Journal of Philosophy of Life Vol.12, No.1 (November 2022):21-38

Is It Possible to Say 'Yes' to Traumatic Experiences?
A Philosophical Approach to Human Suffering

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Abstract

People who have encountered a tragic event and suffered from traumatic experiences can sometimes achieve, in their later lives, an affirmation of having been born to such devastating lives. But what does this "affirmation" exactly mean in such cases? In this paper, I investigate this problem from the viewpoint of philosophy of life's meaning. Firstly, I distinguish among three types of affirmations: the affirmation of survival, the affirmation of having had traumatic experiences, and the affirmation of the occurrence of a tragic event. Secondly, I discuss the differences between the event that affects only one person and the event that affects many people, and which of the three aforementioned affirmations is the most important to victims. I would like to contribute to the discussion of this topic by analyzing some basic concepts concerning human suffering and despair.

1. Introduction

Some of us must have wished at least once in our lives that we had never been born into such a painful life. For example, when our loved ones are killed, or when we encounter a serious accident and become severely disabled, we must be drawn into such an idea, which can be summarized as: "If I had been decided to be born into such a life, I would have preferred not to be born in the first place."[1]

This is a life of despair. But some of us who have experienced such tragic events succeed in escaping from this despair and reach a state of mind in which we can truly think that "I am glad to have been born into this life, even though it contains a devastating, tragic event in it." Viktor Frankl, who went through unimaginable experiences in concentration camps during World War II, published the masterpiece *Man's Search for Meaning* in 1946. The original German title of that book was "*...trozdem Ja zum Leben sagen*," which can be translated as "*Nevertheless Say(ing) Yes to One's Life*." It eloquently expresses our heartfelt

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[1] If this proposition is purified and universalized, it becomes the thesis of antinatalism, which argues that someone's having been born is always worse than their not having been born. David Benatar claims that the correctness of this argument can be demonstrated by appealing to the idea of asymmetry between pleasure and pain. I do not discuss antinatalism here because it does not play a crucial role in this paper. See Benatar (2006) and Zandbergen (2021).

craving for the affirmation we may have when we are thrust into the depths of despair.

However, "life (*Leben*)" is an ambiguous word. It has several meanings such as the state of being alive, the period between birth and death, and one's having been born. In this paper, I want to narrow our focus to the last one, one's having been born, and philosophically clarify what it exactly means to say "Yes" to one's having been born into a life that contains traumatic experiences as one of the core constituents of that life. I believe this is an important issue that today's philosophy of life's meaning must tackle with utmost urgency.

But, first of all, is it actually possible for us to affirm our having been born to lives in which a devastatingly tragic event inevitably occurs, such as a life that contains the sudden killing of our family members in traffic accidents, natural disasters, or violent crimes? At first glance, it seems almost impossible for us to accomplish that.

I remember a tragic train accident, which occurred at Amagasaki, Japan, in 2005, in which more than 100 passengers were instantly killed upon being crushed by flattened train carriages. After the event, I read a newspaper article on a young woman whose fiancé was killed in the accident in question. She fell into despair but tried her best to survive the accident. She put a photo of her fiancé on her desk and commuted to the workplace; however, a year later, she committed suicide.

Was it really possible for someone to encourage her while she was alive that someday she would be able to affirm her having been born to a life in which her fiancé was to be ruthlessly killed? I personally do not think that I could accomplish such a mission. However, I believe that it should be philosophers' task to clarify the meaning of "affirmation" in this context if there had been even the slightest chance for her to affirm her having been born to such a life. I have called this type of affirmation "birth affirmation."[2] This is the subject I tackle in this paper. In the following chapters, I would like to examine, from a philosophical point of view, how affirmations function in harsh situations such as mentioned above.

[2] With regard to the concept of "birth affirmation," see Morioka (2021a), (2021b), (2021c), and (2022). It goes without saying that the founder of the philosophy of affirmation is Friedrich Nietzsche. I do not discuss his philosophy in this paper.

