

# Philosophy and Meaning in Life Vol.3

Edited by  
**Masahiro Morioka**

Journal of Philosophy of Life





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# Philosophy and Meaning in Life Vol.3

## Contents

|   |         |
|---|---------|
| Preface<br>Masahiro Morioka   | i       |
| Deep Personal Meaning<br>: A Subjective Approach to Meaning in Life<br>Drew Chastain                | 1-23    |
| Causation and the Narrative Meaning of Life<br>Mirela Oliva   | 24-42   |
| What Is Birth Affirmation?<br>: The Meaning of Saying “Yes” to Having Been Born<br>Masahiro Morioka | 43-59   |
| Beauvoir’s Philosophy of Meaning in Life<br>Kiki Berk   | 60-77   |
| Meaning and Mistakes in Philosophy and Life<br>Benjamin Murphy                                      | 78-99   |
| Truth and Meaning in Life<br>: A Badiouan Theory of Meaning in Life<br>Jairus Diesta Espiritu       | 100-122 |
| What We Mean by ‘Meaning’<br>Aaron Brooks   | 123-143 |

*Essay*

144-154

The Meaning of Life is the Pursuit of Love

Heidi Cobham

Information about the Authors

## Preface

This book is a collection of all the papers and the essay published in the special issue “Philosophy and Meaning in Life Vol.3,” *Journal of Philosophy of Life*, Vol.11, No.1, 2021, pp.1-154.

We held the Third International Conference on Philosophy and Meaning in Life online at the University of Birmingham, Birmingham, UK, on July 21–23, 2020. This conference was co-hosted by the Birmingham Centre for Philosophy of Religion, and the Waseda Institute of Life and Death Studies. We accepted about 50 presentations from around the world. Professor Lisa Bortolotti and I gave keynote lectures.

After the conference, we called for papers for publication from the speakers, and we accepted seven papers and an essay for the special issue of the *Journal of Philosophy of Life*. We would like to give special thanks to the anonymous referees who kindly reviewed the submitted manuscripts. The accepted papers deal with a variety of topics, such as the subjective/objective debate, narrative meaning, Simone de Beauvoir, and Alain Badiou, and they are all discussed from the perspective of the philosophy of meaning in life.

In 2020, we faced the COVID-19 pandemic, and we had to give up our face-to-face meeting at the University of Birmingham. Professor Yujin Nagasawa, the chair of the conference, and supporting staff members bravely decided to hold the conference online, and with the help of their devotion we were able to hold the three-day meeting successfully. I would like to sincerely thank them for their contributions.

As the editor-in-chief, I hope that readers will enjoy the stimulating papers in this volume.

Masahiro Morioka

Professor, Waseda University

Editor-in-chief, *Journal of Philosophy of Life*

June, 15, 2021.

\*Masahiro Morioka (ed.) *Philosophy and Meaning in Life Vol.3*. *Journal of Philosophy of Life*, (June 2021): i.

# Deep Personal Meaning

## A Subjective Approach to Meaning in Life

Drew Chastain\*

### Abstract

Much has been written about what makes life in general or individual lives meaningful. Yet meaning judgments are aimed not only at lives, but also at things in life. Here I explore what elicits the judgment that things in life are personally meaningful, “things” such as people, relationships, memories, items, places, events, etc. On my account of personal meaning judgments, what makes something personally meaningful is that it provides a sense of connection for the one making the judgment. I begin by further exploring what is meant by “connection” and then show that, once we make room for personal meaning judgments in our theory of meaning in life, we can set up a new critical perspective on prior theories, such as those by Susan Wolf and Thaddeus Metz. Unfortunately, prior theories fail to guide us toward the important kind of meaning that we gain from personally meaningful things.

### 1. Introduction

When I say that my relationship with my parents is very meaningful to me, what do I mean? Or if I say a particular memory is very meaningful to me, or a place or an item or an activity or a vocation, what more can be said about such personal meaning judgments? If we want to better understand what makes *life* meaningful, this is an important question, because a meaningful life is presumably one that is filled with *things* that are meaningful. Here I provide an analysis for the judgment that something is deeply personally meaningful, or very meaningful to me. This analysis points to a kind of subjective state that can be described as a “sense of connection.” In a nutshell, the idea is that, when someone judges something to be deeply personally meaningful, it’s because the meaningful thing is thought to provide a sense of connection. I’ll begin by exploring this concept of connection more fully (section 2).

I also want to show that some recent accounts for what makes *life* meaningful don’t really illuminate the deep personal meaningfulness of *things in life*, and some accounts ignore it entirely.<sup>1</sup> I think this is problematic, because deep

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\* Visiting Professor, Loyola University, New Orleans, 6363 St. Charles Avenue, New Orleans, LA 70118. Chastain[a]loyno.edu

<sup>1</sup> I will be focusing on theories provided by Paul Edwards, Richard Taylor, Susan Wolf, Thaddeus

personal meaning – a subjective experience of connection – is a big part of what we want out of meaning in life (section 3). In the way that I talk about meaning in life here, I’m emphasizing the subjective, yet in the present philosophical debate over the nature of a meaningful life, there is controversy over whether meaning in life is subjective or objective. My account of deep personal meaning judgments affirms a subjective leaning in this debate by placing prime importance on the subjective state of connection. I hope to calm the worries of those resistant to subjectivism, however, by indicating how a judgment’s being subjective does not mean that “anything goes,” or that something is meaningful just because someone believes that it is. I will clarify this by pointing to ways in which judgments of deep personal meaning can be flawed (section 4).

## 2. Connection and Meaning

I’m tracking a particular kind of meaning judgment. The kind in question is not primarily a judgment about whether *life* is meaningful, but about whether *things in life* are meaningful, “things” such as people, relationships, memories, items, places, events, etc. Among meaning judgments of things in life, there can be both personal and impersonal meaning judgments, and it is the personal ones with which I am most interested here.

I will get to the main topic of personally meaningful things shortly, but to see how something can be meaningful without being personally meaningful, consider the example of a call to pass meaningful legislation. Legislation would be considered *meaningless* if it does not have the sort of positive effects it should have, and especially if it makes the sort of situation it’s supposed to solve even worse, in which case we might even go so far as to say that such legislation is absurd. But if it has the relevant positive effects, legislation can be deemed meaningful even if no one has any personal attachment to it. This could be called a detached, impersonal meaning judgment. Then again, it could also be that someone does have a personal attachment to a piece of legislation, such as the legislators who work hardest on writing and passing the bill, in which case the legislation could be personally meaningful to those legislators. My suggestion is that something can become personally meaningful as someone develops an

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Metz, and others. To clarify, making meaning judgments about things in life is distinct from making meaning judgments about parts, segments or time slices of a life, which still falls within the tradition of making judgments about a life.

attachment to it. When an attachment is judged personally meaningful, this is because it is thought to enable a sense of connection for the person in question.<sup>2</sup>

But what is this subjective state of connection? Connectedness gets talked about quite a lot in everyday life as something positively valuable but rarely is an analysis attempted, which might be owing to some inherent difficulties in doing so. I'll provide a sketch of an account of what a psychological sense of connectedness consists in. But to rope out the territory, it's helpful to first indicate what can count as its opposite, that is, a state of disconnection. My strategy here is to get at what "connection" means somewhat indirectly, because the concept of connection appears to be irreducibly metaphorical. I think that we have to live with this, because there also does not appear to be a good replacement concept that could improve upon the illuminatory power of the concept of connection.

So let's first explore connection's opposite. When we are feeling disconnected, we may report feeling alienated, ungrounded, disoriented, empty, fake, bored, depressed or unenthused. We probably could not come to appreciate the positive value of a feeling of connection if we did not have these experiences of its loss. In some way or another, each of these states of disconnection involves an unpleasant or unsettling awareness of oneself in relation to one's situation. These are the sorts of states inspiring Albert Camus' observation that the "divorce between man and his life, the actor and his setting, is properly the feeling of absurdity" (6), a feeling which lurks within a subjective state of meaninglessness, or disconnection.<sup>3</sup> On the idea that there is no real escape from absurdity in modern life, Camus championed the absurd hero (120-123) who can maintain an ability to live entirely within a state of disconnection. But I think it's a rare individual who is truly permanently stuck in this state. We develop attachments along life's way and are typically able to maintain some sense of meaning in life by relation to these attachments that give us a sense of connection.

What more can be said about this experience of connection? Again, metaphor is clearly at work here, because physical connections don't by themselves produce

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<sup>2</sup> Toward the end of the paper (section 4.2), I'll be clarifying that one can be wrong in judging how well something provides a sense of connection. For this reason, although personal meaning depends on the domain of attachments, just because someone is attached to something doesn't guarantee that it provides a sense of connection. For those interested, philosophical analysis of the concept of attachment has recently been pursued by Monique Wonderly (2016).

<sup>3</sup> Camus himself mainly spoke of the concept of meaning as a transcendent thing, such as a cosmic purpose, imagining that an absurd life could be lived without transcendent meaning. In contrast with Camus, I'm focused on meaning as a subjective experience which can be retrieved through an experience of connection, regardless of the transcendent state of affairs.

personal connectedness, although the physical can help to enable the personal. For instance, digital and telephonic communication systems can help to bring people together when distance would otherwise lead us to feel disconnected both physically and socially.<sup>4</sup> But it's not as if close physical proximity guarantees a sense of connection – one can feel very alone in a crowded room. Also, for those inclined to believe that a kind of spiritual energy is responsible for helping us to feel connected to other people or to nature or to God, even spiritual contact *per se* does not guarantee a sense of connection. If there is such a thing as demonic possession, this would involve spiritual contact, but the very opposite of a sense of connection, so something more than spiritual contact is needed to explain the positive psychological state of connectedness.

In further exploring the metaphor of connection, we find that there is commonly talk of three types of connection: connection to the world, connection to others, and connection to self. Within the human psyche, I think these three depend upon each other to a great extent, the first two involving a connection to something beyond oneself and the last to something within, so to speak. Since connection implies linkages between things, it might seem that a sense of connectedness has everything to do with external relatedness to others and the world, but I believe the internal relation is at least equally important. I think that the external relatedness connoted by the word “connection” derives from the very strong need to be in contact with the world and others, and to feel some sense of belonging and a role to play, but this role must also feel right internally in order for the external relation to feel like connection. One difficulty with an analysis of the concept of connection is that it relies more on an internal relation than it may at first seem. A sense of connection is experienced as a return to the world and a return to others, and certain external conditions must be in place for this to be possible, but there is a very important internal condition that must be met as well – a return to self.<sup>5</sup>

A sense of connection is deeply important for an experience of meaning in life. To have meaning in life is to be able to make sense of living as a welcome task,

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<sup>4</sup> However, later in the paper (section 4.2), I discuss how social media can also lead to disconnection.

<sup>5</sup> It's tempting to try to carve out a more precise account of what it means to be connected to self, but I'm not sure how well we can satisfy that ambition, and I won't be pursuing it here. I don't think we should imagine that there is a definite entity describable as the “self,” to and from which we can literally be connected and disconnected. Also, the constitution of one's sense of self may depend on various attachments to external things rather than existing entirely prior to them. I thank James Andrew Whitaker for pressing this last point.

one that we are faced with performing day in and day out. Without a sense of connection, we experience self as out of joint with others and the world, so that it's tougher to make sense of what one should be doing and to feel motivated to do it. When one has a sense of connection, things come into alignment and life flows. With a sense of connection, life's meaningfulness is manifest, our minds guided by meaning rather than grasping for it, so that the question of meaning may not even arise. But then, at times, we experience loss of meaning because of disconnection, which can inspire reflection on what is truly meaningful in life. When, within such reflection, we stop to explicitly judge something meaningful – e.g., “my family is so meaningful to me” – we're first of all appreciating that life is not always experienced as meaningful, that there is a threat of meaninglessness, of being lost, empty, or alone. We are also acknowledging that what we're judging meaningful has the power to restore or maintain an experience of meaning as connection. Meaningful things enable me to be in touch with the world and others and to be in touch with myself, providing me a deep sense of belonging, so that living a life makes sense. Once we identify meaningful things, we gravitate toward them, because they provide us grounding and orientation and the promise of wholeness, all of which is captured in the idea of connection.

Many different kinds of things can be judged meaningful in this way, and for a complex variety of reasons. *Close relationships* are commonly judged meaningful. A close relationship provides not only someone you can rely on, but also someone who understands you to a great extent, while also providing all of the psychological and physical comforts that come with human interaction and solidarity. You likely also have certain meaningful *places* that resonate with you very strongly, bringing out your deepest sense of self, either because of certain features of that environment, or because it is a place with which you have a history. Certain *memories* can also be very meaningful, because they are memories of a time when you felt connected, memories that are meaningful now because they remind you of what connection is like. Meaningful memories help you through difficult times as a reminder that life can be deeply meaningful, and memories can also serve as a bridge between the present and the past, bringing connection between you now and your life so far. Often, meaningful *items* kept around the home or worn on your person are reminders of meaningful times in your life, or else are reminders of who you are when you feel most like yourself. Also, various repeated *events* can be meaningful, like New Year's or your birthday, or attending church weekly, or a monthly book group, because of the way these events bring

people together to acknowledge special things, while also establishing a cyclical rhythm in our experience of time.

This is just a small sampling of the myriad things that we can find deeply personally meaningful for the various ways in which they enable a sense of connection. In my experience, occasions for explicitly and verbally expressing the judgment that something is personally meaningful are relatively rare, reserved for those times when one is in a special reflective state about the deeper things in life, and feeling a need to express gratitude or just to recognize what is most deeply valuable.<sup>6</sup> But I believe the connection analysis accounts for a capacity for personal meaning judgments that is at work even if we don't stop to explicitly describe something as personally meaningful. Whenever it is the case that we are moving toward or away from something, or opting for one thing over another thing, for reasons of personal meaning, we are navigating life based upon what does and doesn't provide a sense of connection. If I'm facing a choice between two different jobs, where one pays more, but the other seems more personally meaningful, these separate reasons can influence my decision-making, even if I never explicitly use the word "meaningful." The reason why the one job possibility has the quality of being more personally meaningful is because it enables a greater sense of connection than the other job possibility.

A central explanatory point I'm wanting to get across here is that, when we judge things personally meaningful, it is because we believe that they help to bring us out of a state of disconnection or to maintain a sense of connection. This is different from impersonal meaning judgments, which track a kind of value which does not depend so much on personal attachment. For this reason, judgments of impersonal meaning can attract more social consensus. For instance, legislation can be meaningful just for having certain positive effects even if no one is personally attached to the legislation – many can see that such legislation is meaningful from a relatively detached, objective standpoint.

In the discussion that follows, more will be said to help clarify what connection and personal meaning are, and how personal and impersonal meaning differ. This will come out as I pursue a critique of late 20<sup>th</sup> and early 21<sup>st</sup> century theories of meaning in life. I'll be arguing that prior subjectivist, objectivist and hybrid theories fail to illuminate the true nature of personal meaning judgments, and for that reason they fail to provide us sufficient guidance in our search for

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<sup>6</sup> Iddo Landau calls this practice "recognizing" and notes that pausing to explicitly recognize meaningful things in one's life can also improve one's experience of meaning in life. (2017, 232)

meaning in life.

