inadequate one, and, on the other hand, thinking that an account has simply missed the target and isn't, really, an account of X at all despite being put forward as one. For example, while recognizing that an account of democracy solely in terms of citizen voting is an account of democracy, many might think this an inadequate, because too simplistic, account. Or, for example, while recognizing that biological accounts of the difference between being a man and being a woman are accounts of this distinction, one might think biological accounts are inadequate for the purpose of addressing the subordination of women to men. For that, we need an account of what makes an individual belong to the social category man or woman within gender-hierarchical societies. By contrast, now discredited biological essentialist accounts of race are not merely inadequate or inadequate for the purpose for which we need an account of race but seem to have missed the target altogether by focusing on a biological fiction. Or, for example, Nozick's objection to Rawls's distributive conception of justice might be read as expressing deep dissatisfaction with a theory that simply misses the target by treating the social product as something to which no one has legitimate entitlement prior to agreement on distributive principles. In short, when a theory is thought to be deeply dissatisfying, the thought will be that the theory has missed the target, perhaps instead hitting a fiction or perhaps hitting a completely different target—not X, but Y—for which it might be a perfectly respectable account.

The charge that a theory is not simply inadequate (perhaps seriously so) but misses the target altogether is relatively uncommon. An interesting feature of debates about meaning in life is that this charge *is* made and takes the form, "This is not a theory of meaning in life, but a theory of something else," or more delicately put, "This theory fails to distinguish the evaluative notion 'meaningful' from closely related evaluative notions." Objectivists may be charged with giving us instead a theory of excellent or significant lives, hybrid theorists with giving us instead a theory of well-being or worthwhile lives, and subjectivists with giving us a theory of happy or authentic lives.

As examples, consider: Stephen Kershnar critically asks how meaningfulness differs, on Thaddeus Metz's fundamentality theory, from intrinsic value or an objective good list.<sup>1</sup> I have raised worries that objectivist theories reduce to

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<sup>1</sup> <http://researcherslinks.com/current-issues/thad-metz-s-fundamentality-theory-of-meaning-in-life-a-critical-review/9/11/24/html>.

theories of excellent or significant lives.<sup>2</sup> Antti Kauppinen critiques my subjectivist account for failing to capture a distinctive meaning-dimension of evaluation and for coming close to capturing just life-satisfaction or value-fulfillment.<sup>3</sup> Frank Martela charges G.E. Moore with in fact “talking about worthwhileness, not the narrow concept of meaningfulness”<sup>4</sup>; he also rejects more subjectivist theories on the grounds “that when people are talking about integrity, autonomy, and being true to oneself, they are actually not talking about sources of meaningfulness, but about sources of authenticity.”<sup>5</sup> Thaddeus Metz identifies Wai-hung Wong’s hybrid account as an example of a view that mistakenly sympathizes with the idea that meaningful lives are worthwhile lives. Given Metz’s view that ‘meaningful’ and ‘worthwhile’ are distinct notions, the implication is that theories like Wong’s are theories of something else—the worthwhile.<sup>6</sup>

As I hope is clear from these examples, what I find unsettling is meaningfulness theories’ *vulnerability* to this charge being credibly made and thus needing to be rebutted. I’m not interested in establishing that some theories really are deeply dissatisfying and should be rejected by everyone. Rather, I’m interested in understanding what makes it possible to use expressed deep dissatisfaction as an *argument strategy*.

Now, one might think that rivaling allegiances to different conceptions of meaning in life are simply to be expected; and we shouldn’t be surprised if disputes seem intractable or worried if the criticisms that different groups of theorists launch at each other express deep dissatisfactions. At first glance, ‘meaningful life’ fits W. B. Gallie’s criteria for *essentially* contested concepts—concepts which necessarily admit of rivalling conceptions and which “inevitably [involve] endless disputes about their proper uses on the part of their users.”<sup>7</sup> An essentially contested concept, he proposed, is an appraisive concept of some achievement—such as democracy, a Christian life, or work of art—where the

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<sup>2</sup> *Doing Valuable Time: The Present, The Future, and Meaningful Living* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2018), ch. 2.

<sup>3</sup> The point is made in his review of *Doing Valuable Time*, *Philosophical Review* 130, no. 1 (2021):154-158, 156.

<sup>4</sup> “Meaningfulness as Contribution,” *The Southern Journal of Philosophy* 55, no.2 (2017): 232-256, 242.

<sup>5</sup> *Ibid.*, 247.

<sup>6</sup> “The Meaningful and the Worthwhile: Clarifying the Relationships,” *The Philosophical Forum* 43, no. 4 (2012): 435-448, 439.