2. Literature relating to the topic

Within the field of the philosophy of life's meaning, there have been many discussions about how a negative event during one's life can be transformed positively, being influenced by the events that occur afterwards. Such discussions are helpful when investigating the possibility of an affirmation of one's having been born. In this chapter, I take up three philosophical arguments concerning this issue and briefly examine them.

The first is J. David Velleman's discussion of redemption in life.[3] He urges us to compare two lives: The first is a life in which your first ten years of marriage are unhappy and end in divorce, but you soon remarry and become happy. The second is a life in which your first ten years of marriage are unhappy, but as the relationship matures, you become happy in the end. Velleman argues that in the second case, the unhappy first ten years become "the foundation of your happiness" because that decade is "given a meaningful place in one's progress through life."[4] What happens here is that the later events "alter the meaning of earlier events, thereby altering their contribution to the value of one's life."[5] He says that in this case a previous negative event is "redeemed" narratively.[6] Likewise, Johan Brännmark expresses it concisely in such a manner that "later events and developments can change the meaning and relative importance of previous events and situations."[7] We can also find a similar discussion in Pedro Alexis Tabensky's paper (2003).

The second philosophical argument is Elizabeth Harman's discussion on preferences for loved ones.[8] Imagine your baby girl was deaf. You were able to choose a cochlear implant operation for the child, but you did not choose it for some reason. And imagine, after she has grown up, the girl being asked whether she wishes she had been cured as a child, she replies "No." In this case, Harman argues, "[i]t can be reasonable to prefer that someone one loves has come to be the person she is [without a cochlear implant], … although one recognizes that there is an alternative in which things would have been *better* [with a cochlear

[3] Velleman (1991).
[4] Velleman (1991), p.55.
[5] Velleman (1991), p.53.
[6] Velleman (1991), p.55.
[7] Brännmark (2003), p.333. He also poses the question of whether "Primo Levi's success as an author somehow lessened the tragedy of his time spent in Auschwitz" (p.327). See also Metz (2013), pp.42-47, for Brännmark and Tabensky's arguments.
[8] Harman (2009).

implant].”[9] The reason is that if she had had a cochlear implant, she would have become a different person, with a different personality and character, from the person you love in the here and now. Harman’s argument can be further generalized as this: Even if you made a bad decision about your loved one’s life in the past, if it has led to a positive outcome for the both of you, it is reasonable for you to prefer the actual world that has been brought about by a bad decision to a better hypothetical world that would have been brought about by not making that bad decision. However, Harman argues, this does not necessarily mean that her bad decision that was *made at that time* was also reasonable. Even if the outcome turns out to be reasonable, it does not automatically make the original decision reasonable. R. Jay Wallace summarizes this point in such a way that a past decision is not justified by its eventual success.[10]

If we apply her discussion to a life that contains traumatic experiences, we could state the following. Firstly, if a life after a tragic event should end in a positive outcome, then it would become reasonable to prefer that life to another possible life which would have been brought about by not encountering the tragic event. This argument seems to support the idea that it should be possible for us to say “Yes” to our having been born to a life that contains traumatic experiences caused by a tragic event. Secondly, however, it does not necessarily mean that it is reasonable to justify that tragic event which has caused traumatic experiences. Here, the phrase “justify that tragic event” sounds a little strange; this is because it does not make sense to apply it, for example, to a tragic event caused by a natural disaster. We cannot say that we “justify the destruction of buildings” caused by a huge earthquake. We thus have to reinterpret the meaning of “justification” in the context of a tragic event that was not caused by a personal decision. I will discuss this point again from a different perspective in Chapter Three.

The third is Camil Golub’s discussion of biographical identity. He criticizes Velleman and Harman, and progresses their discussions one step further by shifting his perspective from “preference” to “affirmation.” He questions why we sometimes prefer to affirm our actual lives despite the fact that there might have been possible alternative lives which would be considered better. Golub writes,

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[9] Harman (2009), p.186. [ ] was added by Morioka.