### 3. Theories of Meaning in Life

Recent theories of meaning in life can be broadly categorized as subjectivist, objectivist or hybrid theories. A subjectivist theory is one that declares a life meaningful if (and only if) the one living the life is in a particular subjective state. Richard Taylor's theory has become the paradigm example of such a theory. Following the lead of Camus' "The Myth of Sisyphus," Taylor considers the case of the mythical Sisyphus, who is condemned to roll a boulder up a hill eternally. Each time Sisyphus reaches the top, the boulder rolls back down to the bottom, so that Sisyphus must roll it back up again, an endlessly repetitive task which leads to no valuable result. Taylor suggests that, really, all of life is like this, the life of humans and other animals, so that in the grand scheme of things life is objectively meaningless, since life is just endless repetition and pointlessness. (128-133) But Taylor argues that life can still be meaningful, at least subjectively, if one desires to do what one is doing. He imagines Sisyphus being given a drug that fills him with the desire to roll a boulder up a hill. In this case, Taylor concludes, Sisyphus' life is meaningful, because meaning comes from within. (130-131, 135-136) Taylor's theory is subjectivist because whether a life is meaningful or not is said to depend on someone's being in a particular kind of subjective state, in this case a state of desire, will or interest.<sup>7</sup>

Many theorists find it unintuitive to say that Sisyphus' life could be meaningful just because he desires to do what he's doing, that is, if what Sisyphus desires to do is so worthless as rolling a boulder up a hill just to let it fall back down over and over again. For a hybrid theorist, like Susan Wolf, it's not enough to be in the right kind of subjective state. The individual in question must also be engaged in activities that are worthwhile. (2010, 34-35) Wolf's is a hybrid theory because she requires that a life satisfy both a subjective and an objective condition in order for it to be considered meaningful. For Wolf, the subjective condition that must be met is a state of active engagement and the objective condition is that the activity in which one is engaged must be worthwhile. Sisyphus' life fails to be meaningful for failing the objective condition; but the alienated housewife, whose

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<sup>7</sup> In a later paper, Taylor (1987) abandons subjectivism for the view that only geniuses have meaningful lives, which would be a version of what I call "externalism," a kind of theory of life meaning that I am also critiquing below (section 3.1).

activities are worthwhile, but who cannot bring herself to be actively engaged with them, also fails to lead a meaningful life, for failing the subjective condition. (1997, 211; 2010, 21) In contrast with a hybrid theorist, an objectivist, like Thaddeus Metz, denies the need to meet a subjective condition at all, pointing only to the objective one. Metz concludes that, even if Mother Teresa does not enjoy or is not actively engaged in helping all those people who were under her care, her life would still be meaningful just for meeting the objective condition of performing worthwhile activities. (183-184)

An objectivist and a hybrid theorist share the intuition that a person's state of mind can't decide whether that person's life is meaningful or not, and for this reason both types of theories could be called "externalist," for quick reference. For an externalist, to be meaningful, a life must be oriented toward something that is truly valuable. Meaning is not just a kind of feeling or experience that one has. This view can seem rather harsh because it undermines the authority of the person living a life to decide what counts as meaningful for that person. Externalism can also lead to the conclusion that a given life is meaningless even if the subject experiences it as meaningful. But this kind of view that privileges an external standpoint over an internal standpoint isn't entirely unwarranted. We commonly have the experience of diving into activities that we feel to be meaningful at the time, like long hours spent playing video games on the couch, but then come to think differently of the time spent in retrospect. We can end up regretfully viewing some of our past engagements as pointless and the time spent on them as wasted. (Wolf, 2010, 44) When one adopts this sort of attitude towards one's past activities, one assumes an external standpoint on one's own life, judging one's own pursuits against a higher, or at least a different, standard. This is undoubtedly one kind of meaning judgment we can make, an impersonal kind. In what follows, I want to point out how different kinds of meaning judgments – personal and impersonal – can come into conflict, and also indicate why we shouldn't always favor the impersonal kind that's prioritized by the externalist.

### **3.1 Critique of Externalist Theories**

External meaning judgments track what is regularly referred to by externalists as "objective value." I am not denying that objective value exists in some sense. Even if there is not such a thing as a value that exists apart from the minds of

subjects who judge value,<sup>8</sup> there are certainly some things which are objectively more valuable than others in the sense of being more universally recognized to have value, or in the sense of serving the interests of more rather than fewer people, or something along these lines. I accept, for instance, that some books and movies are better than others, that some meals are better prepared than others, and that some courses of action are better than others, based on some form of objective normative reasoning. The view I reject is that objective value (in the sense intended by externalists<sup>9</sup>) is a necessary condition for meaning. I think this is one direction that our capacity for meaning judgments can go, along the rails of objective value, which would be the basis for an *impersonal* meaning judgment. But a *personal* meaning judgment goes in another direction. I'm suggesting that a sense of connection, as a kind of subjective value not captured by the externalist's objective value, guides such personal meaning judgments.

Unfortunately, externalist theories potentially obscure or distract us away from the sort of meaning that personal meaning judgments track. This is because the lives that are identified as sufficiently valuable to count as meaningful from an external standpoint aren't guaranteed to provide the person who is living the life with a sense of connection. Having one kind of meaning (an external kind<sup>10</sup>) does not guarantee the other kind of meaning (an internal kind). The sort of meaning that personal meaning judgments track is meaning that we subjectively experience. When we say of something that it is personally meaningful, this is what we're reporting, that this meaningful thing provides an experience of meaning. One's having an experience of meaning may not make one's life meaningful in the eyes of a detached observer adopting an external standpoint on one's life. But then, what would motivate us to care about the view from that external standpoint if we get no insight from it about how to establish a sense of connection so that we experience life as meaningful? A meaning judgment that doesn't lead me to an experience of meaning would seem to be profoundly unhelpful.<sup>11</sup>

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<sup>8</sup> J. L. Mackie classically and compellingly questions the existence of objective value in this mind-independent sense (1977, Ch. 1.6).

<sup>9</sup> At the end of the paper, I'll be pointing out an important ambiguity in what it means to be objective, so that even so-called "subjectivists" can be understood to be concerned about objectivity.

<sup>10</sup> James Tartaglia (2016) has classified what I'm calling externalist theories like Wolf's and Metz's as theories of "social meaning" (12-17; esp. 17), which he says suffer from issues of arbitrariness. The problem is that they are arbitrary with respect to whatever is considered valuable within one's culture or sub-culture, a problem worth mentioning.

<sup>11</sup> Of course, that something is commonly valued can serve as evidence that one could find it

It may be thought that Wolf's hybrid theory has already identified the two kinds of meaning judgment that I am distinguishing here. Again, she says that for a life to be meaningful, it must satisfy both a subjective and an objective condition, which may seem to line up with a distinction between personal and impersonal meaning judgments. But, while a hybrid theorist is right to set apart different aspects of meaning, I have two more complaints about Wolf's approach, in addition to the complaint about her externalism, all of which, taken together, strongly recommend against using her approach as a helpful guide for finding meaning in life. The first is that what she identifies as the subjective condition – active engagement – does not fully illuminate what personal meaning judgments track. Instead, the active engagement analysis fits into a problematic goal orientation paradigm, which unfortunately is common among those theorists identifying a subjective condition for meaning in life, as I will explain (section 3.2). The second complaint is that Wolf's approach to analyzing meaning judgments is to account for what makes *life* or *a life* meaningful, which is also a dominant and largely unquestioned approach in today's philosophy of meaning in life. But I suggest that aiming a meaning judgment at life in general or at particular lives distracts us away from a more clear-eyed pursuit of meaning in life guided by personal meaning judgments of *things in life*, which I take to be the more natural target of meaning judgments (section 3.3). I will now consider these two additional complaints in turn.

### 3.2 Critique of Subjectivist Theories

The problem with objectivist theories of meaning is that they ignore subjective states as a rule. As for subjectivist theories and hybrid theories involving a subjective component, the problem with the proposals available so far is that they don't present the right kind of meaning-giving subjective state. Taylor suggests desire, Wolf suggests active engagement, and Paul Edwards before them suggests that, for a life to have meaning, there must be a special zest in relation to goals (118-119).<sup>12</sup> The shared character of all of these proposals is that they are goal-oriented theories of meaning in life.<sup>13</sup> But, while orientation toward a goal is

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personally meaningful, and the fact that what one is doing is valued by many could contribute to its personal meaning, but this still does not make personal and impersonal meaning the same thing.

<sup>12</sup> Edwards calls this "terrestrial" meaning, as distinct from cosmic meaning. I will return to this issue of levels of meaning in section 3.3.

<sup>13</sup> A notable exception to goal-oriented theories of meaning is Moritz Schlick's "play" theory, which is

undeniably part of a life experienced as meaningful, a sense of connection is still more deeply responsible for the experience of meaning, and this sense of connection can be present even without goal orientation. Recall the various kinds of things in life we find meaningful because they bring us connection: relationships, places, memories, items, events, etc. Meaningful things make life meaningful by providing an experience of meaning, but in many cases it doesn't seem that this meaningfulness comes about by achieving or pursuing goals, or even by an active state of doing something, as suggested by Wolf's "active engagement." I suppose that relationships can be a project or activity in some sense, as Wolf suggests (2010, 36-37), but the active, goal-oriented character of projects or activities isn't really what makes close relationships meaningful to us. It is more fundamentally that being in a relationship with this person (or even animal) provides me a sense of identity and belonging, and enables interaction and social, creaturely contact. That is, close relationships provide us with a sense of connection.

It's understandable that theorists would think that goal orientation is the definitive character of meaning in life, because when we experience problems for meaning, we don't know quite what to do with ourselves. If I'm feeling disoriented, alienated, empty, fake or bored, it's natural to feel a need for better direction. So it can seem that the central answer to the problem of meaning is to have something to do with oneself, to have a goal, perhaps even an objectively valuable one, and to be thoroughly interested in going after it. Also, much of waking human life consists in having and pursuing goals and we certainly experience much of our meaning as connection within goal orientation. But I think there is a deeper layer of meaningfulness in which the meaning of action is rooted, which consists in having a sense of connection.<sup>14</sup> Again, much meaning is derived from just *being* in particular ways rather than doing. Since this is the case, if a theory focuses too much on doing as a method of deriving meaning, such a theory may well be leading us away from meaning and toward disconnection. If, in a state of disconnection, I am advised to put more effort into doing, but without

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explicitly opposed to the idea that goals provide meaning (58). While Schlick's theory provides a refreshing critical stance, I believe that connection is more fundamental than play in establishing personal meaning and meaning in life.

<sup>14</sup> At the risk of psychoanalyzing theorists, it is possible that some theorists so rarely experience deep disconnection that they are unaware of the important foundational role that connection plays in sustaining meaning in life, which would help to explain why their analysis stops at identifying some kind of goal orientation.

any insight into how this will reestablish connection, the disconnection may end up being made even worse.

### 3.3 Critique of Life-Targeting Theories

Meaning judgments can be applied to life itself or to individual lives, but I think that the kind of meaning judgment it is most important to get clear on is the kind applied to things in life. The grand question of whether life itself is meaningful is gripping, yet elusive, for the philosophical imagination. On the one hand, it seems to be a question of whether there is some plan, point or purpose for all of life or reality (an “objective” kind of question), but on the other hand, it seems to be a question of whether life is worth living (a “subjective” kind of question).<sup>15</sup> I think many agree that life can be worth living even if there is no objective plan, point or purpose, and when we are pressed to say why life is worth living, it is natural to identify meaningful things in life, like close relationships. In this way, the confusing question of the meaning of life quickly circles around to the more tractable question of what the meaningful things in life are, even if we never resolve the question whether life itself has an objective meaning. I think that one reason why the question of the meaning of life gets overtaken by the question of meaningful things is because the category of *things in life* is a more natural target for meaning judgments than the category of *life*.

Edwards distinguishes between the grand *cosmic* question of life’s meaning and the more everyday *terrestrial* question of whether an individual’s particular life is meaningful. Edwards argues that the answer to the terrestrial question does not depend on the cosmic one. (118-120) Assuming that life has meaning in the cosmic sense, an individual’s life could still fail to have meaning if, following Edwards’ theory of terrestrial meaning, the person living the life does not have sufficient zest in relation to goals. Likewise, one could have zest in relation to goals even if life fails to have meaning in the cosmic sense. Regardless of whether we agree with the accounts proposed by Edwards, Wolf, or Metz, or with some other account of what makes a particular life meaningful, I think that it is right that the *cosmic meaning of life in general* and the *terrestrial meaning of particular*

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<sup>15</sup> Complicating things, each level of meaning judgment – targeting *life in general*, *individual lives*, or *things in life* – appears to come with its own way of distinguishing the subjective and the objective. I’ll say more about the subjective and objective in relation to personal meaning judgments of things in life in section 4.

*lives* can be judged separately, but this is only because meaning judgments work in different ways in relation to these two different targets. Asking whether life in general is meaningful and asking whether a given person's life is meaningful are really two different questions that are only loosely related.

In recent decades, the question of judging the meaning of particular lives has taken center stage, and externalist leanings on this question have become dominant in philosophy, but unfortunately, this has been at the expense of our understanding of judgments of personal meaning. Externalist theories of meaning in life tend to favor impersonal meaning judgments, so that lives are judged meaningful based more on what a person achieves than on what attachments a person experiences. I think this is a result of the externalist's tendency to emphasize the idea of life as a biography as viewed from a third person point of view. It is within this framework that we are most inclined to think of meaning in terms of publicly observable achievement or attainment, and this is also certainly one way for a life to have meaning, a more impersonal way. But if we want our theory of meaning to guide us toward an *experience* of meaning as we are living it, then I think we need to break free of the third-personal biographical framework. A first-personal search for meaning in life would be less concerned with biography and more concerned with something like choreography, or a day-to-day dance with life, much of which would not make it into an autobiography or obituary. An experience of meaning in life is grounded less in the construction of a life story and more so in one's set of attachments to meaningful things that provide a sense of connection.<sup>16</sup>

I think that this phrase "meaning in life" best applies to the experience of meaning we can have owing to a sense of connection enabled by various kinds of attachments. If we want meaning in life, then the kind of meaning judgment that it's most important to illuminate is our *personal* meaning judgments of *things in life* rather than our *impersonal* meaning judgments of *individual lives*.<sup>17</sup> The

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<sup>16</sup> We certainly do become attached to ideas of ourselves, so that we feel more connected when we can see ourselves fulfilling one storyline rather than another. In fact, I think this helps to account for our great interest in narrative when we're judging the meaning of lives. But I still want to emphasize the difference between *internally* assessing how these storylines affect our experience of meaning in life and *externally* assessing how choice-worthy a life seems to be because of its storyline.

<sup>17</sup> Another problem is that judging individual lives meaningful and meaningless carries with it an implication about the inherent value of those lives. To make the statement that someone's life is meaningless seems to imply that this life doesn't or shouldn't matter to anyone. Externalist theorists surely don't intend this implication, but I think it is a symptom of the awkwardness of aiming meaning judgments at lives, because meaning judgments are ultimately about whether something matters.

externalist will likely have a nagging worry about this that I would like to address in what follows. The worry is that, if we're being guided toward a meaningful life by subjective judgments about what enables an experience of meaning while bracketing an external standpoint, does that mean that it's impossible to be wrong about what is meaningful? Don't we need to stay in touch with an external standpoint in order to put a check on wayward subjective judgments? My response is that our judgments about what is deeply personally meaningful can in fact be flawed, and also that such flaws can be addressed through greater objectivity. But the relevant kind of objectivity does not ignore the internal standpoint, but must instead keep one eye on one's internal experience of connection in order to decide whether things judged meaningful are actually providing the degree of connection they are thought to provide.

#### 4. Flawed Meaning Judgments

To say that meaning in life is based upon a subjective state is not the same as saying that the subject decides what is meaningful by making a meaning judgment, although these two kinds of subjectivism can be easily conflated. Taylor represents the first but not the second kind of subjectivism. He says that Sisyphus' life is meaningful if Sisyphus desires to do what he is doing. Now, if Sisyphus himself were to learn of Taylor's theory and disagree with it, Taylor would have to conclude that Sisyphus is wrong about his own life. That is, imagine that Sisyphus does indeed desire rolling a boulder up a hill continually forever, but also imagine that Sisyphus does *not* think that desiring to do this makes his life meaningful. A subjectivist of the sort who leaves it up to the subject to decide would have to conclude that desiring to roll boulders up a hill does *not* make Sisyphus' life meaningful, simply because Sisyphus does not think it does. But this conflicts with Taylor's subjectivist theory, so Taylor must be a subjectivist of a different sort.