<sup>7</sup> W.B. Gallie, “Essentially Contested Concepts,” *Proceedings of the Aristotelian Society* 56 (1955-1956): 167-198, 169.

complexity of the achievement makes it possible for different theorists to single out and differently weight its various components and thus to propose rivaling conceptions.<sup>8</sup> Given this, theorists of an essentially contested concept should abandon the idea that “their own use of it is the only one that can command honest and informed approval” in favor of recognizing “rival uses of it (such as oneself repudiates) as not only logically possible and humanly ‘likely,’ but as of permanent potential critical value to one’s own use or interpretation of the concept in question” since the debate provides resources for improving one’s own conception.<sup>9</sup>

While the internal complexity of the phenomenon permits plural conceptions of an essentially contested concept, a different feature makes rivalling conceptions conceptions of the same concept. Gallie claimed that rivaling conceptions of the same concept trace their derivation “from an original exemplar whose authority is acknowledged by all the contestant users of the concept.”<sup>10</sup> Agreement on the authority of an exemplar distinguishes disputes over the proper use of a single concept from merely confused discussions of what are in fact different concepts.<sup>11</sup>

Unfortunately, disputes about meaningfulness arise partly from disagreement over both exemplars and the general kinds of activities that contribute to meaning. The absence of exemplars whose authority all parties recognize creates a problem in need of a solution: What makes an account one of meaningfulness rather than an account of something else, if not that it captures some authoritative exemplar? How do we tell when deep dissatisfaction is appropriate and when it is not? And most worrisomely, why think that ‘meaningfulness’ is a single concept rather than a plurality of distinct concepts?

We can begin to answer these questions by noting that Gallie was likely wrong to think that rivaling conceptions of the *same* essentially contested concept must be grounded in some shared, authoritative exemplar(s). Jeremy Waldron, for example, suggests that disputes over what the rule of law consists in are unified as disputes about a single concept—‘rule of law’—in virtue of addressing a common problem: How can we make the law, rather than men rule? Some

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<sup>8</sup> There is now a sizable literature that focuses on the essentially contested nature of a wide variety of “appraisive” concepts. Some non-appraisive concepts, for example, ‘gender’, ‘money’, and ‘species’, also exhibit the distinctive features of an essentially contested concept (Pekka Vayrynen, “Essential Contestability and Evaluation,” *Australasian Journal of Philosophy* 92, no. 3 (2014): 471-488).

<sup>9</sup> Gallie, “Essentially Contested Concepts,” 193.

<sup>10</sup> *Ibid.*, 180. He cites the French Revolution as an exemplar in the case of the essentially contested concept of democracy.

<sup>11</sup> *Ibid.*, 175-178.

essentially contested concepts are thus “solution-concepts” rather than “achievement-concepts.”<sup>12</sup> In addressing themselves to solving the same problem that ‘rule of law’ picks out, disputing theorists are on the same page with respect to what an account of the rule of law should be doing even if they disagree about exemplars of the rule of law; thus, even sharp disagreements will be unlikely to descend into deep dissatisfaction that some accounts are not even on the page at all. The challenge for theorists of meaning in life is to explain what makes their disputes about a single concept—meaningfulness—rather than a confused discussion of what are in fact different concepts.

## 2. The Problem of Success Conditions

Fitting exemplars, solving a concept-defining problem, and serving the purpose for which we need a concept are different kinds of *success conditions* that a minimally successful theory of X might be required to meet. The problem I am drawing attention to is the absence of clear success conditions for theorizing about meaning in life. To see the problem, it’s instructive to compare theorizing in normative ethics with theorizing about meaning in life.

Normative ethics has its own longstanding and seemingly intractable disagreements—notably between consequentialists and deontologists—as to the *best* account of what makes a right act right. Ethicists who reject a theory for being overly demanding, or permitting harvesting one person’s organs to save many, or wrongly prioritizing moral demands over all other evaluative considerations, or not making room for special obligations or direct duties to non-persons, point to a *bull’s eye* that has been missed. Nevertheless, those disagreements rarely rise to the level of deep dissatisfaction and charges that a purported ethical theory has missed the entire target and is not an ethical theory at all.<sup>13</sup> Why not? A crucial difference between theorizing in ethics and theorizing about meaning in life is the

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<sup>12</sup> Jeremy Waldron, “Is the Rule of Law an Essentially Contested Concept (In Florida)?” *Law and Philosophy* 21, no. 2 (2002): 137-164, 158.

<sup>13</sup> Deep disagreement does *sometimes* arise in ethics, for example, with respect to ethical egoism. My earlier examples of the charge being made was intended to bring out the extensive vulnerability of theories of meaning to deep dissatisfactions, and the way even major contenders are vulnerable. Charging Thaddeus Metz’s theory of meaning with having failed to pick out a distinctive evaluative domain strikes me as more like charging some consequentialist theory in ethics with missing the target than like charging ethical egoism with missing the target. Thanks to one of the journal reviewers for pointing out that deep disagreement is sometimes expressed toward ethical egoism, instrumentalism, noncognitivism, and certain kinds of perfectionism.

presence of clear, agreed upon success conditions in ethics and their absence in theorizing about meaning in life.

Normative ethicists share *a large body of settled intuitions* about which acts are right and which acts are wrong against which to test the success of proposed theories. Seeking reflective equilibrium in constructing a theory and posing counterexamples to critique opponent theories are thus useful methods in normative ethics. We test the acceptability of an ethical theory by applying it and seeing if it generates verdicts that conflict with the settled intuitions that we, collectively, share. A central success condition for any ethical theory is that it deliver roughly the same verdicts as any other ethical theory with respect to a broad range of cases.