[10] Wallace (2013), p.127 note 51 and p.157. As Wallace clearly points out in his book, Harman’s argument is a corollary of Bernard Williams’s “moral luck” theory. See Chapter 4 of Wallace (2013), and Williams and Nagel (1976).

"Sometimes, however, we judge that certain lives would have been better for us, all things considered, and yet do not regret having missed out on those lives. Indeed, we affirm our actual lives when comparing them to those better alternatives."[11] The reason why such things happen, Golub argues, is because the important experiences, relationships, and projects that have occurred in our lives "have become part of who we are"[12]; in other words, they have already become part of our "biographical identity."[13]

The concept of biographical identity appears to be helpful in explaining the affirmation structure of a life that contains traumatic experiences; however, Golub does not discuss them. In his paper, he mentions a person who committed a murder in his youth, but he does not provide a detailed analysis for the case.[14] We need to create a new discussion framework that is able to provide an analytic explanation of the affirmation structure of a life that contains traumatic experiences caused by a tragic event.

3. Three types of affirmations

In this chapter, I would like to demonstrate that there are three types of affirmations for a life that contains traumatic experiences. While there have been plenty of studies on traumatic experiences in psychiatry and psychology, there are not quite as many in the field of philosophy. As Hanna Meretoja writes in her 2020 paper, this topic "is rarely discussed" in philosophy.[15] In the following discussion, I want to shed new philosophical light on the relationship between traumatic experiences and affirmation.

In preparation, let me distinguish among the following concepts: a tragic event, traumatic experiences, and a life one lives. This distinction is crucial to our discussion.

1) <u>A tragic event that caused traumatic experiences</u>

This is an *objectively observable event*, for example, a traffic accident or a natural disaster that caused the death of one's family member. This event occurs instantly (in the case of a traffic accident), over a short period of time

[11] Golub (2019), p.72.
[12] Golub (2019), p.81.
[13] Golub (2019), p.82.
[14] Golub (2019), p.82.
[15] Meretoja (2020), p.23.

(in the case of a huge earthquake), or over a long period of time (in the case of repeated child abuse). I use the word "a tragic event" in a singular form in this paper with the implication that the elapsed time of the event varies from a single moment to a long period of time.[16] The effects of a tragic event usually continue to exist long after the event in question, and may even be irreversible. If a family member is killed, he or she disappears and will never come back to our world.

2) Traumatic experiences

These are *subjective experiences* caused by a tragic event. A trauma means a negative and long-lasting psychological impact that was caused by a tragic event, which includes PTSD (Post-Traumatic Stress Syndrome). This torments victims for a long period of time repeatedly in the forms of flashbacks, severe anxieties, and various physical symptoms. Cathy Caruth writes that it takes "the form of repeated, intrusive hallucinations, dreams, thoughts or behaviors stemming from the event…."[17] I would like to use the words "traumatic experiences" in their plural form because they continuously threaten victims again and again throughout their lives. Sometimes, it feels like a truly realistic experience as if it were occurring in the here and now. Traumatic experiences do not easily go away. Some survivors say the flow of time has been frozen from the moment the event occurred; it is still out there in the midst of frozen time.[18] We can also rephrase this frozen point in time as a "traumatic rupture" or a "traumatic breaking."[19] Their life is split in half at that moment, just like when a branch of a tree suddenly breaks. The phrase "a traumatic event" is frequently used in psychological texts, but I do not use it in this paper because the word "trauma" should be used for something *subjective*, not for something *objective* such as "an event."[20] To rephrase correctly, it should be "a tragic event that has caused traumatic experiences."

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[16] Of course, it goes without saying that in cases like child abuse tragic events occur many times repeatedly. With regard to the problem of the elapsed time of a tragic event, see Meretoja (2020), p.27.

[17] Caruth (1995), p.4.

[18] van der Kolk and van der Hart (1995) uses the phrase "[h]ow the mind comes to freeze some memories." P.172.

[19] These two terms were mine. See Herman (1992, 1997), pp.89-90.