To keep the two kinds of subjectivism distinct, we could call Taylor's theory a *subjective state* theory and the other a *subjective authority* theory.<sup>18</sup> When I say

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<sup>18</sup> At the same conference that I presented ideas from this paper, Landau presented a paper (forthcoming) bringing attention to a similar distinction using different terminology, more broadly distinguishing between subjectivism/objectivism and internalism/externalism binaries. Landau helpfully points out how the conflation of subjectivism (what I call "subjective authority" theory) and objective internalism (what I call "subjective state" theory) shows up in the work of numerous theorists. However, it should be noted that Landau uses the term "externalism" in a different (though

that we find things meaningful because they enable a sense of connection, this is also a subjective state rather than a subjective authority theory. In some sense, we may decide what we become attached to in life, but that is not the same as saying that we decide whether our attachments give us an experience of meaning in life.<sup>19</sup>

But, as far as subjective states go, I've presented my view that a sense of connection is a better explanation for our experience of meaning than desire, and in fact, treating as meaningful everything you could possibly desire would lead to flawed meaning judgments. As I noted earlier (section 3.2), it's understandable that we might look to a state of desire as the kind of subjective state that gives life meaning, because desire puts us in pursuit of something. As long as we're in pursuit of something, our life is filled with mission, as Taylor puts it (130), so we aren't as liable to wonder what we should be doing, because we are already up to something. But then we also have experiences of empty desires, that is, desires that leave us feeling empty while we pursue or even acquire what we desire. In that case, the problem with the desire is that it doesn't really lead us to a sense of connection, which would involve overcoming states of disconnection like emptiness.

So, judgments based on desire can be flawed with respect to personal meaning if the desire in question doesn't enable a sense of connection. When it comes to experiencing meaning, I think this is the central flaw to be avoided, because personal meaning is the kind of meaning that we experience. Externalist critics of desire theory have identified other flaws as well, but another critique I'd like to make of externalists is that the flaws with desire theory that they identify are not flaws with respect to personal meaning *per se*. To see what I mean and why it's important, let's consider Wolf's view that a desire to engage in either trivial or immoral activities cannot contribute meaning to life.

#### **4.1 Of Trivial and Immoral Activities**

According to Wolf, trivial activities, like counting blades of grass or doing crossword puzzles, fail to be activities important enough to meet the threshold of sufficient value that her hybrid theory requires. (1997, 207; 2010, 18-23) Immoral

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certainly well-motivated) way, and that he also pursues the life-targeting theoretical approach to meaning in life that I critiqued in the previous section (3.3). I thank an anonymous reviewer for bringing the publication to my attention.

<sup>19</sup> Also, not all attachments are equally conducive to an experience of connection, a point to which I will return in section 4.2.

activities, like murder or pedophilia (2010, 60), also fail the objective value test (and may even represent negative value<sup>20</sup>), so desire theory fails as a theory of meaning in life, since, according to desire theory, desire to do anything whatsoever can make life meaningful. If an activity is undoubtedly trivial or immoral (though I think it is harder to agree on cases of trivial activity, as I will explain), then it makes sense to identify a flaw in the judgment that a trivial or immoral activity is objectively valuable. However, this isn't the same as showing that the judgments are flawed *with respect to personal meaning*, that is, the kind of meaning that we experience. Rather, such judgments are flawed with respect to certain kinds of value or importance that serve as the building blocks for impersonal meaning. Personal meaning, by contrast, consists entirely in the value of a subjective state of connection, and I would suggest that meaning is more clearly its *own* value in the context of the experience of personal meaning.

To put it another way, an externalist theory of meaning like Wolf's, which asserts an objective value requirement, is actually trading in other kinds of value and obscuring the special value of personal meaning in the process. If so, this leaves open the possibility that, while a judgment that trivial or immoral activities are meaningful may be flawed with respect to other values, such a judgment actually may still not be flawed with respect to personal meaning. The connection account for what makes something personally meaningful can help to clarify things in this regard, which is what I will pursue next. I will conclude that it's difficult to identify a category of trivial activities that always fails with respect to personal meaning, though there might be some foundation for the common view that immoral activities fail in this way.

When it comes to trivial activities, it seems rather clear that many of the activities that show up on an externalist's list of trivia can actually be very meaningful if meaningfulness is understood as something's capacity to enable a sense of connection. For example, crossword puzzles can help us to focus our attention and regain orientation in the midst of an otherwise complex and confusing day. Wolf says<sup>21</sup> that aerobics are a trivial activity that can't make life meaningful, but physical exercises and mindfulness practices can bring us back to ourselves and encourage a sense of clarity and balance. Wolf says that eating chocolate can't make life meaningful, but tasty treats like chocolate or pie, if

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<sup>20</sup> At least Landau makes the suggestion that there is such a thing as less than zero meaningfulness that can result from immorality (2011, 317).

<sup>21</sup> The examples discussed in this paragraph are discussed by Wolf at (1997, 207).

indulged at the right time and not taken to excess, can bring a meal to completion or wake up the senses, opening us up to joy at times when we've been burdened by too much drudgery. It is often the little things or the simple pleasures that bring us back to ourselves and reconnect us with self, the world and others. This is why it's so problematic to say that trivial things don't make life meaningful. If we're seeking an experience of meaning in life, the best advice should not be to sideline the little things. Advice on meaningful living shouldn't privilege what appears important from an external standpoint. Too much emphasis on this point of view may well distance us from ourselves and produce disconnection. Also, whenever so-called "trivial" things enable connection, they are then important rather than trivial, because it is very important to feel connected.

As for immoral activities, my assessment is a bit more tentative. For those who have a conscience – that is, a capacity for guilt, shame, remorse, and regret – any seriously immoral pursuits will certainly be haunting, leading to a sense of alienation from the moral community, or a sense of disconnection. Actions that are most clearly immoral are those that violate someone else, which directly undermines one's connection with others, at least those others who are violated. So if a sense of connection is at its optimum when we feel connected to self, world and *others*, then each time we compromise a connection to someone else by acting immorally, we reduce our capacity for connectedness. And it is also largely true that connection to self *depends upon* connection to others. Being in touch with myself depends in complex ways on how I see myself in relation to others and how my inclinations are shaped based upon the way that I relate to others. At the same time, it is certainly humanly possible to be cruel to one individual or group while maintaining a bond with another, but as a rule of thumb, it doesn't seem that immorality toward others can be recommended as a pathway toward the kind of meaning we derive from connection.<sup>22</sup>

My critical point is that, if an experience of meaning is thought to depend on

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<sup>22</sup> Note that this way of approaching the question of the relation between meaning and immorality remains open to intuitions on both sides of the debate, both those who think immorality is consistent with meaningful living (including Edwards and John Kekes, 2000), and those who think it is not (including Wolf, Metz, and Landau). There's not space to pursue this topic further here, but for those who think that immorality can give one just as much of an experience of meaning in life as morality, I would suggest this little thought experiment. If someone is getting connection from membership to a hate group, that means that this sense of connection is dependent upon a sense of disconnection from the out-group. What if this person switched to a universal love group? I think the subject's overall experience of connection would improve. I thank Michael Hauskeller and Michael Woodruff for pressing me to say more about this point.

morality in some way, as some theorists suppose, then we should figure out what that dependency consists in, rather than simply building morality into the analysis of meaning based on its being a source of objective value. If it's true that immorality towards others undermines a sense of connection, then this would give the right kind of explanation for why experiencing meaning in life is heavily dependent on being moral.

## 4.2 Of Judgments Flawed with Respect to Meaning

Subjectivist theories invite skepticism for seeming to give the subject too much authority in deciding what is and isn't meaningful, but I think it's clear that someone can believe that something provides a sense of connection when this is not the case. I suggest that personal meaning judgments are adequate when one judges something to be meaningful just to the extent that it provides connection, where the most deeply meaningful things are the ones that provide the most enduring connection. By contrast, personal meaning judgments are inadequate or flawed when something provides less connection than it was judged to provide.

If one judges chocolate to be meaningful for the occasion but not so much as one's deepest anchor in life, then the meaning judgment is adequate because the treat isn't expected to be more meaningful than it is. Personal meaning judgments often go wrong when what was expected to provide lasting connection does not sustain that sense of connection for very long. This a common problem with consumeristic materialism. An advertisement suggests to you that the purchase of a car, an outfit, or a trip to an exotic location will give you a newfound sense of wholeness or completion. While the purchase of the product may provide an initial thrill and also a distraction from your sense of disconnection owing to your absorption in the actions taken to acquire and consume the commodity, it is common that the sense of disconnection creeps back in despite your continued pursuit or ownership of the fetishized consumer good.<sup>23</sup> If a purchase is made for the sake of deep personal meaning, but the purchase does not provide any lasting

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<sup>23</sup> Bringing out this kind of problem, a recent *Saturday Night Live* commercial spoof featuring Adam Sandler ("Romano Tours," 2019, Season 44, Episode 19) reminds customers that a trip to Italy will not necessarily overcome the problem of disconnection: "here at Romano Tours, we always remind our customers: if you're sad now, you might still feel sad there. ... remember, you are still going to be you on vacation. If you are sad where you are, and then you get on a plane to Italy, you in Italy will be the same sad you from before, just in a new place. ... And please, if you and your partner are having trouble connecting, we guarantee our tour will not help. If you don't want to touch each other at home, be reminded, in Italy you will have those same bodies and thoughts."

sense of connection, then this personal meaning judgment is flawed with respect to personal meaning. This helps to make clear that it is not the case that you decide what is personally meaningful just by making the judgment that it is.

The most deeply meaningful things will be those that support your sense of connection over longer periods of time. This is why close relationships are among the best examples, but only if these relationships are not toxic. A toxic relationship is one in which there is some kind of abuse or neglect. One might think that it's important to stay in the relationship because it provides some sort of stability or because of what it does for one's identity; for instance, one may feel the need to be socially recognized as being in a romantic relationship with a certain sort of person. Stability and identity are part of the network of factors that are important to feeling a sense of connection, so concern for stability and identity would count as reasons of personal meaning. But it would be flawed to view a toxic relationship as meaningful if being in the relationship is actually undermining one's sense of connection because of the abuse or neglect.

To illustrate another way in which something chosen for the sake of connection can turn out to be problematic in that regard, consider social media, like Facebook, Instagram or Twitter. In one way, social media does enable us to be more involved in each others' lives even when we are physically distant. But use of social media also produces problems of addiction, isolation and vulnerability to social overexposure or to the invasion of one's privacy, all of which can undermine one's sense of connection. One of the largest problems, at least among the youth, is FOMO, or the "fear of missing out" on the prestigious and exciting things that others present themselves as doing, which can produce the comparative judgment that one's own life is inadequate.<sup>24</sup> This socially hypercomparative attitude inspired by the online social media environment is a source of anxiety that undermines a sense of connection.

Incidentally, avoiding excess social anxiety is yet another reason to temper comparative externalist meaning judgments (like those discussed in section 3.1) with personal meaning judgments. Personal meaning judgments don't compare individuals' lives as being better or worse than one another, but instead these judgments identify those things in life that provide an experience of connection

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<sup>24</sup> This and other problems with social media are discussed by Caroline Miller in "Does Social Media Cause Depression?: How heavy Instagram and Facebook use may be affecting kids negatively" at Child Mind Institute ([childmind.org](http://childmind.org)).

for the one making the judgment.<sup>25</sup> Being more mindful of making well-founded personal meaning judgments can help to counteract disconnection that results from too much concern that others see one's life as meaningful from an external standpoint.

In the case of social media, what we need to acknowledge is that this online environment can be good and bad for our sense of connection in different ways. The strengths of the pros and cons with respect to one's experience of meaning in life will depend upon one's individual psychology so that no precise universal judgment can be made about the effect of social media on our sense of connectedness. It is not a weakness of a theory of meaning judgments to acknowledge this variability. It is just the reality of the ineliminable subjective role played by individual psychology in the search for meaning.<sup>26</sup>

## 5. Conclusion

I hope to have shown that a standard of objectivity can be applied to personal meaning judgments that track a subjective state of connection. While externalism's form of objectivity imposes a standard of objective value arrived at from a third person standpoint, objectivity about personal meaning judgments must determine from a first person standpoint whether a subject can really be said to be in a subjective state of connection to the degree anticipated by the personal meaning judgment. It is important to review our attachments in life in this way,

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<sup>25</sup> Landau also stresses the need to relax comparative (or what he calls "competitive") attitudes for the sake of meaning in life (2017, 44-48).

<sup>26</sup> I believe there is much more to explore on the topic of personal meaning judgments and how they can be flawed, which will have to be left to future discussion. I'm emphasizing the experiential side of having a sense of connection, but, to explore the metaphor further, to feel connected is also to feel in touch with something real, whether this is connection with the real world or a real situation, or connection with real others as they honestly or authentically are, or connection with one's true self in some sense or other. This suggests that an experience of connection is importantly dependent on additional factors beyond the experience that can be external (others, world) or internal (self). Nonetheless, I still take the subjective experience of connection itself to be what drives our judgment that something in life is meaningful, and this is also the important kind of experience that we seek when we seek an experience of personal meaning in life. In the paper, I've emphasized a kind of objectivity that pays attention to how well things in life reliably produce an experience of connection, but another form of objectivity is sensitive to the reality or authenticity of that with which we are connected. Extreme examples to consider are (a) experiencing connection to things within a virtual reality or (b) believing in and experiencing connection with a deity that may not exist. But, for those exploring this question, I think that one thing to keep in mind is that there may be ways of believing or make-believing in things which aren't real externally that do allow one to really connect with oneself internally, so I think there are some complex issues to sift through here.

using the internal standpoint to determine what is truly meaningful for me, in order to assess whether our attachments are allowing for as much meaning in life as we hope to experience.<sup>27</sup>

But I should add that I don't think there's any sure way to maintain a strong sense of connection without fail. What was meaningful to me in the past may not be meaningful in the future. To an extent, meaning is a moving target, because life's playing field of self, world and others is continually changing (again, it's more like a dance). For this reason, the search for meaning requires continual openness to discovery and experimentation, and it is probably best to view occasional experiences of disconnection – or dark nights of the soul – as part of a natural cycle of growth and change that we must accept and learn to manage.

Also, while I've said that our experience of connection involves attachment to things, a more enduring sense of connection is also greatly aided by the cultivation of non-attachment, or the ability to let things go, so that we do not lose all sense of meaning in life when faced with loss of attachments. As I suggested earlier, a connection with self may well be the more important aspect of our overall sense of connectedness, and connection with self can also benefit from an ability to let go.

At times, it may be important to let go of certain ideas of who one is if these ideas don't represent who one needs to be in order to experience connection. Likewise, meaningful living also requires balancing the social pressure to “be somebody” with the need for connection that one has in one's present circumstance. I haven't argued that we should abandon external or impersonal meaning judgments altogether, but that this kind of meaning judgment should not eclipse personal meaning judgments in our search for meaning in life.<sup>28</sup>

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<sup>27</sup> My emphasis in this paper on distinguishing internal and external standpoints on meaning in life owes a great deal to Thomas Nagel's work on meaning exemplified in Ch. XI of *The View from Nowhere* (1986). I look at how this distinction in standpoints affects consideration of the question whether life can be meaningful without free will in (Chastain 2019), where I present additional critique of Wolf's approach to meaning in life.