In addition to a shared “data set,” clarity about the general nature of the moral enterprise also helps define the success conditions for ethical theories.

First, it’s clear *to whom* judgments about morally correct or forbidden conduct must be justifiable (or more modestly, if one thinks of sentimentalists and emotivists, *with whom* we aim to share moral judgments): other people. An ethical theory that proposed that actions need only be justified to oneself, and thus endorsed individual relativism about the obligatory, permitted and forbidden would not qualify as an ethical theory.<sup>14</sup>

Second, it’s clear what core *values* underlie the enterprise of morality and give it its point: the moral equality of persons and the regulation of social life via shareable standards. While there might be moralities in the descriptive or sociological sense aimed at preserving social hierarchies among differently valued groups of persons, a *normative* ethical theory proposing this as the point of morality would, once again, be open to the charge of not being an ethical theory at all.

Third, it’s clear what underlying *justificatory concern* besides just making correct judgments ethical theories serve. We care about making correct judgments because we want to make demands on others, hold them to account, and levy punitive sanctions; and we want to be justified in doing so. Relatedly, we care about defending ourselves against mistaken charges of having failed to meet legitimate demands, and we want to be justified in rejecting those demands. A theory that did not address this pressing justificatory concern by establishing

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<sup>14</sup> The demands made on persons, that must be justified to them, may of course include demands to fulfill obligations to non-persons (e.g., animals or the environment) or to persons incapable of making demands on their own behalf (e.g., young children).

criteria for sorting legitimate from illegitimate demands would not look like an ethical theory at all.

Because these success conditions are clear, it's also clear when one is providing an account of rightness and when one is not (but possibly doing something else instead). By contrast, theorizing about meaning in life appears to lack the very things necessary to clearly determine when a theory of meaningful living is or is not successful:

1. There is no large and settled body of intuitions about which activities are instances of meaningful ones. Are pastimes like working jigsaw puzzles, self-improvement activities like reading the classics of English literature, admiring the cloud-crowned mountains, friendships, traveling to foreign lands, achieving something in one's chosen occupation, public service activities done only out of duty meaningful activities, and if so, just how meaningful are they? No doubt, everyone has some intuitions about these cases. But we're likely to feel we need a theory of meaning in life to determine what we *should* think about these examples, rather than taking firm pre-theoretical intuitions about them as constraints on theory. Thus, methods of reflective equilibrium and critique by counterexample have limited utility.
2. It isn't clear *to whom* it is most important that claims about the meaningfulness or meaninglessness of particular activities be justifiable. Is it meaningfulness to others or to ourselves that matters most? Division on this question characterizes the dispute between objectivist and subjectivist approaches to meaning.
3. It isn't clear what, if any, underlying *justificatory concern* besides making correct evaluations of the meaningfulness of particular activities a theory of meaning in life is supposed to address. Why does living meaningfully matter?

In the absence of clear, widely agreed upon success conditions, it's not surprising that there would be widespread lack of consensus about when a theory is a theory of meaningful living and when it is, really, a theory of something else.

I now take up each of these three items, starting in Section 3 with the absence

of a large, settled, and shared body of intuitions, then, in Section 4, unclarity about to whom evaluative judgments must be justifiable, and in section 5, the question of what justificatory concerns underlie our interest in making correct judgments about meaningfulness.

### 3. Intuitive Data for a Theory

It doesn't take a great deal of reading around in the meaning in life literature to get a sense that our intuitions about *meaningful* activities are widely divergent. There are lots of activities we would agree are worthy of *positive evaluation*. But 'meaningful' is thought to pick out a distinctive form of value, different not only from moral and prudential value, but also from the worthwhile, the authentic, the excellent, the contributor to flourishing, and so on. A theory's picking out a distinctive value—'meaningful'—is precisely what makes it a theory of meaningfulness rather than a theory of something else. It is with respect to intuitions about what bears the distinctive value 'meaningful' as opposed to some other positive value that intuitions widely diverge.

Absent consensus on a large data set, theories of meaning in life must employ a different resource for theory construction and critique. One option is to appeal to a small set of *exemplary*—in the sense of extreme—cases of meaningful and meaningless lives. Exceptional individuals like Albert Einstein and Mother Teresa exemplify notably meaningful lives. Fictional grass blade counters and total couch-potatoes exemplify notably meaningless lives.

Appealing to exemplary exemplars from both ends of the meaning spectrum might seem an excellent substitute for a large, settled, and shared body of intuitions. Exemplary exemplars can provide test cases for any minimally adequate account of meaning in life and thus a clear success condition. Given this, examining what in exemplary lives contributes to their meaningfulness or meaninglessness, can help us identify that in virtue of which any life is meaningful.