[20] For example, the DSM-5 uses the phrase "traumatic event(s)" for their PTSD criteria. https://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/books/NBK207191/box/part1_ch3.box16/ (Visited on March 6th, 2022).

3) One's life in which a tragic event occurs

This is *the life someone has been born into* and this is the life in which that person encountered a tragic event. This is also the life in which that person survives the tragic event. The affirmation of having been born means to be able to say "Yes" to one's having been born to this particular life that contains the tragic event. To clearly separate the concept of "one's life" both from that of "traumatic experiences" and that of "a tragic" event is fundamental to the following discussion.

Now, let us imagine a hypothetical story of an affirmation like this. First, a tragic event occurs to me, for example, one of my family members is brutally killed. I have traumatic experiences caused by that event. I am tormented by trauma. I try hard to survive. Supported by specialists and friends, I gradually come to be able to affirm my survival. The threatening force of traumatic experiences decreases, and looking back on my past experience I feel I can affirm my having had traumatic experiences. And then, looking back on the tragic event, I feel I can finally affirm the occurrence of the event.

Of course, everyone knows that such a simple affirmation process rarely occurs. In most cases, the reality is too harsh and unbearable to affirm. Keeping that in mind, let us closely examine the aforementioned process. Here, we can find three types of affirmations there: the affirmation of survival, the affirmation of having had traumatic experiences, and the affirmation of the occurrence of a tragic event. Let us take a close look at those three affirmations one by one. (Hereafter, I will sometimes use a first person perspective to describe the situations.)

Affirmation One: The affirmation of survival

This is an affirmation of the fact that I have survived the tragic event I encountered in my life. Victims of a tragic event are likely to confuse the tragic event itself with their having survived their lives, and think that because they cannot affirm the tragic event, their survival does not have any positive values at all. But this judgment is wrong. It is vital to separate the value of survival from that of a tragic event and realize that the survival of a tragic event has its own positive value and dignity. This is the reason why we call victims "survivors" and try to support their endeavors to live their life after a tragic event. It is widely

known that it takes a long time to achieve this type of affirmation, sometimes up to the rest of their life.

The important thing we have to keep in mind is that an affirmation of survival does not *automatically* lead to an affirmation of having had traumatic experiences. In many cases, even after I succeed in achieving an affirmation of survival, traumatic experiences repeatedly come to me in a variety of forms, and it is very hard for me to accept those severe experiences. For the same reason, an affirmation of survival does not *automatically* lead to an affirmation of the occurrence of the tragic event that caused these traumatic experiences.

Affirmation Two: The affirmation of having had traumatic experiences

Nevertheless, reaching an affirmation of survival *facilitates the possibility* of achieving an affirmation of having had traumatic experiences. This is the affirmation that I can say "Yes" to having had traumatic experiences that were caused by a tragic event. Imagine the case where I have survived a devastating event, but one day, looking back from the here and now, I find that the very existence of the traumatic experiences I have desperately been coping with are already integrated into my life as an indispensable and irreplaceable piece that does not threaten the core of my existence. In such a case, most of us would think that I have achieved a kind of affirmation of my having had traumatic experiences.

Please pay attention to the point that what I am saying here is the "affirmation of having had traumatic experiences" rather than the "affirmation of traumatic experiences." My point is that while affirming traumatic experiences themselves is very hard, or almost impossible, to achieve, affirming "having had" traumatic experiences is not impossibly hard for us to accomplish. (Of course, this does not mean that it is easy.) This distinction is important in Affirmation Two.

In order for such an affirmation to occur, it is necessary for my recovery to have made significant progress as the result of support from specialists and intimate friends and family, and that I have finally reached the stage where I am no longer overwhelmed when encountering reminders of the traumatic experiences.

Judith Herman, a feminist psychotherapist, makes a detailed analysis of the recovery process of PTSD survivors of sexual abuses in her well known book

Trauma and Recovery.[21] Herman argues that in the final stage of recovery from trauma, although the trauma does not disappear from a survivor's life, she begins to think that "the trauma no longer commands the central place in her life."[22] And as a result, the sense that "one's own troubles are 'as a drop of rain in the sea'" comes to her. Here, "[h]er recovery is accomplished; all that remains before her is her life."[23] This is the situation that I have in mind when I talk about the affirmation of "having had" traumatic experiences. It is a long journey to get to this stage, but it is not impossible.