<sup>28</sup> I am grateful for helpful comments from an anonymous reviewer, as well as for audience comments on a presentation based on this paper delivered at the Third International Conference on Philosophy and Meaning in Life, hosted online at the University of Birmingham, UK, in July 2020. In addition to those acknowledged in previous footnotes, I also thank Jason Berntsen, Marilyn Chastain, Everett Fulmer and Leonard Kahn for helpful feedback on earlier versions of this paper.

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## Causation and the Narrative Meaning of Life

Mirela Oliva\*

### Abstract

This paper argues that causation is the core of the narrative meaning of life. In the first part, I show that the narrative meaning of life does not stop at narrative identity and includes causal relations beyond personal agency. In the second part, I employ Aristotle's definition of plot in the *Poetics* as the compass for the narrative meaning of life. I show that all requirements of a plot pertain to causal relations. In the third part, I discuss the value of narrative causal relations. Here I challenge the instrumentalist accounts that deny any intrinsic value to narrative causal relations and see them as instrumental to other sorts of meaning (e.g., the ethical). I finally defend the ontological value of narrative causation, which inheres in the structure of causal relations.

The search for the meaning of life entails questions about life's cosmic significance, the realization of objective values or the satisfaction of desires, and the shape of life stories. The first two types of questions received extensive treatment in the scholarship, whereas the third has come into the foreground only recently (Seachris, Velleman, Fischer, De Bres, Brännmark, Rosati). Although the conception of narrative goes back to Aristotle, clarity is still needed about what is the narrative meaning of life. This paper argues that causation is the core of the narrative meaning of life. I offer a dispositionalist account of narrative causation, in which causation is a manifestation of powers intrinsic to a cause. In the first part, I show that the narrative meaning of life does not stop at narrative identity and includes causal relations beyond personal agency. In the dispositionalist account of narrative causation, both cause and effect matter, not only the effect of an event on our lives. In the second part, I employ Aristotle's definition of plot in the *Poetics* as the compass for the narrative meaning of life. I show that all requirements of a plot pertain to causal relations. In the third part, I discuss the value of narrative causal relations. Here I challenge the instrumentalist accounts that deny any intrinsic value to narrative causal relations and see them as instrumental to other sorts of meaning (e.g., the ethical). I finally defend the ontological value of narrative causation, which inheres in the structure of causal relations.

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\* Associate Professor, Rudman Chair of Philosophy, Philosophy Department, University of St. Thomas  
3800 Montrose Blvd. Houston, TX 77006, USA. olivam[a]stthom.edu

## 1. Causation and narrative meaning

Narrative meaning has its place within the quest for the meaning of life. Psychological and anthropological studies have revealed that a vast majority of people recount their lives in narrative terms.<sup>1</sup> Fields such as psychotherapy or law frequently employ narrative. Some scholars like Galen Strawson<sup>2</sup> have denied the ubiquity of narrative in human lives, arguing that many people do not see their lives in narrative terms. Furthermore, not only are we not narrative but neither should we be. The normative claim that a meaningful life must contain narrative meaning is wrong in Strawson's eyes. I will not discuss the psychological and the normative thesis about narrative or address the objections against them. I will assume both theses: that we are thinking in narrative terms and that a meaningful life needs narrative meaning. My focus will be on the nature of the narrative meaning of life. This focus will also circumvent the problem of whole-life or part-life narrative meaning. Whether our entire life is a complete story with an overarching narrative meaning or just a cluster of smaller stories that do not compose a total narrative<sup>3</sup> will not be addressed here.

The narrative is the unfolding of events and states of affairs around a unified subject (one or more persons), exhibiting a complex structure in which events relate to each other. Narrative meaning is the significance of this development in terms of (1) internal structure and (2) value. There are cases of events happening to a subject without constituting a narrative: "Today Helen woke up at 7, took breakfast, and then went to the University." In terms of structure, these events have a temporal order. However, the events do not connect through strong relations. Taking breakfast does not directly depend on her waking up, although she could not have breakfast without waking up. In terms of value, this development does not indicate any event or action that might load Helen's life with added value. If the three events are habitual, they might yield value as a pattern reflecting an existential or moral order. However, to obtain narrative

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<sup>1</sup> Dan P. McAdams and Erika Manczak, "Personality and the Life Story", in M. Mikulincer and P.R. Shaver (ed.), *APA Handbook of Personality and Social Psychology*, vol. 4: *Personality Processes and Individual Differences* (American Psychological Association, 2015) 425-446.

<sup>2</sup> Galen Strawson, "Against Narrativity", in *Real Materialism: and Other Essays* (Oxford University Press, 2008).

<sup>3</sup> For an overview of the part-life/whole-life debate, see Thaddeus Metz, *Meaning in Life: An Analytic Study* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2013) 37-58.

meaning, we need further conditions that strengthen the internal structure of the development of events and increase their value. There must be a relation between events, and their significance must make a difference in our lives. Causal relations meet both conditions: causation is the cement that unites events and state of affairs, and the element that generates new value through change. In the second condition, causation constitutes value bearers like achievements or divine interventions, as we will see in the last section.

The narrative meaning of life includes the issue of narrative identity, but it is more than that. In narrative identity, what matters is personal identity not external factors like natural events, social events, or personal relations. The latter are merely a sort of medium in which identity takes shape. In the case of narrative meaning in life, the external factors take front seat. When reading a person's autobiography, the historical details of her situation are of tantamount importance, and the persons who partake in her life are not just figures of accompaniment. For instance, Viktor Frankl starts his memoir *Recollections* with his mother's depiction: her family genealogy, her kindness, her piety, and her sense of humor.<sup>4</sup>

If we consider this impact in terms of causation, we see that not only the effect matters, as in the narrative identity, but also the cause. The causal process in its integrity constitutes narrative meaning in life. The nature and efficacy of the cause have a share in the narrative meaning. The equal weight of cause and effect is also visible in some uses of the term "meaning" in everyday language. As Robert Nozick observes, we often use "meaning" to signify an external causal relationship.<sup>5</sup> In this use, we either indicate the cause and then the effect, or we start from the effect and then go back to the cause. In the first case, if we say, "The refusal to free prisoners means war", the refusal to free prisoners is the cause of war. In the second case, if we say "Smoke means fire", the smoke is the effect of fire. In both cases, "meaning" brings up both cause and effect. A dispositionalist account of causation can best handle this issue because it explains causation through the powers that enable a cause to produce a particular effect. The properties of the cause are crucial here.

Nevertheless, even if they accept narrative's causal nature, some scholars still circumscribe the narrative meaning of life to personal agency. In John Martin

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<sup>4</sup> Viktor Frankl, *Recollections: An Autobiography*, transl. Joseph Fabry and Judith Fabry (Cambridge: Basic Books, 2000) 19.

<sup>5</sup> Robert Nozick, *Philosophical Explanations* (Cambridge: Belknap Press of Harvard University Press) 574.

Fischer's view, the narrative meaning of life is a function of our self-expression, akin to artistic creativity. Fischer admits that causal relationships between life events constitute the structure of a narrative. But it is our free-will which endows them with meaning. Meaning has less to do with the intrinsic properties of causes and effects and more with the agent's interpretation.<sup>6</sup> Fischer distinguishes between narrative explanation, which unveils the structural relationships between life events, and narrative evaluation, which endows these relationships with meaning. Narrative meaning is, ultimately, the self-expression of the agent who writes a sentence in her life narrative every time she acts, or she interprets her past in accord with her purposes. Fischer does not offer a full-blown account of the relation between acting and interpreting. He rejects total control over the unfolding story of the universe, attributed to metaphysical megalomania. But his dismissal of the inherent properties of causes and effects to the benefit of meaning-giving self-expression seems to rob the life narrative of its integrity. Narrative meaning emerges from the inherent qualities of the causes and effects experienced by the narrating agent, not only from her subjective perspective.

Another view that confines narrative meaning to the personal agency is MacIntyre's teleology of virtue. In this view, life narrative is shaped by the causal relationships between our intentions and actions. The narrative of life is a teleological order of the personal agency. It unfolds through various intentions that are causally related to each other and embedded in a historical and social setting: "In doing this, in determining what causal efficacy the agent's intentions had in one or more directions, and how his short-term intentions succeeded or failed to be constitutive of long-term intentions, we ourselves write a further part of these histories."<sup>7</sup> Unlike Fischer, MacIntyre thinks that the nature of the cause and its efficacy matter. But he limits causal relationships to the subject's intentions, disregarding causes that pertain to non-subjective entities or events.

Most people account for their life beyond their agency, even if they value social relations or external events in different degrees. The exceptions to this general inclination are somewhat pathological. Psychological studies have indeed

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<sup>6</sup> John Martin Fischer, *Our Stories: Essays on Life, Death, and Free Will* (Oxford University Press, 2009) 152. Similarly, J. David Velleman thinks that the order of narrative lies not in how things happen but how things feel. See J. David Velleman, "Narrative Explanation", in *The Philosophical Review*, Vol. 112, No.1, 2003, 19; Gregory Currie, "Narrative Representation of Causes", in *The Journal of Aesthetics and Art Criticism*, Volume 64, No. 3, 2006, 309-316.

<sup>7</sup> Alasdair MacIntyre, *After Virtue: A Study in Moral Theory* (Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press, 2007) 208.

revealed that life stories centered exclusively on personal agency might indicate narcissism.<sup>8</sup> Narrative meaning includes, on the contrary, elements that are outside a protagonist's control.

## 2. Plot and dispositional causation in Aristotle

Aristotle's definition of the plot in *Poetics* best captures this inclusiveness of narrative meaning. For Aristotle, causation is the core of a plot's unity and qualitative changes that push a protagonist's life in a new direction. He focuses primarily on the plot of tragedies but mentions that the epic plot has a similar structure. The plot is the organization of events. It is an imitation of actions and life, not of persons, because it has to do with the quest for happiness. Happiness, he says, is an activity, not a quality: "The point is action, not character; it is their moral status that gives people the character they have, but it is their actions that make them happy or unhappy."<sup>9</sup> While the *Nicomachean Ethics* sees happiness mainly in terms of a stable character expressed in virtuous actions, the *Poetics* makes room for events outside an agent's control, impacting his happiness.<sup>10</sup> Here, the structure of events takes precedence over character. This structure has several characteristics: completeness, magnitude, unity, determinate structure, and universality. These characteristics concern relations between events and the significance of these relations for the protagonist's happiness. All of them, I believe, boil down to causation.

Before discussing them, we should first clarify what causation is for Aristotle. He considers causation to be the engine of change (*metabolé*). Causation responds, indeed, to the question of why something is the way it is, why it came to be, why it changed, or why it ceased to be.<sup>11</sup> Causation is a relation of dependence: B depends on A for its change. This dependence is not mere regularity, nor the object of natural laws, nor a counterfactual condition verified in possible worlds. Aristotle understands causation as deeply entrenched in the fabric of things. He attributes causation to the powers (*dunamai*) that things have to cause certain

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<sup>8</sup> Dan McAdams, *The Redemptive Self: Stories Americans Live By* (Oxford University Press, 2013) 69.

<sup>9</sup> Aristotle, *Poetics*, transl. Anthony Kenny (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2013) 1450a, 24.

<sup>10</sup> See Martha Nussbaum, *The Fragility of Goodness: Luck and Ethics in Greek Tragedy and Philosophy* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2001); Silvia Carli, "The Love Affair between Philosophy and Poetry: Aristotle's *Poetics* and Narrative Identity", in *The Southern Journal of Philosophy*, Volume 53, Issue 2, 2015, 151-177.

<sup>11</sup> Aristotle, *Physics* 194b, transl. Robin Waterfield (Oxford University Press, 2008) 39.

effects. Such powers are not magical forces but pertain simply to the intrinsic properties of things. For instance, through its property of being hot, fire can warm up a room. Hotness disposes fire to cause the warming of the room. This kind of view is nowadays called dispositionalism. The concept of power (or disposition) rests on a distinction Aristotle makes between potentiality (*dunamis*) and actuality (*entelecheia*). A block of stone has the potential to become a statue; this potential is actualized by the sculptor when he models the stone into a particular form. Causation is thus a process of the actualization of potentialities.<sup>12</sup> The likelihood of this actualization brings Aristotle to a distinction between necessary causes, which always obtain their effect, probable causes that usually (most of the time) obtain their effect, and chance, namely causes that only extremely rarely obtain their effect. The latter two are contingent.<sup>13</sup> In his definition of the plot, Aristotle employs mainly necessity and probability.

Aristotle's dispositionalism differs from other accounts developed after him in its appeal to the intrinsic properties and the powers of things.<sup>14</sup> The Humean account based on regularity and the counterfactual account based on possible worlds tackle causation "from outside", without considering what brings a thing to cause something. They establish a connection between cause and effect from an external perspective. For instance, to determine whether A is a cause of B, a counterfactualist would inquire if B could exist or happen without A in another possible world. But this hypothetical scenario cannot provide a full explanation about why A causes B. In the case of narrative causation, neither the Humean nor the counterfactual account have adequate tools to capture the relations between life events. First, Humean regularity obtains little signification. The mere connection between events yields insufficient life significance. I can observe that the birth of my child has changed my life, but that is not enough. I would still need to grasp the properties of the birth event and the characteristics of its effect on me. Second, counterfactualists seem to go a bit further than Humeans in that they establish a stronger connection between causes and effects. We often wonder how our life would have been if something had not happened, if we had made a

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<sup>12</sup> See also Thomas M. Tuozzo, "Aristotle and the Discovery of Efficient Causation", in Tad M. Schmaltz (ed.), *Efficient Causation: A History* (Oxford University Press, 2014) 29.

<sup>13</sup> Aristotle, *Physics*, 196b10, 44.

<sup>14</sup> Stephen Mumford and Rani Lill Anjum discuss in detail the advantages of dispositionalism over other accounts of causation in their book *Getting Causes from Powers* (Oxford University Press, 2011). They challenge, though, the application of dispositionalism to necessity and chance in *What Tends to Be: The Philosophy of Dispositional Modality* (Routledge, 2018) 22-23.

different decision, or if we had not met our soul mates. Nevertheless, this kind of counterfactual reasoning is more an exercise of imagination that involves regret, projection, etc. It does not fully assess the impact that an event had on our life. Narrative entails a robust display of the characteristics of this impact including the properties of causes and effects involved in it.

Aristotle's definition of the plot untangles the complex manner in which events impact a person's life. First, a plot is a whole unified by a beginning, a middle, and an end. This quality is not merely a temporal order; it concerns how the beginning, middle, and end relate to other events and with each other. Aristotle uses here the causal terms of necessity and probability. A beginning is a sort of originating event. It does not necessarily follow from any other event but stands as the origin of subsequent events, which happen naturally after it, through an intelligible, causal connection. The end occurs necessarily or usually (with probability) after another event but is not followed by anything else. The middle follows causally from preceding events and then it produces its own effect(s). In other words: the beginning is what causes without being caused, the middle is what causes after being caused, and the end is caused without further causing. The causation that makes up this characteristic and the other four entails two types of causes: necessary and probable. Stephen Halliwell indicates that these are Aristotle's criteria of "what makes 'natural' sense within human lives."<sup>15</sup> As we will see later, chance can be part of a plot, too, on one condition.

One could object to applying this tripartite structure to the narrative meaning of life. There are phenomena in our lives, so the objection goes, in which it is not easy to pinpoint the beginning, middle, and end.<sup>16</sup> For instance, in a friendship, it is sometimes difficult to point to the exact moment when it started: is it the day when we first met that person, or the day we first organized something together, or the moment in which we confessed to each other our life's secrets? Nonetheless, it is possible to differentiate between the part of one's life when this friendship did not exist and the part in which this friendship has developed. Our gratitude to our friends often rests on the difference they made in our lives compared to the time before the friendship started. The awareness of a beginning is expressed in the famous line from the movie *Casablanca*, when Rick tells Captain Louis:

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<sup>15</sup> Stephen Halliwell, Footnote 71 to Aristotle, *Poetics*, transl. Stephen Halliwell (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1995) 57. See also Dorothea Frede, "Necessity, Chance, and "What Happens for the Most Part" in Aristotle's *Poetics*", in Amélie Rorty (ed.), *Essays on Aristotle's Poetics* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1992).