But do exemplary exemplars provide an indisputable success condition? Notice that in taking compatibility with a set of exemplary exemplars as a success condition, one must be assuming that 'meaningful' is, at the very least, an essentially contested concept. 'Meaningful life' and 'meaningful activity' refer to some *unified phenomenon*—or to use Gallie's term, some *achievement*—that could be exemplified. But recall my earlier observation that not all concepts are like this, nor are successful concepts all assessed in relation to "authoritative"

exemplars. Some concepts, like ‘rule of law,’ are solution-concepts for which successful conceptions are ones that address the relevant problem. Other concepts, like ‘gender’ and ‘power,’ are purpose-concepts for which successful conceptions are adequate for a specified purpose.<sup>15</sup> In cases of solution- and purpose-concepts, there need not be shared, authoritative, theory-independent exemplars. The identification of exemplars instead typically depends on prior agreement on a particular *way* of solving a problem or a particular *purpose*, and thus is not theory neutral. In short, without first establishing the *kind* of success condition a conception must meet—exemplar-derived, problem-solving, purpose-serving, or something else—the use of exemplary exemplars to test accounts of meaning in life is ungrounded. The broad intuitive appeal of exemplars like Albert Einstein and Mother Teresa may result from their exemplifying, for example, *one* way of addressing a solution-concept or *one* purpose of a purpose-concept, rather than exemplifying *the phenomenon*.

In addition to resting on an undefended assumption about the kind of concept, and thus appropriate kind of success condition, an appeal to exemplary exemplars is likely to strike some as biased from the outset toward a particular conception of meaningfulness rather than being theory neutral. Exemplary exemplars strongly suggest that meaningfulness is a matter of *significance*, or *importance*, or *contribution* for or to something other than ourselves, whether that be to particular other persons, as in contribution to others’ welfare, or to some sphere of human activity that could be advanced by individuals’ achievements or the development of their abilities.<sup>16</sup> It will seem obvious to those *already* inclined toward this conception of meaningfulness that to deny that exemplarily significant lives like Mother Teresa or Albert Einstein “had substantial meaning in their lives” and that “to deny that these are good candidates for meaning in life is to misuse the term ‘meaning,’ or to elect to use it in a way that differs radically from the way most present-day philosophers and other thinkers do in the Euro-American literature.”<sup>17</sup>

To those not already so inclined, Mother Teresa’s and Albert Einstein’s status as exemplary exemplars will seem less obvious. One’s intuition might be that

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<sup>15</sup> See, for example, Mark Haugaard, “Power: A ‘Family Resemblance’ Concept,” *European Journal of Cultural Studies* 13, no. 4 (2010): 419-438.

<sup>16</sup> For an interesting discussion of why equating meaningfulness with significance or good social impact is biased, see James Tartaglia, “Metz’s Quest for the Holy Grail,” *Journal of Philosophy of Life* 5, no. 3 (2015): 90-111.

<sup>17</sup> Thaddeus Metz, “The Meaningful and the Worthwhile: Clarifying the Relationships,” *The Philosophical Forum* 43, no. 4 (2012): 435-448, 437.

unremarkable but mutually satisfying personal relationships are an important source of meaning.<sup>18</sup> In response to a Pew Research Center survey of where people find meaning in life, the number one thing that people cited as contributing to the meaningfulness of their lives was family.<sup>19</sup> Or one's intuition might be that Mother Teresa's long-term depression over Christ's silence about her work in India should knock her from exemplary exemplar status. Or one's intuition might be that it's just a mistake to start from such exceptional lives rather than from averagely meaningful lives.

The alternative, and more evidently theory-neutral approach, is to proceed from a list of intuitively plausible *contributors* to meaning in life (where a contributor is a *kind of activity* that meaningful lives may include, not that *in virtue of which* the activity counts as meaningful). Such a list might include both activities of high achievement and social contribution as well as personal relationships and achieving personal goals. It might, if we're trying not to presuppose any particular theory from the get-go, also include forms of self-improvement, solitary or social pastimes, involvement in cultural or political life, certain kinds of experiences, and so on.

Mentioning possible members on the list immediately suggests what the central problems with this procedure are likely to be. One is disagreement about what belongs on the list of contributors. Personal relationships may make the list because of sufficient pre-theoretical consensus that they contribute to meaningful living. But what about self-improvement activities? Or what about, as Robert Audi proposes, activities that are pleasing to God?<sup>20</sup> Absent settled and widely shared intuitions about the contributors to meaningful living, there's a genuine

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<sup>18</sup> The meaningfulness of personal relationships ends up oddly described if their meaningfulness is located solely in their *significance* to, *importance for*, or *contribution* to someone other than us. It's true that there's a kind of self-transcendence involved in relationships: we care about someone else and not just ourselves. It's also true that in caring about another, we typically make contributions to how their lives fare. But one would think that personal relationships are meaningful also in virtue of what one gets out of those relationships for oneself, and perhaps especially because of their mutuality and thus mutual benefit. *Shared* trust, physical and emotional intimacy, and support of one another's projects, as well as *shared* history, memories, and ends such as raising a family seem to have some relevance to the meaningfulness of personal relationships. Thus, someone convinced that personal relationships contribute to meaning in life is likely to feel that a theory derived from exemplars of achievement and social contribution is a theory, not of meaningfulness, but of something else.

<sup>19</sup> <https://www.pewforum.org/2018/11/20/where-americans-find-meaning-in-life/>

<sup>20</sup> Robert Audi lists activities pleasing to God as one of only four items sufficient for meaningfulness—along with creativity/virtuosity, contributing to others' welfare, and loving relationships ("Intrinsic Value and Meaningful Life," *Philosophical Papers* 34, no. 3 (2005): 331-355). He hypothesizes that "any other sufficient condition will imply at least a significant degree of partial satisfaction of at least one of these criteria" (351).

risk that one's preferred list will be theory-driven rather than theory-neutral, and the doors will be open to deep dissatisfactions between theorists who begin from different lists of intuitively plausible contributors.