I think that there must be some positive aspect in having had traumatic experiences that could contribute to survivors' recovery. For example, by interacting with supporters and intimate friends and family, survivors may come to be able, for the first time, to believe the power of compassion, realize the meaning of human dignity, and better understand the pain and suffering of other people. These discoveries will create in their minds the idea that even having had traumatic experiences can have positive aspects, which are considered necessary for them to affirm having had trauma. Psychologists have called these types of positive transformation of personality after experiencing trauma "post traumatic growth."[24] Of course, philosophically speaking, the question of "What is growth?" remains a crucial point for their psychological research, but it seems apparent that post traumatic growth shares certain crucial aspects of survivor recovery with the affirmation of having had traumatic experiences.

Golub's concept of "biographical identity," as discussed in the previous chapter, might also be helpful to understand this sort of affirmation dynamics. Past negative experiences can constitute an important and positive element of a survivor's biographical identity when she tries to cope with traumatic experiences in the final stage of her recovery.

Affirmation Three: The affirmation of the occurrence of a tragic event

Achieving an affirmation of having had traumatic experiences subsequently *facilitates the possibility* of achieving an affirmation of the occurrence of a tragic event. This is the affirmation that I can say "Yes" to the fact that a tragic event

[21] Herman (1992, 1997)
[22] Herman (1992, 1997), p.195.
[23] Herman (1992, 1997), p.236.
[24] Tedeschi and Calhoun (2004).

occurred to me in the past. It also means that I can say I am glad I encountered that tragic event.

The tragic event in question is *objectively observable* event, which is completely different from *subjective* traumatic experiences. Once I succeed in achieving an affirmation of having had traumatic experiences, then it becomes logically and theoretically possible for me to proceed to an affirmation of the occurrence of the tragic event itself. Here, again, please keep in mind that I distinguish the affirmation of "the occurrence of the tragic event" from that of "the tragic event." What survivors can affirm is the *occurrence* of an event, not the *content* of an event.[25] This is because the focal point of survivors' concern is the fact that although there had been the possibility that the event did not come into being, in reality the event did come into being. In other words, survivors are tormented by the fact that it occurred and the opposite did not occur. The point is the event's coming into being.

An affirmation of the occurrence of a tragic event is very hard to achieve. However, there are people who finally come to this type of affirmation. Imagine the case in which a man encountered a tragic event and fell into despair, but in his struggle to escape from it, he realized for the first time that he had been supported by the hidden goodwill of the people surrounding him, and he finally came to think that "I am glad I encountered the tragic event because it made me realize the truth that a human being is made alive by other people's love and compassion." I think that this is one of the typical examples of the affirmation of the occurrence of a tragic event. You can easily recall similar stories and narratives in world literature and religious texts.[26]

It is worth noticing that if we have come to an affirmation of the occurrence of a tragic event, then we have to be able to affirm a new state of affairs caused

[25] This point holds true through three affirmations. In the affirmation of survival, what is affirmed is "survival," not my life itself. In the affirmation of having had traumatic experiences, what is affirmed is my "having had," not the "traumatic experiences" themselves. In the occurrence of a tragic event, what is affirmed is "the occurrence," not "a tragic event."

[26] A difficult problem arises from the relationship between my affirmation of a tragic event and the meaning of that affirmation for the deceased person. For example, imagine the case in which I affirm the occurrence of the death of my sister in a traffic accident. But what about the meaning of the occurrence for the deceased sister herself? Her life was brutally ended and she was never able to live after a certain point in her life. Even if I can affirm the occurrence of the event, can it be the same as the affirmation of the value of death that occurred to her? Is it really possible for me to affirm the occurrence of the death that directly occurred to her? Her death is an observable event for me, but is not an observable event for herself. The affirmation of the former should not be the same as that of the latter. This is a very difficult problem to answer, and future clarification is needed. I would like to thank Professor Robert Allinson (Soka University of America) for opening my eyes to this problem.

by the tragic event. For example, if I have come to an affirmation of the occurrence of having been hit by a car out of my own carelessness, then I have to be able to affirm my current life in a wheelchair caused by the accident.