<sup>16</sup> See Alasdair MacIntyre, *After Virtue*, 212.

“Louis, I think this is the beginning of a beautiful friendship.”

The current accounts of the narrative meaning of life especially emphasize the end. Joshua Seachris considers the end of the story as the most important moment in the sequence.<sup>17</sup> He shows that the end has a proleptic power because it frames the entire story. The way our lives end qualifies the preceding parts of our lives and guides the normative appraisal of life narrative as a whole. Similarly, F.M. Kamm thinks that a progressive narrative structure is better than a decline, even if the overall amount of goods and bads is the same in both structures.<sup>18</sup> How a life ends is more important than how it begins, and it is better to have a good end (and a bad beginning) than having a good beginning (and a bad end).

Second, a plot must have an adequate magnitude. It must be sufficiently long to convey a significant life change or reversal of fortune (*metabasis*) from good to bad fortune or from bad to good fortune. This change must be the outcome of a sequence of events related to each other through necessity or probability. The plot’s aesthetic value emerges from a combination of its internal order and structure with the intensity of life changes. In this sense, magnitude is the crucial characteristic that gathers the causal configuration of the plot and the ethical and existential significance of narrated events. This condition is important for the narrative meaning of life because it postulates the selection of causal relations based on their significance in our lives. I will discuss this selectivity in part 3.

Third, the plot needs unity and a determinate structure. Although a circumscribed protagonist (one or several characters) is necessary for a plot, the protagonist does not ensure unity. The reason is that a large number of events happen to a person, but not all of them constitute unity. Similarly, a protagonist performs many actions, but they do not sum up into a single action. For instance, in the *Odyssey*, Homer excluded events that lacked causal connections, like Odysseus’ wounding on Parnassus or his feigned madness. Thus, the unity of the plot emerges from causal connections. The absence of causal relations undermines the narrative meaning. “There is a great difference between something happening after certain events and happening because of those events.”<sup>19</sup> Causal connections also specify the plot so that if one removes and relocates a part of the connection, the overall meaning suffers. The plot has a determinate structure

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<sup>17</sup> Joshua Seachris, “The Meaning of Life as Narrative: A New Proposal for Interpreting Philosophy’s “Primary” Question”, in *Philo*, Volume 12, Issue 1, 2009, 5-23.

<sup>18</sup> F.M. Kamm, “Rescuing Ivan Illych: How We Live and How We Die”, in *Ethics*, Vol. 113, No.2, 2003, 222. I thank one anonymous reviewer for calling my attention to Kamm’s account.

<sup>19</sup> Aristotle, *Poetics*, 1452a20, 29.

given by order of cause and effect. If the cause is removed, the effect becomes unintelligible. We would not be able to fully understand all the properties of the effect and its origin. If the effect is removed, the cause becomes insignificant because it would have no impact on the protagonist's life.

Finally, the plot needs universality. Aristotle understands the universality of narrative as intelligibility granted by necessity or probability.<sup>20</sup> Chance does not contribute to universality because it can be hardly known.<sup>21</sup> Its contingency remains confined to particular, singular events that do not yield any universality (for instance, to unexpectedly find a treasure while digging to plant a tree is not a type of activity one can prepare for and in which one can exercise her virtue). The universality also entails a *telos* of the sequence of events. For this reason, chance might be accepted in a plot only insofar as it reveals a purpose. Aristotle explains this requirement by associating necessity and probability with the sentiments evoked by tragedy, namely astonishment, pity, and fear. These sentiments only arise when a reversal of fortune comes about through a consequential chain of events oriented towards a purpose: "Tragedy is an imitation not just of complete action, but of events that evoke pity and fear. These effects occur above all when things come about unexpectedly but at the same time consequentially. This will produce greater astonishment than if they come about spontaneously or by chance – for even chance events are found more astonishing when they seemed to have happened for a purpose."<sup>22</sup> Aristotle gives the example of Mity's murderer, who was killed by Mity's statue (erected after his death) falling randomly on him. The purpose at stake here is not the agent's goal, but rather the *telos* of his life. This *telos* is partially out of his control, although his random death is a punishment for his killing.

The narrative meaning of life raises a similar requirement of teleological recognition. This recognition crosses paths with other types of meaning: cosmic significance in terms of God's purpose for us and ethical meaning in terms of the quest for happiness and virtuous action. One can recognize in her life's story glimpses of the divine Providence or the consequential realization of personal aspirations. Dispositionalism helps in this case because it embeds teleology in the particular configuration of events. What these causes are, how they cause, what are their effects - all of this matters. They are not just disposable milestones

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<sup>20</sup> Aristotle, *Poetics*, 1451a35, 28.

<sup>21</sup> Dorothea Frede, "Necessity, Chance, and "What Happens for the Most Part", 204.

<sup>22</sup> Aristotle, *Poetics*, 1452a, 29.

towards a telos.

We started from the presupposition that the Aristotelian plot's causal order is the same as the order in which we recount our life stories in everyday life. Aristotle is a realist both in an aesthetic and a metaphysical sense. He sees tragedy's plot as an imitation of actions and the causal relations embedded in the narrative order as real relations. Narrative causation is not a literary trope. The narrator does not impose upon reality a type of structure that does not exist in real life. The narrative meaning of life mirrors thus the narrative meaning in Aristotle's plot.

However, among Aristotle's requirements for a plot, the exclusion of chance seems to be most problematic for life's narrative meaning. There are serendipitous events that radically transform our lives. Most of us, when telling life stories, also highlight such accidental events that happen by chance. The role of chance in Aristotle's poetics and ethics is still open to debate. Martha Nussbaum claims that luck (*tuche*) plays a significant role in Aristotle, more than we are inclined to assess based on our knowledge of Aristotle's virtue ethics. Other scholars, however, think that she uses "luck" in a broader sense than Aristotle, to include all external interferences not intended by the agent.<sup>23</sup> It would be helpful in this sense to differentiate between *tuche* (chance) and *eutuchia* (good fortune, with its opposite *dustuchia* or *atuchia*, misfortune). Stephen Halliwell warns that the two terms do not fully overlap. Aristotle sometimes speaks of *eutuchia* as the sphere of things of which chance (*tuche*) is a cause, but in other cases, he also indicates that there are goods of *eutuchia*, which are not caused by *tuche*, but by nature or human agency.<sup>24</sup>

To sum up, Aristotle places causation at the core of the narrative. Following Aristotle, we define the narrative meaning of life based on causal relations of different sorts: necessity, probability, and chance. The causal relations ground all requirements for the narrative order: (1) the framework beginning-middle-end; (2) the plot's magnitude. (3) the unity and determinate structure; and (4) the universality. Each requirement comes with its characteristics added to causation: (1) the temporal order; (2) the intensity of life changes; (3) the arrangements of distinct causal processes among each other; and (4) the purposive pattern.

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<sup>23</sup> Dorothea Frede, "Necessity, Chance, and "What Happens for the Most Part" in Aristotle's *Poetics*", 217.

<sup>24</sup> Stephen Halliwell, *Aristotle's Poetics*, (Chapel Hill: The University of North Carolina Press, 1986) 205.

Narrative meaning includes, thus, besides causation, also these characteristics, which are added to causation and configure narrative patterns.

Causation itself is nevertheless not sufficient, as it also needs to carry value and significance for one's life. Narrative meaning emerges from significant life changes, which Aristotle names reversals of fortune (*metabasis*). In tragedy, change is always for the worse, but it does not need to be so in all narratives. The question that arises here regards the relation between causation and value. Is causation instrumental to value? I'll address this issue in the next part.

### 3. Narrative causation and value

The narrative meaning of life arises from causal relations between life events and their value and significance in our lives. The problem is whether the need for added value commits us to instrumentalism about causation. I will argue that, although the ethical and cosmic significance is necessary for causation to yield full narrative meaning in life, there is also a sense in which causation has intrinsic value in our life.

A thought experiment of T.J. Mawson aptly shows the need for added value. Mawson takes the story of Sisyphus to illustrate the role of causal relations in the issue of life's meaning. He contends that the meaninglessness of Sisyphus' life also comes from the lack of causal consequences.<sup>25</sup> Gods have punished Sisyphus to carry a rock up a hill. Every time he reaches the top of the hill, the rock falls back, and Sisyphus must go back down and roll it up again. His ordeal will never end because there will be no final moment when the rock remains on top, and Sisyphus finishes his task. In Mawson's view, the cancellation of his works' effects is partly the reason we see Sisyphus' life as meaningless. But this is not the only reason. To demonstrate that a further condition is necessary, Mawson imagines an immortal person called Andy, who has the same situation as Sisyphus, except that the rock he is carrying does not fall and he manages to build up a pile of rocks which grows *ad infinitum*. Andy has more causal consequences than Sisyphus, since the rock he carries remains at the top. But would we judge his life as significant? Although we would prefer Andy's situation over Sisyphus', we would still not evaluate his life as deeply meaningful. Would we like to spend our entire life building a pile of rocks on top of a mountain? The issue here is that,

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<sup>25</sup> T.J. Mawson, *God and the Meanings of Life: What God Could and Couldn't Do to Make our Lives More Meaningful* (London: Bloomsbury, 2016) 62.

although we have cause and effect, the effect has a low value. What matters, in the end, is this value.

Mawson admits that causal relations yield meaning in life, distinct from other meaning types such as the ethical one. The existence of several sorts of meaning supports Mawson's amalgam polyvalent account of life's meaning, which proposes that there are several meanings of life. However, he sees this meaning as somehow inferior or less deep than the ethical meaning of achievement. Although desirable, it is not desired for its own sake, but as instrumental to the other types of meaning: "...having causal consequence is primarily valued by us not for its own sake. It is valued only as a necessary condition of something that we value for its own sake, having causal consequence in bringing about something significant and positively evaluable."<sup>26</sup>

Helena De Bres and Connie Rosati defend similar views. In De Bres' account of meaning in life, causal narrative relations have some value, which she pins down to two primary goods of story-telling: the good of understanding and the good of community. The good of understanding has practical value regarding human action in the world around us. Understanding causal connections between events helps us to better plan and act. Second, it has subjective value as it fulfills our desire to make sense of the world and gives us pleasure and fulfillment. Third, it has epistemic value because it reaches a cognitive achievement. The good of community regards story sharing and common patterns. We like to tell stories about our lives to others because it gives us a sense of solidarity. In our stories, we employ patterns common to our narrative and other people's narratives, thus giving us a sense of belonging and common experience. However, De Bres believes that these values are only instrumental to the narrative's main value, which has to do with depth, purpose, and superlative value. Thus she evaluates causal relations not through themselves but through the benefits that story-telling brings to a person. Ultimately, causal relations have no value in themselves but are only abstract entities. As such, their role in life's meaningfulness is purely instrumental: "In this case, and others like it, I find it counter-intuitive that the mere existence of the relation – the bare fact that these two life parts are causally connected – suffices to confer meaning on the life. Intuitively, this is because meaningfulness is a form of value, and causal relations, in contrast to projects, relationships and experiences, are abstract, bloodless entities. They may connect

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<sup>26</sup> T.J. Mawson, *God and the Meanings of Life*, 63.

events that are rich in value, but they aren't the kinds of things that have value in themselves."<sup>27</sup>

For Connie Rosati, too, the intelligibility granted by causal relations serves a higher goal, namely the feeling of being in charge of one's own life. In this sense, narrative contribution to life's meaningfulness does not reside primarily in the narrative structure of life events but the recounting of narratives. This recounting enhances one's self-awareness, confidence in her worth, and trust in planning for the future and moving forward in life. Narrative meaning in life "operates to bring about, maintain, or restore a sense of ourselves as controlling authority over our selves and our lives."<sup>28</sup> This kind of self-awareness does not exhaust all the requirements for a meaningful life. Rosati distinguishes between the meaning or significance of narrative, which concerns intelligibility, and the meaningfulness of life, commonly identified with features such as having a life purpose, connecting to something larger than oneself, and positively impacting the world.<sup>29</sup> The sense of control over one's life seems to be the intermediary link between this kind of meaningfulness and narrative intelligibility. Thus Rosati concludes that narrative causal relations do not yield value for themselves but only as they make possible the recounting of our lives.<sup>30</sup>

Rosati's and De Bres' recountist accounts capture the importance of understanding for the narrative meaning of life. Whether we can recount the story (or stories) of our lives is important for our well-being and future projects. Nonetheless, our story can only matter to us only insofar as it provides a specific pattern and adequately answers the *Why* question. Not every story contributes to well-being but only the true one. Delusional stories can be harmful. Second, life stories do not retreat into the background once we reach well-being by understanding them. Memories are proof of this permanence. We remember life stories time and again. In the remembering process, the focus remains on the narrative structure. Narrative causation seems to yield more than instrumental value.

Robert Nozick offers a more balanced account of meaning and causation. For him, causal meaning is a distinct type of meaning that contributes to the overall

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<sup>27</sup> Helena De Bres, "Narrative and Meaning in Life", in *Journal of Moral Philosophy*, Vol.15, 2018, 552.

<sup>28</sup> Connie S. Rosati, "The Story of a Life", in *Social Philosophy & Policy*, Volume 30, Issue 1-2, January 2013, 45.

<sup>29</sup> Connie S. Rosati, "The Story of a Life", 34.

<sup>30</sup> Connie S. Rosati, "The Story of a Life", 42-43.

meaningfulness of life. He distinguishes between eight modes of meaning in human life, which he retrieves in the everyday linguistic use of the term “meaning”: 1) external causal relationship; 2) external referential or semantic relation; 3) intention or purpose; 4) lesson; 5) personal significance; 6) objective meaningfulness; 7) intrinsic meaningfulness; 8) the total resultant meaning (the sum of 1-7).<sup>31</sup> Causal meaning lies at the bottom of this classification, culminating with the total resultant meaning identified with the divine Unlimited. It is hard to say whether Nozick sees this type of meaning as somehow inferior to others, as Mawson, De Bres, and Rosati do. However, although he admits the need for ethical or cosmic value to qualify causal relations fully, he seems to maintain the independent value of causal meaning. In his classification, the causal meaning is the elementary structure upon which all other meanings develop.

Causal meaning shapes the whole of life, not just parts of it. Nozick classifies three types of causal relations: causal antecedents, causal concomitants, and causal consequents. Causal antecedents precede our life and make it possible: the romantic relationship of our parents, the creative act of God. Causal concomitants are causal relations between events that happen during our lives (including, but not limited to, our intentions and actions). Causal consequences come after we die and regard our lives’ impact upon our family, the society, or even the universe. On this sort of meaning, Nozick argues, every life is meaningful because every life has causal relations. The meaning of life, in this sense, is the sum of all causal relations. This sum is not just a grab bag addition. It rather has an order that Nozick compares with widening circles: “On this reading, every life has (multiple) meaning, and if these causally connected things need not be inferable, a life will mean all of its causal antecedents and consequents and concomitants, and perhaps all of theirs as well, in ever widening circles. The meaning of a life, then, would be the whole causal nexus and flow of events; the causal nexus is meant by the life’s place in it.”<sup>32</sup> Nevertheless, causal relations by themselves do not exhaust the meaning of life because they do not capture the relative importance of events for our life. If we remain at this level, everything in the web of events becomes equally important. That, Nozick states, would diminish the relative importance of life events. More is, thus, needed in order to establish the

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<sup>31</sup> Robert Nozick, *Philosophical Explanations* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1981) 574. I have analyzed Nozick’s relational notion of meaning in detail in Mirela Oliva, “The Relational Nature of the Meaning of Life in Nozick”, in *Disputatio*, Vol.8, No. 11, 2019.