A second problem with proceeding from lists of contributors is that it introduces considerable *heterogeneity* into the "data" for theory construction. Having a significant impact, achieving personal goals, contributing to others' welfare, improving oneself, pursuing pastimes, and having personal relationships—all items that might appear on an intuitive list of contributors—seem valuable for very different reasons and meaningful in different ways.

Of course, heterogeneity is not a problem if the various contributors share some basic feature. After all, the sorts of acts that are morally right exhibit similar heterogeneity. Keeping promises, refraining from assaulting people, and rescuing those in life-threatening situations seem quite heterogeneous at first glance. But those seemingly heterogeneous actions share a basic feature, such as respecting persons as ends or generally maximizing utility. It might be thought that the heterogeneous contributors to meaning also share a basic feature. There is strong consensus that meaningfulness consists in part in the valuableness of life activities, and in particular, with the activity being aimed at ends that are worth pursuing for their own sake. That relative consensus, however, is not as useful in preventing deep disagreements as it might seem, because theorizing about meaning in life lacks a second success condition that theorizing in ethics has: agreement on to whom evaluative judgments must be justifiable.

#### **4. Justifiable to Whom?**

Despite consensus that meaningful activities must be valuable ones, there's considerable disagreement about *to whom* judgments of valuableness need to be justifiable. In normative ethics, consensus on to whom moral judgments must be justifiable is fixed by the underlying justificatory concern with making and subjecting ourselves to legitimate demands, as well as the value of social regulation. It's not fixed by consensus on a metaethical view about the kind of value moral value is. By contrast, absent a clear underlying justificatory concern or a value like social regulation, views about to whom judgments about meaningfulness need to be justifiable appear simply to track intuitions about the kind of value meaningful activities must have. Some theorists' intuition is that, to be meaningful, activities must be objectively valuable. Judgments of

meaningfulness must be justifiable to those (possibly merely hypothetical) others capable of making objectively correct value judgments. Given socio-historical failures to achieve correct value judgments of various activities, this option allows that activities might be meaningful even if *no one* at a socio-historical moment appreciates their being so. More commonly, individuals may lead meaningful lives while mistakenly believing they are not and fail to lead meaningful lives while mistakenly believing they are.

Others may have the intuition that meaningful activities are ones a social or cultural group considers valuable, such that given cultural changes over time, activities that were once meaningful may cease to be so.<sup>21</sup> Here too the individual's own assessment of their life as meaningful is not relevant to its actual meaningfulness. What matters is that judgments about the value of some activity be justifiable to some social or cultural group.

Yet other theorists have the intuition that the valuableness of an activity is determined by the subject. Individuals may value certain activities because they *take* them to be objectively or intersubjectively valuable, and thus take them to be justifiable to others. But even so, it is the individual's assessment of value that matters. Thus, meaningful lives must be justifiable as meaningful to the person who leads that life. If mistaken judgments are possible, it will only be due to the subject's mistaken assessment of what they in fact value.

Finally, yet others have the intuition that judgments of meaningfulness must be justifiable both to others and to the person whose life it is. Here, one might think the person engaged in meaningful activities must appreciate the objective or intersubjective value of what they are doing. In that case, judgments of meaningfulness would be like judgments of moral worth: in order to redound to the agent's credit, morally worthy actions must be both right actions (thus objectively or intersubjectively valuable) and done from the very reasons that make them right (thus connected with subject's perspective). So, too, for meaningfulness. If this seems too restrictive, since people may find themselves subjectively engaged with and non-alienated from what they do for reasons other than the activity's objective or intersubjective value, one might allow that justifying claims about meaningfulness to others and justifying them to oneself may not appeal to exactly the same reasons.

Because answers to the "Justifiable to whom?" question track intuitions which

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<sup>21</sup> Vincenzo Politi, "Would My Life Still be Meaningful: Intersubjectivism and Changing Meaning in Life," *Human Affairs* 29, no. 4 (2019): 462-479.

are not settled and widely shared, any answer will render the theory vulnerable to deep dissatisfactions. Advocates of meaningfulness-to-others, whether objectivists or intersubjectivists, may well think that subjectivists have simply missed the target by mistaking seeming meaningfulness for real meaningfulness. No account that dignifies objectively or intersubjectively worthless or trivial activities with the label “meaningful” is a plausible account of meaning. Advocates of meaningfulness-to-self may well think that objectivists and intersubjectivists have missed the target by mistaking third-personal value judgments for what is essentially a first-personal phenomenon. No account that dignifies lives that an individual doesn’t care about or feels alienated from with the label “meaningful” is a plausible account of meaning.

Hybrid theorists that require both justifiability to others and justifiability to self are vulnerable from both directions: they may be charged with missing the first-personal nature of meaningfulness by requiring, in addition, justifiability to others; or with having missed the third-personal nature of meaningfulness by requiring, in addition, justifiability to self.