In Affirmation Three, I affirm my survival, my having had traumatic experiences, and the occurrence of a tragic event, however, I strongly argue that events similar to the one that caused my traumatic experiences must never be repeated again in the future, in my life and any other lives, in any parts of the world. I can say "Yes" to the occurrence of a tragic event in the past, but this does not lead to the justification of future occurrences of the same kind. It must be stopped in the here and now.

Please remember Harman and Wallace's argument that a past decision is not justified by its eventual success. What I argued in the previous paragraph is almost the same as their discussion, although the direction of the inference is completely opposite. While they argue that a past decision is not justified by a future success, I argue that a future occurrence is not justified by the affirmation of the occurrence of a past event. This is the place where the philosophy of justification and that of affirmation sharply cross.

4. Some further discussions on affirmation

The distinction among the three types of affirmations leads us to the following two philosophical arguments. The first concerns the roles of experiences and the event. The second is the fundamentality of the affirmation of survival.

[Roles of experiences and the event]

The difference between Affirmation Two and Affirmation Three clearly stands out when we discuss the affirmation of a tragic event that involves multiple people.

Firstly, let us think about the case in which the victim of a tragic event is only me, that is, for example, the case in which I fell in a river out of my own carelessness and I was forced to live in a wheelchair as my legs were paralyzed.[27] In this case, just as I discussed in the previous chapter, it is possible for me to achieve Affirmation Three, thinking that "I am glad I encountered the tragic event because it made me realize the truth that a human being is made alive by other people's love and compassion."

[27] This never means that a life in wheelchair is generally worse than a life without the need for a wheelchair.

Secondly, let us think about the case in which there are multiple victims of a single tragic event, for example, the case in which one of my family members (say, a sister) is brutally killed by a devastating traffic accident. Not only me, but other family members of mine fall into despair. In this case, it may be possible for me to achieve an affirmation of having had traumatic experiences, but it may be almost impossible for me to affirm the occurrence of that event because while the former is a matter of my *subjective* affirmation, that is to say, the former primarily relates to me, the latter is a matter of a *shared* event among our family members.[28]

Imagine what would happen if I should say loud and clear, in front of my family members, "Now I have achieved an affirmation of the occurrence of the death of my sister." If other family members have not reached the same affirmation, they would probably be shocked to hear my statement. Although my affirmation is no more than one interpretation of the shared event, it may sound as if it were a universal interpretation other family members should follow, which might place a tremendous pressure on my family members' understandings of the event. Because we can easily foresee such dynamics, it becomes very difficult for us to achieve an affirmation of the occurrence of an event in case it is shared by our friends and family. However, on the other hand, with regard to my subjective affirmation of having had traumatic experiences, we can ontologically separate my affirmation from other intimate people's affirmations, and say "I have achieved an affirmation of my own experiences, but that is totally different from yours, so I fully understand and sympathize that you are suffering from your own traumatic experiences even today." Of course, an affirmation of the occurrence of my traumatic experiences can be directly connected to those of other family members, and there must be cases in which until their trauma heals, my trauma will never heal either. Nevertheless, even in such a case, traumatic experiences that occur to me are ontologically separate from those that occur to other persons.