<sup>32</sup> Nozick, *Philosophical Explanations*, 575.

meaning of life. Additional value and significance must discriminate between causal relations. This determines Nozick to move to the other modes of meaning. Nozick's account seems to grant causal meaning an independent role in life's meaning, even though it needs added value. However, he does not discuss the intrinsic value of causal relations, and it is not clear whether he does indeed accept such intrinsic value.

The intrinsic value of narrative causation is visible, I think, in our quest for causal relations even after we reach values that we usually identify with the meaning of life. On the instrumental view, once we reach such values, we should lose our interest in causal connections. But this is not happening, neither in the case of cosmic meaning nor in the case of ethical meaning. First, in the case of cosmic meaning, we could settle the matter by establishing God's existence. For instance, we could employ one of the arguments for the existence of God, or we could have a revelation through a religious experience. However, our conviction or belief that our universe and our life have meaning because a benevolent God has created them does not suffice to grasp meaning fully. We still want to know how God created the universe, what type of causation is involved, why a material effect has ensued from an immaterial cause, and so on. If we experience divine revelation or intervention, we do not merely say: "God showed Himself to me, or He intervened in my life and helped me, or punished me". The details of this experience, including causal relations involved, are equally important. They are part and parcel of the experience's overall meaning. For instance, Augustine's conversion to faith starts with hearing of children singing "Take and read, take and read" while he passes by, without any connection with these children. Hearing this song pushes him to read the Bible, which he was carrying with him. In his eyes, this causal chain that includes an extraordinary coincidence points to divine intervention. His conversion would not entirely make sense without the causal relations involved in the process.

The same goes for ethical meaning. Moral actions do not have meaning only through the value obtained. Recent ethical accounts show that causation is part of the nature of achievements (Gwen Bradford) or responsibility (George Moore).<sup>33</sup> In both cases, to establish that a success is an achievement, or that a person is responsible for harming another person, we need to determine whether and how

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<sup>33</sup> Gwen Bradford, *Achievements* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2015) 64-82; Michael S. Moore, *Causation and Responsibility: An Essay in Law, Morals and Metaphysics* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2009).

the person caused the outcome. In Bradford's view, an achievement must satisfy the competent causation condition. The agent must cause the successful outcome and have justified and true beliefs about his actions causing the outcome. If the goal of one person's action obtains independently from her action, we cannot recognize it as her achievement.<sup>34</sup> For instance, Joan protests a law prohibiting overnight parking in her town by standing on her head three hours a day. At the same time, a local politician buys a new car and needs parking space, thus intervenes to abolish the law. Eventually, the law is abolished at his request. Although Joan's action was directed towards the same goal, she didn't cause the abolition of the law, and thus her action is not an achievement.

If causation is an essential part of events and actions that yield ethical or cosmic meaning, what is its value? Is it ethical, insofar as it constitutes the ethical meaning, and cosmic insofar as it constitutes cosmic meaning? Does the value of causation derive from the value of its effect? I am inclined to answer negatively. Let us take the example of a person who helps others. Catherine is a social assistant who found her purpose in life to help homeless people. The causes involved in her action have high moral value: she, as an agent, is a kind and generous person. Her final cause to help homeless people has the value of justice and generosity. The form of her action, giving clothes to homeless people, is valuable, too. But the very fact that Catherine causes homeless people's well-being is distinct from these values. Her causation's success is something different from the values of kindness, generosity, solidarity, and justice yielded by the causes involved. It is also different from the values of well-being carried by the effect: the sense of self-worth, the goodness of opportunities that arise when elementary conditions of living are met, etc. Obtaining the right effect carries a distinct kind of value. The efficacy at work in causation is different from the moral values of kindness, generosity, self-worth, and self-realization. The dispositionalist view best accounts for the success of causation. For dispositionalism, causation is a process in which the powers of the cause manifest in obtaining a certain effect, as Stephen Mumford and Rani Lill Anjum show.<sup>35</sup> The very manifestation of these powers differs from the values that the powers might yield. This manifestation has to do with the metaphysical structure of things and of their actions upon other things.

In this sense, I propose that causation has an ontological value, which arises

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<sup>34</sup> Gwen Bradford, *Achievements*, 13.

<sup>35</sup> Stephen Mumford and Rani Lill Anjum, *Getting Causes from Powers*, 8, 119.

from the very nature of causes *qua* causes, namely from the ability of one thing to influence, change or even generate another thing. I borrow the term “ontological value” from Dietrich von Hildebrand. Hildebrand distinguishes between qualitative values (such as moral values, intellectual values, aesthetic values) and ontological values.<sup>36</sup> Qualitative values are independent of their bearer, although her attitudes and actions must embody them. We speak, platonically, about kindness, generosity, truthfulness, beauty as such. Ontological values, however, inhere in their bearer. For instance, the dignity of the human person is proper to the human being as such. A person may embody or not some moral values, but she always has her dignity and never loses it. Every human being has this ontological value, no matter his moral choices or intellectual activities. Moreover, not only human beings as such but also their powers have ontological value. There is a difference between the will’s ontological value and the moral value of a good will. The first comes from its own ontological constitution. In contrast, the second comes from will’s relation to the *eidōs* of a moral value. Similarly, Hildebrand argues, matter and its power have ontological value. Thus, ontological values inhere in beings by way of their own existence, nature, and powers.

In narrative causation, the value of causal relations inheres in their metaphysical structure. It is an intrinsic value, and it is not instrumental to values that make up the ethical and cosmic meaning.<sup>37</sup> Thus, I submit, narrative causal relations have a value of their own, which renders narrative meaning a distinct kind of meaning. The ontological value of causation does not admit of degrees. While ethical values can be embodied in different degrees (one person can be more generous than another), ontological values have no degrees. One person does not have more dignity than another person. Similarly, one causal relation does not have more ontological value than another causal relation. The ontological value of the causal process through which fire warms up a room is the same as the one of the process in which Catherine helps homeless people. The ontological value explains thus Nozick’s intuition that all human lives have meaning in the causal sense.

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<sup>36</sup> Dietrich von Hildebrand, *Ethics* (Steubenville: Hildebrand Press, 2020) 139. See also Rogelio Rovira, “On the Manifold Meaning of Value According to Dietrich von Hildebrand and the Need for a Logic of the Concept of Value”, in *American Catholic Philosophical Quarterly*, Vol. 89, No.1, 2015, 123.

<sup>37</sup> See also Rani Lill Anjum and Stephen Mumford, *What Tends to Be*, 165: “...there cannot be good and bad causes.”

One could object that narrative meaning also needs some values added to causal relations (values pertaining to ethical or cosmic meaning), as we have seen earlier. When telling life stories, we select significant causal relations that carry some value, either positive or negative. Those values would make narrative causation variable in degrees. However, cosmic and ethical meanings do not constitute causal relations. They are only conditions that discriminate between causal relations. They are criteria of selection but do not ground the order of narrative meaning, as Aristotle pinned it down in his *Poetics*. It is true that most of us prefer a positive story to a negative one, a story that includes achievement to one without achievement. This does not necessarily mean that narrative causation comes in degrees, but rather that when evaluating a life, ours, or somebody else's, we cannot consider only narrative meaning. We must also ponder its cosmic and ethical meaning. Narrative meaning, nonetheless, is distinct from these sorts of meaning, and its distinct nature rests on causal relations.

There are, nevertheless, some ways in which the narrative meaning of life admits of degrees. One way is the variation in the characteristics added to causation (temporal order, intensity, arrangements, and purposive orientation). These characteristics build up diverse patterns that can differ from each other even when the overall amount of goods and bads stays the same, as we have seen earlier in Kamm's account. In this sense, independently from ethical or cosmic meaning and from the process of causation, the end might be more important than the beginning, a progressive structure might be better than a regressive structure, or one arrangement of events might be better than another one. A second way in which narrative meaning can admit of degrees has to do with the self-understanding of the person whose life is at stake. One person can understand a part of her life better than another part or experience difficulties in understanding her life narrative. These variations are independent of the intrinsic value of causation. However, in both cases, causation remains the grounding factor, and it maintains its intrinsic value.

#### **4. Conclusion**

I have shown that causation is the core of the narrative meaning of life. For this purpose, I have defended a dispositionalist account of narrative causal relations derived from Aristotle's *Poetics*. In this account, causes have powers that dispose them to cause specific effects. Causation is the manifestation of such

powers. This view, I argued, best captures the nature of the narrative meaning:

1. It gives equal importance to cause and effect, and it brings to the fore causal relations that are not limited to personal agency.
2. It substantially accounts for life changes, revealing properties of events and of the effects they have in our lives.
3. It places causation within the metaphysical structure of objects, allowing for both necessity and contingency. Narrative causation unfolds according to events' properties and interactions with other events, and not implacable laws.

My dispositionalist reading of the narrative meaning of life relies on Aristotle's requirements for the plot, which reveal the causal order of the narrative: (1) the complete structure of beginning-middle-end; (2) the magnitude of a causal process that yields life significance; (3) the unity and determinate structure of causes that act in a particular order around a unified subject; and (4) the universality that arises from the intelligibility of necessity and probability and the purpose of the causal process.

Finally, the dispositionalist view from within the causal process led us to postulate an ontological value of the narrative causation, distinct from the value carried by ethical or cosmic meaning. I argued that causal efficacy does not depend on ethical or cosmic meaning but on the causation process's metaphysical structure. While the ethical meaning and the cosmic meaning are relevant in selecting causal relations, they do not exhaust the value of narrative causation.

The narrative meaning of life is thus grounded in causal relations between life events. These causal relations have intrinsic value. Furthermore, the narrative meaning entails: (1) the embedding of causation in patterns shaped by temporal order, intensity, arrangements, and purposive orientation; and (2) values that discriminate between causal relations and pertain to ethical or cosmic meaning.<sup>38</sup>

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<sup>38</sup> I thank Catherine Barber and two anonymous reviewers for their critical comments and suggestions on this paper.

## What Is Birth Affirmation?

### The Meaning of Saying “Yes” to Having Been Born

Masahiro Morioka\*

#### Abstract

In this paper, the concept of birth affirmation is clarified in both the psychological dimension and the philosophical dimension. In the psychological dimension, we propose two interpretations: 1) Possible world interpretation: Even if I could imagine a possible world in which my ideal was realized or my grave sufferings were resolved, I would never think, at the bottom of my heart, that it would have been better to have been born to that possible world. 2) Anti-antinatalistic interpretation: I would never think, at the bottom of my heart, that it would have been better not to have been born. In the philosophical dimension, we propose the following interpretation: The comparison of betterness or worseness between the actual world and a possible world and between my having been born and my not having been born should be impossible. In the final part of this paper, the differences from other related concepts and frequently asked questions are discussed.

#### 1. Introduction

In this paper, I conduct a philosophical analysis on the concept of “birth affirmation.” Birth affirmation means the state of mind in which I can say from the bottom of my heart that I am truly glad that I have been born. In short, it means to be able to say “Yes” to my having been born. I believe that birth affirmation is one of the most promising ideas that can contribute to contemporary philosophical discussions on meaning in life. In my 2019 paper, I called this approach “an affirmation-based approach to meaning in life.”<sup>1</sup>

The concept of birth affirmation was first proposed in my Japanese paper “What is Life Studies?” published in 2007, and since then this concept has been deepened in my Japanese papers and books. In the following chapters, I illustrate a basic framework of my birth affirmation-based approach.

It was Friedrich Nietzsche who first introduced an affirmation-based approach to the philosophy of life in Western philosophy. Nietzsche writes in the Drunken Song of *Thus Spoke Zarathustra* that, “Did you ever say yes to one joy? O my friend, then you said yes to all woe too. All things are entangled, ensnared,

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\* Professor, Human Sciences, Waseda University, 2-579-15 Mikajima, Tokorozawa, Saitama, 359-1192 Japan. Email: <http://www.lifestudies.org/feedback.html>

<sup>1</sup> Morioka (2019).

enamored, —.”<sup>2</sup> This “saying yes” (*Ja-sagen* in German) to one’s life is considered a primordial concept that helped grow our idea of birth affirmation. (However, as we will see in the final part of this paper, Nietzsche’s *Ja-sagen* has a significant problem we should never overlook.) We can also find a similar concept in the philosophy of Viktor Frankl. The original title of his masterpiece *Man’s Search for Meaning* is “...trozdem Ja zum Leben sagen,” which can be translated as “*Nevertheless Say(ing) Yes to One’s Life.*” We can see Nietzsche’s *Ja-sagen* in Frankl’s book title. According to Frankl, we are being questioned by life, daily and hourly, about the meaning of our own life. We have a responsibility to answer that question, and “saying yes to one’s life” can be the most simple and fundamental answer to that question.<sup>3</sup> Nietzsche and Frankl are two pioneers of affirmation-based approaches to meaning in life. In current academic discussions on philosophical approaches to meaning in life, we rarely encounter this type of thinking, but I believe it is time to reevaluate the importance of affirmation-based approaches in this field.

Another philosophical thought we must pay special attention to is “antinatalism,” which argues that it is better never to have been born, and hence that we should not give birth to children. Antinatalistic thoughts can be found in ancient Greek literature, ancient Buddhism, and modern thinkers such as Schopenhauer and Cioran. Today’s most enthusiastic advocator of antinatalism is David Benatar. He argues that the proposition “coming into existence is always a harm” is correct, and hence his argument is superior to any other rival theories.<sup>4</sup> I believe that his argument in Chapter Two of his book *Better Never to Have Been* is incorrect, but I do not discuss it here, leaving it to my future discussions.

As I have noted, antinatalism consists of two negations. The first is “birth negation,” which argues that it is better never to have been born. The second is “procreation negation,” which argues that we should not give birth to children. The logical consequence of the second thesis is the extinction of the human race. Birth affirmation is roughly considered the opposite concept of the first thesis of antinatalism, “birth negation.” Please note that birth affirmation does not necessarily lead to the affirmation of procreation. Birth affirmation is saying “Yes” to my own coming into existence, but procreation affirmation is saying “Yes” to

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<sup>2</sup> Nietzsche (2005), p.278.

<sup>3</sup> I borrowed this sentence from Morioka (2019), p.90.

<sup>4</sup> Benatar (2006). See also Coates (2014), Lochmanová ed. (2020), and Morioka (2021) for the history of antinatalistic thought.

the coming into existence of my baby or someone else's baby. These two are completely different things. In this paper, I use the term "antinatalism," paying special attention to its first aspect, "birth negation," and leave the discussion of its second aspect, "procreation negation," to another paper of mine.<sup>5</sup>

Honestly speaking, I have the thought of "birth negation" on a deep layer of my mind. However, I want to create a philosophy of birth affirmation and overcome my own birth negation, because I have already been born, and hence it is impossible for me to go back to the world where I had not been born. Therefore, the attempt of creating a philosophy of birth affirmation is aimed, first of all, at the resolution of my own personal existential problem. In this sense, birth affirmation should be, basically, the affirmation of "my" having been born.<sup>6</sup> At the same time, I strongly believe that my philosophical struggle over this subject will be helpful to other people who have suffered from similar inner philosophical problems to mine.

## **2. The Psychological Dimension of Birth Affirmation**

It is hard to clarify what exactly the affirmation of my having been born means. The sentence "I am truly glad that I have been born" sounds clear at first sight, but once scrutinizing it, we soon realize that the exact meaning of the sentence is unclear. The same can be said about the phrase "saying yes to my having been born." What does it mean to "say yes" to my birth in the situation that I have already been born to this world? You might think that birth affirmation is the claim that having been born is better than not having been born, but this is wrong. In my view, birth affirmation is not a claim that is justified by a comparison between two situations. I want to take a close look at this point.