## **5. Identifying the Unifying Concept**

Reflection on the range and depth of disagreements between meaning in life theorists invites a particular diagnosis—not that we have not yet hit on the one correct account, but that ‘meaningful’ is polysemous. ‘Meaningful life’ and ‘meaningful activity’ are used in a wide variety of senses by both theorists and ordinary persons. Being polysemous, ‘meaningful life’ and ‘meaningful activity’ naturally evoke different and competing intuitions, different views of the relevance of exemplary exemplars, different lists of contributors, and different claims about to whom evaluative judgments must be justifiable.

There’s at least some recognition of this possibility in the meaning in life literature. For example, Frank Martela, after charging some accounts of meaningfulness with instead being theories of authenticity, admits the reasonableness of dividing theories of meaningfulness into accounts of authenticity-meaningfulness and contribution-meaningfulness.<sup>22</sup> Thaddeus Metz, after equating meaningfulness with significance, allows in a footnote that the reader may take him to be spelling out a “major swathe of talk about ‘meaning in

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<sup>22</sup> Martela, “Meaningfulness and Contribution,” 247-248.

life” rather than the only possible reasonable interpretation of meaningfulness.<sup>23</sup> I myself have argued that objectivist theories collapse into theories of something else, but also registered doubts that a decisive case for this claim could be made.<sup>24</sup> Taking up a related question—“What is the meaning *of* life?”—Timothy J. Mawson argues that dissatisfaction with answers to that question are partially explained by failure to interpret this question as “polyvalent” and thus as in fact asking a set of different questions.<sup>25</sup>

If ‘meaningful’ is polysemous, then deep disagreements are likely misplaced. Different theories simply aim to capture different senses of ‘meaningful.’ But we now need some justifying explanation of *why* ‘meaningful’ is, or at least appears to be, polysemous. And since theorists of meaning in life take themselves to be offering conceptions of the *same concept*, we need to know what unifies different conceptions as conceptions of the same concept. Absent that, the polysemy of ‘meaningful’ amounts to a grab bag of different concepts.

What might unify a plurality of conceptions of ‘meaningful’ as conceptions of the same concept? I’ve argued against employing the strategy Gallie proposed for essentially contested concepts, namely, that competing conceptions are derived from one (or set of) authoritative exemplar(s), where the plurality of conceptions results from selecting different features of the complex phenomenon exemplified and differently weighing various features. Without agreement on exemplars of meaningfulness, or on the list of activities that contribute to meaning, this strategy for specifying the concept of meaningfulness is unlikely to be theory neutral or to avoid deep disagreement. For the same reason, explicating the concept of meaningfulness by means of a cluster of properties, such as purposiveness, self-transcendence, and meriting esteem and admiration—properties which different conceptions might differentially take up, yielding conceptions that bear a family resemblance to each other—also is unpromising.<sup>26</sup>

There is an alternative. Recall the earlier observation that some concepts are solution-concepts, where the problem can be posed as a question. ‘Rule of law’ is

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<sup>23</sup> Metz, “The Meaningful and the Worthwhile,” 437.

<sup>24</sup> Calhoun, *Doing Valuable Time*, 20.

<sup>25</sup> Timothy J. Mawson, “Sources of Dissatisfaction with Answers to the Question of the Meaning of Life,” *European Journal of Philosophy of Religion* 2 (2010): 19-40. See also his *God and the Meanings of Life: What God Could and Couldn’t Do to Make Our Lives More Meaningful* (London: Bloomsbury, 2016).

<sup>26</sup> Thaddeus Metz recommends this “cluster” or “family resemblance” approach to the concept of meaningfulness and proposes these three properties (*Meaning in Life* [New York: Oxford University Press, 2013], ch. 2).

the concept of whatever answers the question ‘How can the law rather than humans rule?’ *Conceptions* specify different ways of addressing that question. Perhaps ‘meaningfulness’ is a solution-concept.

But how might the problem be specified without invoking meaningfulness itself? (We don’t want to say that the concept of meaningfulness is the concept of whatever addresses the problem of meaning.) Talk about addressing a ‘problem’ of meaning sounds very close to talk about addressing what I’ve called an ‘underlying justificatory concern.’ Recall my observation that underlying normative ethical theorizing is the concern with justifying making demands on others and being subject to their demands.

So, what justificatory concerns underlie our interest in making judgments about meaningfulness? You might think those concerns are just those expressed in the kinds of questions people ask when they start worrying about the meaningfulness of their lives, questions like: “Am I pursuing anything worth pursuing for its own sake?” “Does my life merit esteem or admiration?” “Does my life make a difference to anyone?” “Have I accomplished anything of lasting value?”<sup>27</sup> The concept of meaningfulness would then be the concept of whatever addresses these concerns. But notice that starting with these quite specific concerns is no better, in terms of theory neutrality, than starting with authoritative exemplars or a cluster of properties. We need a more generic specification.

Here is what I suggest: the underlying concern is with having something to say on behalf of our having a life at all or having a life that, over time, has the contents it does, where *to whom* something needs to be sayable might be ourselves, an ideal observer, fellow cultural members, or God. ‘Meaningful’ is the concept of whatever addresses that justificatory concern.