Let us expand upon this point more broadly. What about the dropping of atomic bombs? Nearly 80 years have passed since Hiroshima and Nagasaki. The majority of the direct victims are already deceased but there are still living survivors. Plus, there are their relatives and children who know the survivors' suffering and struggles. Among them, there are still many who cannot affirm the occurrence of the dropping of atomic bombs onto civilians and children. In such a circumstance, is it really possible for survivors who have achieved an

[28] In conversations, we sometimes use the phrase "shared experiences," however, from the perspective of this paper, we should say "people's experiences caused by a shared event" instead.

affirmation of that tragic event to openly affirm it in front of other suffering survivors? If they make their voice public, it may further torment other victims who have not reached a state of affirmation. Taking this possibility seriously, those who near their affirmation might refrain from achieving it and intentionally suppress their own healing process. Survivors of a tragic event that involves a large number of people are placed in a highly complicated situation. In the cases of extremely devastating events such as atomic bombs, Holocaust, and a huge train accident, it is *psychologically* very difficult for survivors to affirm their occurrences.

I do not have any clear-cut answer to this complicated problem, but the concept of "collective victimhood" might be helpful in disentangling it. When a group of people become victims of violence, they are forced to experience severe suffering, trauma, and distress; however, according to Masi Noor et al., their experiences are not homogenous.[29] One person's psychological relation to a violent action is wholly different from that of another person. Some victimizations are made directly and others are made indirectly. It is interesting that Noor et al., too, distinguish the concept of *psychological* collective victimhood from that of *objective* collective victimization.[30] There are other scholars who use the term "collective trauma" to describe a psychological dimension of collective victimhood. For example, Saul Friedländer analyzes collective trauma that was shared by Holocaust (Shoah) survivors in Israel and argues that collective trauma is considered different from individual trauma.[31] This kind of approach in the field of social psychology may shed new light on our philosophical investigation into affirmation dynamics.[32]

[The fundamentality of the affirmation of survival]

Let us move on to another important question. That is the question of which type of affirmation is needed for a person who encountered a tragic event to achieve an affirmation of having been born (birth affirmation): Are all three types of affirmations required, or is just one type of affirmation sufficient? My answer is that Affirmation One suffices for that purpose. Even if I cannot affirm my having had traumatic experiences, and even if I cannot affirm the occurrence of a

[29] Noor et al. (2017), p.122.
[30] Noor et al. (2017), p.121.
[31] Friedländer (2016), p.317.
[32] The term "the affirmation dynamic" is R. Jay Wallace's one. Wallace (2013), pp.97-98.

tragic event, if I can achieve an affirmation of my survival of a tragic event, it will certainly be able to lead to an affirmation of coming into existence to my life. The reason is that affirming my survival prepares a firm ground on which I can look back on the whole process of my life from my birth to the present day and evaluate it positively even if it contains traumatic experiences. And if I can positively evaluate the whole process of my life up until the present, then it can naturally bring me to an affirmation of my having been born to this particular life. Of course, logically speaking, an affirmation of survival does not directly entail an affirmation of one's coming into existence, but it is not strange to think that a person's having survived a tragic event and having come to positively evaluate their life up until the present prepares a firm ground on which that person can acquire an affirmation of having been born to her life. This is what I call the fundamentality of the affirmation of survival.

There is a common misunderstanding that in order to affirm our having been born, we have to affirm each and every event or subjective experience that happens in their lives, but this is wrong. If I am allowed to speak rhetorically, to affirm our having been born is to affirm our whole life that is filled with events and experiences that can never be affirmed at all. And if we can only affirm our survival, it will open the door to an affirmation of our having been born, even if our lives are full of regrettable events or repeated devastating experiences. The affirmation of survival is the most fundamental of the three. Our survival is great as it is, a survived life is full of dignity, and nothing has to be added to it.

Then, what about the value of Affirmations Two and Three? I think these two affirmations should be considered additional blessing that unexpectedly knock on survivors' doors during their struggles to heal their wounds and reconstruct their lives. I do not think that those two affirmations should be considered a goal for survivors because such a goal-setting might run the risk of excessively suppressing survivors' recovery.

Finally, let us think a little about the relationship between affirmation, meaning, and happiness.