Birth affirmation has two dimensions: the psychological dimension and the philosophical dimension. The psychological dimension of birth affirmation is the dimension in which psychologically affirmative reactions to my having been born arise. The philosophical dimension of birth affirmation is the dimension in which a psychological affirmation or negation of my having been born is examined in terms of philosophy and metaphysics.

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<sup>5</sup> I presented this discussion in Morioka (2021).

<sup>6</sup> In this paper, I use the word "my"; however, strictly speaking, "my" does not mean the author Morioka. I should use the words "the solipsistic being" and say that "the affirmation of the solipsistic being's having been born." As for the concept of solipsistic being, see Morioka (2019).

I want to discuss the psychological dimension firstly in this chapter and leave the discussion of the philosophical dimension to the next chapter. The psychological dimension of birth affirmation can be illustrated as two types of interpretations described below:

1) *Possible world interpretation*

Even if I could imagine a possible world in which my ideal was realized or my grave sufferings were resolved, I would never think, at the bottom of my heart, that it would have been better to have been born to that possible world.

2) *Anti-antinatalistic interpretation*

I would never think, at the bottom of my heart, that it would have been better not to have been born.

Let us examine the possible world interpretation first. This interpretation argues that birth affirmation means I would never wish, at the bottom of my heart, to have been born to a possible world where my problems have been resolved, even if I could vividly imagine such a possible world. For example, imagine the situation in which I had a severe physical disability, but being supported by sincere caregivers, supporters, and friends, I felt I was truly happy. In such a case, even if I could imagine a possible world where my physical disability was completely cured, it would be possible that I did not wish, from the bottom of my heart, to have been born to that possible world. This should be called birth affirmation, because in this case I can believe that the fact that I have been born to this actual world does not need to be negated at all, and as a result, my birth to this actual world is strongly affirmed. Of course, this is no more than a rough sketch of the possible world interpretation of birth affirmation. There are a lot of things to be discussed even in this single case.

I would like to add one thing here. The possible world interpretation resembles Nietzsche's concept of *amor fati*. Nietzsche talks about the concept of *amor fati* in *Ecce Homo* as follows: "My formula for greatness in a human being is *amor fati*: that one wants nothing to be different, not forward, not backward, not in all eternity."<sup>7</sup> This means that people who live in the state of *amor fati*

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<sup>7</sup> Nietzsche (1967, 2000), p.714. The original German is "Meine Formel für die Größe am Menschen ist *amor fati*: dass man Nichts anders haben will, vorwärts nicht, rückwärts nicht, in alle Ewigkeit nicht."

never wish this world be replaced by any other possible worlds. The possible world interpretation is an articulated version of Nietzsche's *amor fati*. The possible world interpretation claims that even if I could imagine *better* possible worlds than the actual one, I would never wish, from the bottom of my heart, to have been born to those *better* worlds. In the psychological dimension, we sometimes imagine *better* possible worlds and compare them with this actual world. Even in such a case, a person living in the state of birth affirmation never thinks that this world should have been one of such *better* worlds.<sup>8</sup> (In the philosophical dimension, the situation becomes totally different. I will discuss it later.)

Let us consider, next, the anti-antinatalistic interpretation. Antinatalists, such as Schopenhauer and David Benatar, argue that if we compare one's having been born and one's not having been born, one's not having been born should be better than one's having been born. They argue that this proposition is universally applied to any people's any births. It is true that there are many people who have this kind of worldview and lament their own coming into this world. Looking back on myself, sometimes I, too, am inclined to think that my not having been born would have been better, especially when thinking about what I have done to my loved ones and friends. This shows that this kind of antinatalism (birth negation) is nestled even inside me.

However, since it is impossible to go back to my birth and erase it from this world, what I should do is, I believe, not cling to an unrealizable alternative and lament it, but try to find a way of dismantling the thought of "better never to have been" that has been inscribed on a deep layer of my mind. This dismantling of inner birth negation should open up the possibility to say "Yes" to my having been born. This is the anti-antinatalistic interpretation of birth affirmation.

When I reach either of the above two psychological states, or the combination of them, I can say I am in a state of birth affirmation in the psychological dimension. It should be noted that in order to reach a state of birth affirmation, I do not need to affirm every event that occurred in my life. I can affirm my life *as a whole*, even if there were events that cannot be affirmed in my life.<sup>9</sup>

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<sup>8</sup> Please note that there is no inconsistency in the situation that this person, who is in a state of birth affirmation, tries to improve her current life conditions in the future.

<sup>9</sup> Since there is not enough space to discuss this topic here, I would advise those who are interested in this topic to see Morioka (2019).

### 3. The Philosophical Dimension of Birth Affirmation

Let us move on to the philosophical dimension of birth affirmation.

The philosophical dimension of birth affirmation can be illustrated as follows:

1) *Possible world interpretation*

The comparison of betterness or worseness between a possible world and the actual world should be impossible.

2) *Anti-antinatalistic interpretation*

The comparison of betterness or worseness between my having been born and my not having been born should be impossible.

In the psychological dimension, I can imagine other possible worlds and compare them with this actual world, and I can wish I had been born to another world, or I can wish I had never been born to any possible worlds at all. In the psychological dimension, this way of thinking makes sense, but in the philosophical dimension, it causes serious problems.

Let us take a close look at the possible world interpretation. At first sight, it seems possible to compare this actual world and another possible world and to judge which world is better than the other. However, I believe that the comparison of betterness or worseness between the actual world and a possible world cannot be made correctly.

Imagine the pilots of the Enola Gay, who were about to drop the atomic bomb onto Hiroshima. In this moment, they could imagine two possible worlds. One was the world in which about 100,000 residents were to be killed instantly. The other was the world in which the pilots did not press the button and a mass killing was avoided. We can correctly compare the betterness or worseness between these two possible worlds, because these two possible worlds are on the same level in their modality. We can say the latter possible world is better than the former, or vice versa.

Next, imagine a civilian of Hiroshima who was actually watching the burning town and a pile of charred bodies in every corner of the city just after the dropping of the atomic bomb. In this case, it is impossible to correctly compare the betterness or worseness between the two worlds: the actual world that was unfolding before this person's eyes and the possible world in which such devastation never occurred, the peaceful world of Hiroshima at 8:15 a.m., August

6, 1945.

The former world is the actual world that the person actually experiences. The latter world is a possible world that the person can only imagine amid the actual devastation surrounding her. These two worlds are situated on completely different levels in their modality. Hence, it is impossible to correctly compare the betterness or worseness between them. The reason why I think so is that while the actual world that I live in is a world of constant and dynamic change, in other words, a world of becoming (*Werden*), possible worlds are worlds that I just have imagined or posited, which are not under the influence of becoming and dynamic change. The world of actual becoming cannot be compared with any other imagined world in its betterness or worseness. This kind of understanding of modality strongly contradicts the modal realism of David Lewis, which insists that every possible world has its own actuality as an indexical. I do not go deeper into the discussion of modal theories here, but we must pay attention to the fact that the discussion of birth affirmation needs more clarification from the perspective of possible world semantics.<sup>10</sup>

Let us move on to the anti-antinatalistic interpretation.

This interpretation argues that the comparison of betterness or worseness between my having been born and my not having been born is impossible. There are two reasons for that. One is the same reason as I examined in the possible world interpretation, which argues that it is impossible to compare the betterness or worseness between the actual world and a possible world. If the world in which I have never been born can be considered an example of possible worlds, the same logic we have just examined above should also be applied to this case.

The second reason is unique to the anti-antinatalistic interpretation, which argues that a comparison between them is impossible because the state of my not having been born cannot be correctly posited. Please note that my point is not that the state of my non-existence cannot be correctly posited. By using counterfactual conditionals, I can talk about the world in which I do not exist, and I can also talk about the betterness or worseness of that counterfactual world. My point is that “my non-existence” and “my not having been born” mean completely different states of affairs. The former means the situation in which I do not exist in the universe. This is a proposition concerning my *existence*. On the contrary, the latter means the situation in which I have not come into being in the universe.

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<sup>10</sup> I have done some of the discussions in Morioka (2020).

This is a proposition concerning my *becoming*. These two are completely different. It is very important to keep this in mind when discussing this topic.

In the case of my non-existence, I can talk about what the world would be like if I did not exist at all. However, in the case of my not having been born, I cannot correctly posit the world in which I have not been born. The reason is that if I try to imagine the world in which I have not been born, I have to imagine the world in which the “I” that is now trying to imagine that world does not exist, because that “I” should not have been born here. In the case of my non-existence, I can stand in a safe zone located outside of the question “Is my non-existence better than my existence?” and think about the question as a bystander.

However, in the case of my not having been born, I cannot remain standing in such a bystander’s position. Positing the situation of “my not having been born” forces me to actually go back to my birth and annihilate my coming into this world. That is because the negation of the static “my existence” does not affect the “I” that is thinking about this negation; however, the negation of the dynamic “my becoming” reaches the “I” that is thinking about this negation, because this actual “I” is a direct outcome of that becoming.

In other words, my existence can be counter-factualized, but my becoming cannot be counter-factualized. Positing the situation of “my not having been born” forces me to actually go back to my birth and annihilate my coming into this world, but this is impossible. Hence, I cannot successfully posit the situation of “my not having been born,” and therefore, it is impossible to compare the betterness or worseness between my having been born and my not having been born. As I mentioned before, this is a corollary of the traditional philosophical problem of “being” and “becoming,” which has been discussed from Plato to Nietzsche and Heidegger. I would like to call this problem — namely, the problem that my non-existence can be posited but my not having been born cannot be posited — “the problem of my non-existence and my non-becoming.”

We can also illustrate the difference between the impossibility of comparison in the possible world interpretation and the impossibility of comparison in the anti-antinatalistic interpretation as follows. In the possible world interpretation, the subject “I” exists in both worlds: actually in the actual world and hypothetically in a possible world. On the other hand, in the anti-antinatalistic interpretation, while the subject “I” exists in the actual world, the hypothetical world where I have not been born cannot be posited, so we never know whether the subject “I” exists there. Hence, we can say that the natures of the two

interpretations are completely different in their impossibility of comparison.

This argument also needs further elaboration and clarification, but I believe that I have succeeded in showing the basic framework of the concept of “birth affirmation” by our discussions so far. Putting together the discussions of the psychological dimension of birth affirmation and the philosophical dimension of birth affirmation, we can conclude the following:

#### The psychological dimension of birth affirmation

1) *Possible world interpretation*: Even if I could imagine a possible world in which my ideal was realized or my grave sufferings were resolved, I would never think, at the bottom of my heart, that it would have been better to have been born to that possible world.

2) *Anti-antinatalistic interpretation*: I would never think, at the bottom of my heart, that it would have been better not to have been born.

#### The philosophical dimension of birth affirmation

The comparison of betterness or worseness between the actual world and a possible world and between my having been born and my not having been born should be impossible.

Before our discussion in this paper, it was difficult to give a clear answer to the question “What does it mean to say ‘yes’ to my having been born?” Now, I believe, we can show a plausible answer to it.

Let us turn our attention to the relationship between the above two dimensions. In the philosophical dimension, it is impossible to compare betterness or worseness between “the actual world and a possible world” and between “my having been born and my not having been born.” However, sometimes I am inclined to compare them in the psychological dimension and negate the worth of my having been born to a life I am actually living. When falling into such a thought, what I should do first is go to the philosophical dimension and make sure that such a comparison does not make sense philosophically, and then come back again to the psychological dimension.

What I should do next is to pursue the possibility of thinking that “Even if I am inclined to think that it was better to have been born to another possible world, or better never to have been born, I should never cling to such an unrealizable alternative and lament it but try to find a way of dismantling that idea.” If this

kind of positive and mutually supportive combination occurs between two dimensions, it will certainly serve as a solid foundation for our pursuit of birth affirmation.

Considering all the above, we can say the following. In the psychological dimension, the first step of birth affirmation is to *become free from* the idea that I wish I had been born to a certain possible world, or that I wish I had never been born. In the philosophical dimension, the first step of birth affirmation is to *know* that the comparison of betterness or worseness between the actual world and a possible world and between my having been born and my not having been born is impossible.

What we have further to consider is whether this first step is sufficient to fully establish the concept of birth affirmation, or whether something more affirmative should be added for it to be the true basis of birth affirmation. This is a question we will have to tackle in a future discussion.

Camil Golub discusses an important issue concerning our affirmative attitudes to our actual lives in his 2019 paper “Personal Value, Biographical Identity, and Retrospective Attitudes.” He writes, “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.”<sup>11</sup> This is similar to what we have called the “possible world interpretation in the psychological dimension of birth affirmation.” Golub calls it the “conservative bias” and argues that such an affirmation is rationally explicable.

Golub proposes two concepts: “personal value” and “biographical identity.” Personal value means “our attachments to certain relationships, projects, and other valuable things in our past.”<sup>12</sup> Golub argues that such attachments can lead us to a state of affirmation of our actual lives. Biographical identity means an identity that includes certain valuable things in our past that have become “part of who we are” as essential ingredients of our current self.<sup>13</sup> He argues that affirming our biological identity can also lead us to reasonably affirm our actual lives even if they are not better than imagined, preferable hypothetical lives.

Golub’s argument successfully demonstrates how the affirmation of one’s actual life can become a reasonable judgement even if it is not considered a better

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<sup>11</sup> Golub (2019), p.72.

<sup>12</sup> Golub (2019), p.79.

<sup>13</sup> Golub (2019), p.82.

choice. His argument may also be applied to our possible world interpretation in the psychological dimension of birth affirmation. However, there are two things that concern me. The first is that he does not clearly define the concepts of “affirmation” and “regret” in his argument. The second is that he does not fully discuss the importance of the philosophical dimension of birth affirmation, which I have extensively conducted in this chapter.<sup>14</sup> I think a lot of things remain undiscussed surrounding this topic despite Golub’s valuable achievement.<sup>15</sup>

#### 4. Comparison with Other Related Concepts

There are some concepts similar to birth affirmation. Here I want to take up three concepts — namely, “self-affirmation,” “the affirmation of existence,” and “the affirmation of life” — and further clarify what exactly birth affirmation means in contrast with them.

Self-affirmation means to say “Yes” to oneself. *Merriam-Webster Dictionary* defines self-affirmation as “the act of affirming one’s own worthiness and value as an individual for beneficial effect.”<sup>16</sup> In social psychology, self-affirmation is considered a source of resilience when one’s integrity is threatened. Claude M. Steele demonstrated in his experiment that when people’s integrity was threatened, they “eliminated the effect of specific self-threats by affirming central, valued aspects of the self.”<sup>17</sup> This is one of the important aspects of the theory of self-affirmation in social psychology.

The difference between self-affirmation and birth affirmation is clear. While self-affirmation is to say “Yes” to oneself, birth affirmation is to say “Yes” to one’s having been born. The former means the affirmation of one’s worthiness, value, or integrity in cases where there are threats from the outside. The latter means the affirmation of the state of affairs that I have been born to this world. This means that birth affirmation is not necessarily the affirmation of the worthiness or value of one’s self. We can also say that birth affirmation is not necessarily equal to the concept of self-esteem.

The affirmation of existence is a term that has been used in Japanese disability

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<sup>14</sup> He says that Velleman’s view is “far too radical,” but I do not necessarily think so. Golub (2019), p.77.

<sup>15</sup> I would like to thank Ikuro Suzuki for his discussion of Golub’s paper in a meeting of Hokkaido University’s research group on meaning in life held in February 2021.

<sup>16</sup> “Self-affirmation” in *Merriam-Webster Dictionary*.