## 6. Explaining Polysemy

That generic concern, however, is an umbrella for a set of more specific concerns that reflecting on the fact of having a life and reflecting on the content of a life provoke. Some of those are existential concerns, some are concerns with the intelligibility of a life. As I describe them, keep in mind that the goal is not to precisely state these concerns or create an exhaustive list, but to get into view their

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<sup>27</sup> Thaddeus Metz suggests that “to ask about meaning... is to pose questions such as: which ends, besides one’s own pleasure as such, are most worth pursuing for their own sake; how to transcend one’s animal nature; and what in life merits great esteem or admiration” (*Meaning in Life*, ch. 2).

plurality.<sup>28</sup> (You may wish to express them differently, to delete some, or to add others. Just keep in mind that *properties* proposed to solve the problem of meaningfulness—i.e., a *conception* of meaningfulness—shouldn't appear in a theory-neutral statement of the justifying concern.)

Three existential concerns center, in different ways, on the contingency and finitude of our own lives. One concern arises from reflecting on the fact that it is entirely contingent that we exist. Just a tiny difference in timing on your parents' part, for example, would have meant someone else, not you, would have been born. How long you have managed to live is also contingent. You, unlike many others, have survived infancy and childhood and thus have been able lead an adult life of chosen activities. In reflecting on these contingencies, the fact that you have a life to lead at all might seem a matter of great and unearned good fortune—something you've fortuitously been able to have but potential people and those who die very young have not. Given this, an existential concern with justifying having this unearned gift of life naturally arises: What can you say on behalf of your having a life?

A second existential concern arises from reflection on mortality. When you die, the world continues on without you and any memory of who you were will be progressively lost. Both threaten to erase the significance that your life had while you were a living participant in the world around you. It will be as though you had never lived. An existential concern thus arises with how you can live in a way that is sufficiently meaningful to future others that something of you will survive beyond your death. As Joshua Lewis Thomas observes, the desire for a meaningful life is not a selfless desire that significant goals *be* achieved but that *we be the ones* to achieve them. That self-oriented desire arises from reflection on the prospect of “a future universe that no longer includes any piece of us whatsoever and no evidence that we had ever existed at all.”<sup>29</sup> What can you say on behalf of your life's continued significance post-death?

A third existential concern arises from reflection on the finitude of a life's time

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<sup>28</sup> I will not address the metaphysical justificatory concern with the meaning *of* human life generally or of individual human lives, but I think it's unwise to dismiss it and the theories of meaning that address it. James Tartaglia criticizes what he calls the “new paradigm” in analytic philosophical work on meaningfulness for sidelining questions about the meaning *of* life (“Metz's Quest for the Holy Grail,” *Journal of Philosophy of Life* 5, no. 3 (2015): 90-111). Joshua Lewis Thomas proposes a theory that tries to address our concern with both meaning-of and meaning-in life (“Meaningfulness as Sensefulness,” *Philosophia* 47 (2019): 1555-1577).

<sup>29</sup> Joshua Lewis Thomas, “Is the Desire for a Meaningful Life a Selfless Desire?” *Human Affairs* 29 (2019): 445-452, 451.

and the way that any activity uses up some of that time and thus uses up a bit of oneself. Thus, a concern naturally arises with how you are using your life's time. Wasting or frittering away time and expending time on less rather than more valued activities raise the worry that, looking back, you will not have much to say in answer to "What can you say on behalf of how you have spent your time?"

Not all concerns with meaningful living are existential. Some have more to do with meaning in the ordinary sense of being intelligible and making sense. Because average humans live a long time, their lives will be full of many things, some unchosen, but many chosen. This raises an intelligibility concern with how to make sense of the plurality a life contains; and since lives are lived temporally, the concern will also be with how to make sense of the temporal relation between a life's contents. What can you say on behalf of your life containing what it has, does, and will have?

Finally, as social beings, we lead our lives among and with others, and within a specific socio-cultural meaning system and set of traditions. This raises an intelligibility concern with whether your life's contents make sense to others. What can you say on behalf of the social intelligibility of what you are doing?—where that might include your activities simply making sense, or deserving social recognition, or having a place within an extended socio-cultural tradition?<sup>30</sup> This 'saying on behalf' might be a matter of actually saying or imagining what you might say to others or simply privately reflecting on what others might make of what you are doing; but it can also be a matter of what you might say to yourself, as a being who grasps your socio-cultural-historical world, about the intelligibility of your life's contents.

Because the problem of meaning arises in different ways—five of which I've just sketched—'meaningful' is polysemous: There are a plurality of problems of meaning, thus a plurality of sub-concepts. But 'meaningful' may or may not turn out to be *interestingly* polysemous. It's theoretically possible that a particular *conception* of meaningfulness would address all the justificatory concerns. That is, the properties the conception picks out would be relevant to cite no matter which justificatory concern with meaning we have in mind. Thus, such a

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<sup>30</sup> One sociological study of stone masons, academics, and refuse workers discovered that special moments of recognition (such as the unveiling of the mason's renovation work on a cathedral, or graduation ceremonies) were important to a sense of meaningfulness of work, as was being able to locate their work in a centuries long tradition where skills had been transferred from one generation to the next. Catherine Bailey and Adrian Madden, "Time Reclaimed: Temporality and the Experience of Meaningful Work," *Work, Employment and Society* 31, no. 3 (2017): 3-18.

conception would not treat ‘meaningful’ as interestingly polysemous. And if we thought this was the *best* conception of ‘meaningful,’ we’d conclude that ‘meaningful’ isn’t interestingly polysemous *tout court*.