Iddo Landau writes in his book *Finding Meaning in an Imperfect World* that many of his neighbors and relatives in Jerusalem were Holocaust survivors and they went through "very traumatic experiences." He says that "they never stopped feeling intense sorrow and having painful memories"; nevertheless, some of them led "meaningful (and sometimes even happy) lives." And some were "happy

overall." [33] Here, Landau discusses traumatic experiences in terms of meaningfulness and happiness. Although his discussion is moving and persuasive, I must say that leading a happy and meaningful life is completely different from affirming one's having been born. It might be possible for a person who has encountered a devastatingly tragic event to feel happiness or meaningfulness in their later life, but it cannot be easy for them to say "Yes" to their having been born into a life that is destined to contain such tragedy.

There seems to be a tremendous gap between "meaningfulness or happiness" and "affirmation." We can explain this gap as follows. In the case of meaningful life and happiness, all we need to do is stay inside our actual lives and concentrate on making our ongoing lives meaningful and happy. On the other hand, in the case of affirmation, we have to step outside of our actual lives, and compare our actual lives with other possible lives in which the tragic event had never occurred, and examine whether we can believe that we never would wish for our actual lives to be replaced by any other possible lives. This meta-analysis like process is crucial to an affirmation of having been born, and I believe that it makes the affirmation of having been born more difficult to achieve than a meaningful or happy life.[34] The hurdle for affirmation seems to be set higher than meaningfulness or happiness. This is the place where the philosophy of affirmation and the philosophy of happiness or meaning sharply clash.

5. Conclusion

With all of these discussions in mind, let us think again about how to talk to a person who is in a similar situation to the woman whose fiancé was brutally killed in the train accident I mentioned in the first chapter of this paper. One of the most important things we can do as philosophers would be to show her a way to separate her survival itself from her repeated traumatic experiences and the tragic event she encountered. Once she succeeds in separating them, she might be able to find that what she has to protect and cherish most is her survival, on which the dignity and irreplaceability of her life is concentrated.

However, after encountering the tragic death of her fiancé, achieving an affirmation of survival would be tremendously difficult for her because however hard she may try to affirm her survival, she would repeatedly be forced to face the

[33] Landau (2017), p.172.
[34] Any theories of happiness or meaningful lives do not require this kind of process.

harsh reality that her fiancé was killed in the accident and will never come back to her. The despair she has to endure would be unimaginable.

What would happen if such a person were asked to imagine a situation in which the deceased fiancé was still alive in heaven and looked down on her. If he really loves her in heaven, what would he say to her? It would be, "Please do not cry every day, because I am living well here," and he might add to it, "Forget the event, affirm what happened, and lead a happy life from now!" To imagine what a deceased person would reply is not a strange action. For example, a conversation such as "What would our late father think if he knew?" is frequently exchanged among ordinary people in everyday life. Hence, by imagining what her fiancé would reply to her, she might be encouraged to continue living her life and might come one step closer to an affirmation of her survival.

But this is no more than speculation. The question, "How can we achieve an affirmation of survival?" cannot be fully answered by philosophical investigations only. We need a positive collaboration between philosophy and psychology to tackle the problems of affirmation.[35] In this paper, I have attempted to clarify, from a philosophical point of view, the affirmation structure of a life that contains traumatic experiences caused by a tragic event and I have examined the relationship between three types of affirmations and the affirmation of having been born (birth affirmation). This field is still in its infancy; I thus hope that my discussion in this paper will contribute to the development of future affirmation studies.[36]

*This paper was first presented at the Fourth International Conference on Philosophy and Meaning in Life held at the University of Pretoria in 2022 online. I would like to express my gratitude to those who asked me valuable questions there.
* This work was supported by JSPS KAKENHI grant nos. 20K00042, 17H00828, and 20H01175. This work is an outcome of Waseda University's Special Research Projects 2020C-374 and the C Project of Advanced Research Center for Human Sciences, Waseda University.

[35] For example, psychological research on the relationship between self-affirmation and resilience is also helpful. See Steele (1988) and Sherman and Cohen (2006).
[36] One of the philosophical problems I was not able to discuss in this paper is the problem of what it actually means to *affirm* something in the context of the philosophy of life's meaning. This is left to our future research. See Morioka (2021a).

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