A theory of meaningfulness, however, need not aim to address all the justificatory concerns. It might proffer a conception of what can be said on behalf of the plurality of a life’s contents without aiming to elucidate what can be said on behalf of having a life at all. Indeed, insofar as many contemporary theories claim to be addressing meaning *in* life, not the meaning *of* life, they appear to be setting aside the question of what can be said on behalf of one’s having a life at all. A theory that only addresses one justificatory concern or a subset of justificatory concerns would treat ‘meaningful’ as interestingly polysemous: differences among the justificatory concerns warrant developing different conceptions.

## 7. Concluding Remarks about Theoretical Implications

I set out to explain why theories of meaning in life are vulnerable to a particular argument strategy—expression of deep disagreement—and to determine whether there is a way of thinking about the concept ‘meaningful’ that makes deep dissatisfactions misplaced.

The picture I’ve developed—of the relation between the *concept* of meaningfulness, the plurality of *justificatory concerns*, and *conceptions* (that pick out meaning-relevant properties of a life or its contents)—has some useful implications. The first is cautionary. The solution-concept ‘meaningful’ is not narrowly tied to a single problem (as, say, ‘rule of law’ is), but rather to a set of problems connected with having a life with various contents across time. Thus, it is a mistake to simply *assume* that an adequate theory of meaningfulness must address all our justificatory concerns about meaningfulness. Indeed, the plurality of justificatory concerns might suggest the likelihood that any conception claiming to be *the* account of meaningfulness will seem ad hoc because it tries to address too many different problems of meaning in a single theory or because, in the attempt to avoid appearing ad hoc, it excises from the domain of meaningfulness things that seem to belong there. But in any case, whether it would be better to have a single conception of meaningfulness or different conceptions that solve different problems of meaning is something to be debated.

The more hopeful implication is that deep dissatisfaction with particular

theories is likely misplaced, and this for two reasons. Recall, to be deeply dissatisfied with a proffered conception is to think it is not a theory of meaningfulness, but a theory of something else—or more delicately put, it fails to distinguish the evaluative notion ‘meaningful’ from closely related evaluative notions. It’s certainly appropriate to critique a theory for not having the *scope* it purports to have: for example, it claims to account for meaningfulness *tout court*, but in fact fits only one or some sub-concepts. But that’s very different from charging the conception with not being a theory of meaningfulness *at all*. So long as the conception addresses, however partially, the problem of having something to say on behalf of our having a life at all or having a life that, over time, has the contents it does, it counts as a conception of meaningfulness. You just might think it’s not a particularly good conception because it doesn’t do all the work it claims to or that you think a good conception should.

The second reason deep dissatisfactions are misplaced is that the *content* of a conception of meaningfulness need not differ from the *content* of a conception of something else, say, excellent or worthwhile lives. Recall that we identify solution-concepts not by listing defining properties, but by specifying the problem: the concept is a concept of whatever addresses the specified problem. A conception is a conception of meaningfulness not because it specifies concept-identifying *properties* of meaningfulness (whether necessary and sufficient conditions or some cluster of properties), but because it addresses the problem of meaning. It could conceivably turn out that a conception of, say, excellent lives and a conception of meaningful lives specify the same properties. They will, nevertheless, be conceptions of different concepts. What makes a property set a conception of the concept ‘meaningful’ is not that it identifies a unique property set, but that it addresses the problem(s) of meaning.

Another implication is that we shouldn’t be surprised that theorizing about meaningfulness differs from theorizing in normative ethics in the ways I suggested in the beginning: lack of a large and settled body of intuitions and unclarity about to whom something on behalf of our lives is to be offered (ourselves? God? an ideal judge? other members of our social world?). Nor should we be surprised to find disagreement both about the relevance of exemplary exemplars and about what activities, experiences, and so on belong on a list of contributors to meaningful lives. Equally, we shouldn’t be surprised at disagreement about whether the value borne by meaningful activities is objective, subjective, or intersubjective; nor surprised if narrative coherence or subjective

engagement figures prominently in some conceptions but not others. Different justificatory concerns may pump different intuitions on these matters.

Finally, the account has implications for defending and critiquing theories of meaning in life. The method of reflective equilibrium, so useful in normative ethics, is not equally useful in theorizing about meaningfulness. This is not to say that appeals to intuition are useless, only that their use is less decisive, in part because more likely to be theory dependent. We may, however, be able to make appeals to intuition more useful by first specifying the problems of meaning—the justificatory concerns—a conception is designed to solve, since this may narrow the field of possible, relevant intuitions. One strategy for critiquing a theory—charging it with being, really, a theory of something else and failing to identify the distinctive value, meaningful—also turns out not to be useful. This, I trust, is a welcome result.