<sup>17</sup> Steele (1988), p.289.

ethics. Since the 1970s, Japanese disability activists have criticized our mainstream society as having the eugenic thought that disabled people should never exist in a society. Disability activists argued that no matter how physically disabled, weak, unproductive, and burdensome to their family, disabled people's existence should be protected, highly respected, and affirmed. They call this idea the affirmation of existence. Based on this idea, they have criticized the killing of disabled children, selective abortion, and new eugenics. I am not sure how this term has been used in the English-speaking world, but I believe that readers can easily grasp the central meaning of this term that has been used in the Japanese disabled people's movement.<sup>18</sup>

The concept of the affirmation of existence is very close to birth affirmation. Their goals are almost the same. The difference is while the former mainly functions as a concept for resisting social pressure from the majority of people in our society, the latter does not usually function as such. Birth affirmation can work as an important life question for both the minority and the majority.

The affirmation of life generally means the affirmation of our being alive itself, or the affirmation of our way of being as life, which consists of such aspects as birth, growth, giving birth, aging, and death. This is the affirmation of the fact that we are not in the realm of death and that we are not just inorganic matter. Here I would like to focus on Nietzsche's concept of affirmation. He writes in *The Will to Power* as follows:

If we affirm one single moment, we thus affirm not only ourselves but all existence. For nothing is self-sufficient, neither in us ourselves nor in things; and if our soul has trembled with happiness and sounded like a harp string just once, all eternity was needed to produce this one event—and in this single moment of affirmation all eternity was called good, redeemed, justified, and affirmed.<sup>19</sup>

This is considered one of the most extreme affirmations of life, which extends towards all existence in the universe. Nietzsche says that if we affirm one single moment of our life, it necessarily means that we are affirming our entire life. This is because in order for us to be able to have one single moment of affirmation, all the events in our life that have prepared that moment were needed for it to happen;

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<sup>18</sup> See Morioka (2001), Chapter 6; and Morioka (2015a).

<sup>19</sup> Nietzsche (1967), pp. 532-533, no.1032.

therefore, all of them should be justified and affirmed as valuable supportive factors that have prepared that single moment. This is a basic idea underlying Nietzsche's concept of *eternal recurrence*.

The Nietzschean affirmation of life looks similar to our birth affirmation, but there are fundamental differences between the two. Firstly, Nietzsche does not specifically talk about the affirmation of my having been born. What he talks about is a dynamic relationship between the affirmation of one's single life event and the affirmation of one's entire life. The affirmation of one's coming into being is not situated in the center of his philosophy of life. Secondly, in his philosophy of *eternal recurrence*, all the past events that have prepared a current affirmative moment should be wished or desired to happen again in the future time and time again eternally, but this way of thinking is absurd and considered morally wrong. We should not wish that misery and devastation, such as the droppings of atomic bombs and the terrorist attacks on the Twin Tower Buildings, will happen again in the future, even if those events have remotely prepared the moment of bliss and happiness I am experiencing here and now. Birth affirmation cannot support this kind of thinking.

## **5. Conclusion**

In this paper, I have tried to clarify the concept of birth affirmation from the viewpoint of philosophy and metaphysics. I am now developing a philosophical framework called "the philosophy of birth affirmation" based on the concept of birth affirmation and other related ideas. I believe that this philosophy will be able to become one of the most promising approaches to difficult problems concerning meaning in life.

A former version of this paper was presented online as a keynote speech at the Third International Conference on Philosophy and Meaning in Life, held at the University of Birmingham on July 23, 2020. During and after the conference, I received valuable comments and suggestions from participants. I would like to offer brief replies to some of them here.

The first question was why I added the phrase "from the bottom of my heart" to the definition of birth affirmation. The point is what role the phrase "from the bottom of my heart" plays in the sentence "to think from the bottom of my heart that I am truly glad that I have been born." My answer is that by adding that phrase, the sentence can become a truly existential one. I want to place special emphasis

on this point because for me the question of birth affirmation is not just puzzling. I am talking about my own existential value judgment about my own having been born. This is not a question of birth affirmation of an imaginary person. The topic here is my own birth affirmation. And what is also questioned here is *your* affirmation, dear reader, the affirmation of *your* own having been born. In my 2019 paper, I called this dimension a “solipsistic layer” in the pursuit of meaning in life. The phrase “from the bottom of my heart” signifies this layer.

The second question was whether I can give affirmation to someone else’s birth. For example, is it possible for parents to give birth affirmation to their baby by saying “I am truly glad that you have been born”? Contrary to readers’ expectation, I must say that this is not birth affirmation, because birth affirmation must be, by definition, the affirmation of my own birth, not the affirmation of someone else’s birth. Of course, it is conceivable that one of the parents says to their baby, “I am truly glad that you have been born,” and I believe that this must be a moving scene; however, it is not the birth affirmation we have discussed. It might be called “procreation affirmation.” It is important to know that the situation in which you say to yourself that “I am truly glad that I have been born” and the situation in which I say to you that “I am truly glad that you have been born” are different.

The third question concerned the optimistic nature of birth affirmation; that is to say, the concept of birth affirmation looks as if it shed light solely on the positive side of one’s life. To answer this question, I would like to talk about birth affirmation in Morioka’s case. Talking of my personal case, I have never reached a state of birth affirmation. Not only that, I sometimes sink deeply into the thought that I wish I had never been born to this world. I have been in the midst of birth negation since I grew up, and I have not escaped completely from this mental state. This is why I have made philosophical investigations into birth affirmation for such a long time. The attempt to create a philosophy of birth affirmation has both positive and negative sides. The concept of birth affirmation is not necessarily colored by an optimistic view of life.

The fourth question was as follows: “Is a life of birth affirmation better than that of birth negation?” I have a solid answer to this question. A life of birth affirmation is not better or worse than that of birth negation because these two lives cannot be compared in terms of their betterness or worseness, which I argued in Chapter Three of this paper. I may live and die a life of birth affirmation, or I may live and die a life of birth negation. If I live and die a life of birth affirmation,

it is the one and only actual life of mine, and it cannot be compared with any other possible lives of birth negation in their betterness or worseness. The same is true of my life of birth negation.

The fifth question was about the timing of my achieving a state of birth affirmation. I am sometimes asked whether I am imagining the moment just before my death as the timing I say to myself that I am truly glad that I have been born. In the past, I was thinking like that,<sup>20</sup> but I do not think so now. I think I can reach a state of birth affirmation any time in my life. It might be the last day of my life, some day in the future, or just here and now. Then, what happens after I reach such a state? A state of birth affirmation might continue for a long period of time, but it might soon disappear. Birth affirmation is not like eternal life or *nirvana*. It is not certain whether I can keep it forever after I reach such a state. The problem of timing of birth affirmation has a close relationship with the controversy on the part-life and the whole-life in the philosophy of life's meaning.<sup>21</sup>

The sixth question was whether the philosophy of birth affirmation argues that every one of us should reach a state of birth affirmation. This is a misunderstanding frequently asked to me when I talk about birth affirmation. I never think that all of us should *reach* a state of birth affirmation, or even that all of us should *aim* to reach there. Birth affirmation is a concept that is needed for people who wish to be liberated from the thought of birth negation lurking inside them. There must be many people who do not need that concept in the pursuit of their life goals.

The last question was whether birth affirmation is a subjective concept or an objective concept. In the field of the philosophy of life's meaning, there has been a huge controversy on whether meaning in life is subjective or objective. Regarding this problem, I have proposed the concept of the "heart of meaning in life" and claimed that there is a solipsistic layer in meaning in life, which cannot be compared with anything whatsoever.<sup>22</sup> I would like to answer in the same way to the question of birth affirmation. Birth affirmation is not subjective nor objective, but solipsistic. I will clarify this point in my future papers on birth affirmation.

I have illustrated a brief outline of the concept of birth affirmation. Although

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<sup>20</sup> For example, in my 2007 paper.

<sup>21</sup> See Metz (2013), pp.37-58.

<sup>22</sup> See Morioka (2015b) and Morioka (2019).

what I have discussed in this paper is just an incomplete summary of the whole picture and I have yet to clarify its details in my future research, I believe that the concept of birth affirmation will be able to break new ground in the field of the philosophy of life's meaning.

\* I would like to express my gratitude to those who asked me valuable questions after my presentation at the Third International Conference on Philosophy and Meaning in Life held online at the University of Birmingham on July 23, 2020.

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## Beauvoir's Philosophy of Meaning in Life

Kiki Berk\*

### Abstract

While Simone de Beauvoir does not offer an explicit theory of meaning in life in any single work, she does provide in her various writings the materials needed to piece together such a theory. In this paper, I offer a systematic account of Beauvoir's view on meaning in life based on these materials. In particular, I develop this account based on her discussion of projects in *Pyrrhus and Cineas*, her discussion of values in *The Ethics of Ambiguity*, her discussions of death and aging in *The Coming of Age*, and her discussion of gender in *The Second Sex*. In the course of doing so, I also make connections to some of her fellow "existentialists" (Sartre and Heidegger) as well as some contemporary analytic philosophers (Setiya and Scheffler) in order to show the originality and continued relevance of Beauvoir's philosophy of meaning in life.

### Introduction

Nowhere in her vast oeuvre does Simone de Beauvoir offer a systematic account of meaning in life. She does, however, discuss meaning in the course of developing her other views. In *The Second Sex* (1949) she argues that women have limited opportunities to make their lives meaningful, and in *The Coming of Age* (1970) she makes similar points about the elderly. And although her two dense philosophical works *Pyrrhus and Cineas* (1944) and *The Ethics of Ambiguity* (1947) don't mention "meaning" per se, let alone "meaning in life," they do concern *projects* and *values*—two key notions in contemporary analytic discussions of meaning in life. My aim in this paper is to draw together these diffuse comments in order to construct a coherent Beauvoirian account of meaning in life. I also draw some contrasts between Beauvoir's views and those of two of her contemporaries (Sartre and Heidegger) and make a few connections between her ideas and those in the current analytic debate, in order to show that Beauvoir's views about meaning in life were not only novel at the time but are also of continued relevance today.

I start by discussing Beauvoir's notion of projects (section 1). I then consider Beauvoir's position on what makes projects valuable and on the status of freedom

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\* Associate Professor of Philosophy, Southern New Hampshire University, 2500 N. River Road, Manchester NH, 03106, USA. k.berk[a]snhu.edu

as a primary value (section 2). Next, I sketch the connection between meaning and death, old age, and womanhood in order to flesh out Beauvoir's general theory of meaning in life (section 3). All of this adds up to a full-fledged and systematic account of Beauvoir's view on meaning in life, which I summarize in the conclusion of this paper (section 4).

## 1. Meaningful Projects

*Pyrrhus and Cineas* is a short but dense work about the point of having goals and engaging in projects. The title refers to the Hellenistic king Pyrrhus, who is set on conquering the world, and his "wise" adviser Cineas, who attempts to dissuade him. Beauvoir opens her book with the following account of their dialogue:

Plutarch tells us that one day Pyrrhus was devising projects of conquest. "We are going to subjugate Greece first," he was saying. "And after that?" said Cineas. "We will vanquish Africa." – "After Africa?" – "We will go on to Asia, we will conquer Asia Minor, Arabia." – "And after that?" – "We will go on as far as India." – "After India?" – "Ah!" said Pyrrhus, "I will rest." – "Why not rest right away?" said Cineas.<sup>1</sup>

Beauvoir thinks that questions like the ones Cineas raises—"And after that? What's the use?"<sup>2</sup>—plague all of us. What's the purpose of doing anything if what we do has to end? Or, as Tolstoy asked in the depths of his mid-life crisis, "And what next? What for?"<sup>3</sup> Trying to answer Cineas's (and Tolstoy's) questions is the main purpose of *Pyrrhus and Cineas*. And while Beauvoir's discussion is sometimes difficult to follow, it contains many philosophically rich ideas. In what follows, I highlight eight key ideas that are especially relevant to understanding her overall view on meaning in life.

The *first* key idea related to meaning in life in *Pyrrhus and Cineas* is Beauvoir's insistence that pursuing projects is at the heart of what it means to be a human being. Beauvoir believes that human beings have no "essence" and so they create themselves by their actions. In fact, this self-creation is a project in its

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<sup>1</sup> Beauvoir 2004: 90.

<sup>2</sup> Ibid.: 91.

<sup>3</sup> Tolstoy 2012: 14.

own right. In her words: “I am not a thing but a project of self toward the other, transcendence.”<sup>4</sup> Beauvoir repeatedly stresses the fact that human beings are “transcendence,” by which she means that we are always acting, always projecting ourselves into the future. According to Beauvoir this is essential to the human condition. As she puts it, our “condition is to surpass everything given.” The upshot is that—Cineas’s questions notwithstanding—it is simply impossible for human beings *not* to engage in projects. As Jonathan Webber explains: “Pursuing projects with values at their core is not an optional feature of human life [for Beauvoir].”<sup>5</sup>

A *second* key idea in *Pyrrhus and Cineas* follows from this first: refusing to engage in projects, or even resting from such engagement, is not a viable response to Cineas’s questions. In fact, Beauvoir explicitly considers this solution (“Let man therefore renounce all projects”<sup>6</sup>), and she rejects it. As we have seen, human beings are by their very nature engaged in projects. Not only is being a human itself a project, but Beauvoir identifies such things as happiness and enjoyment as projects: “since man is project, his happiness, like his pleasures, can only be projects”; and “all enjoyment is project.”<sup>7</sup> Indeed, “every thought, every feeling is project,”<sup>8</sup> she says. And since everything we do is a project, including the very act of being human itself, not engaging in projects is simply out of the question.

Of course, a person could try to be as inactive or restful as possible, but this would be an impossible and therefore absurd goal. As soon as we have any thoughts or desires, we are already transcending the moment and so are no longer perfectly at rest. Furthermore, according to Beauvoir, even if absolute inactivity were possible, it would not fulfill us. She cites Valéry who calls rest “the pure ennui of living.”<sup>9</sup> Because we are “transcendence,” we would not be content at rest even if we could *per impossibile* achieve it. Beauvoir drives this point home by asking us to imagine paradise—a place of perfect restfulness—which, she says, immediately prompts all of us to ask ourselves: “What shall we do there?”<sup>10</sup>

A *third* key idea related to meaning in *Pyrrhus and Cineas* is that our projects are meaningful, and so give our lives meaning, only while we are engaged in them.

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<sup>4</sup> Beauvoir 2004: 93.

<sup>5</sup> Webber 2018 (a): 225.

<sup>6</sup> Beauvoir 2004: 95.

<sup>7</sup> *Ibid.*: 96.

<sup>8</sup> *Ibid.*: 140.

<sup>9</sup> *Ibid.*: 97.

<sup>10</sup> *Ibid.*: 98.

(By “meaningful” I mean having a point, purpose, or value. Thus, as I understand these terms, something is meaningful if, and only if, it has some point, purpose, or value.) As soon as they are over, our projects become meaningless. This explains why we are so often disappointed when we complete projects or meet our goals: a source of meaning in our lives has gone away. For example, if writing a book gives my life meaning, then finishing the book, far from adding meaning to my life, actually takes it away.

This admission, that projects have meaning only while they are ongoing, seems to concede a lot of ground to Cineas. If the meaning of a project disappears as soon as it is completed, then what’s the point in engaging in such a project—or any projects—in the first place? Here we come to a *fourth* key idea in *Pyrrhus and Cineas*, which constitutes the core of Beauvoir’s response to Cineas: the solution to finding meaning in life is not to give up on all projects (which is impossible), or to try to find a way to extend the meaning of a project after it is over (which is also impossible). It is simply to start another project. According to Beauvoir, a meaningful life consists in the pursuit of one meaningful project after another, in an ongoing and indefinite series. Sure, finishing a book is unsatisfying, because it’s over. But the solution is not to give up, or to dwell on one’s past accomplishments. Rather, according to Beauvoir, the solution is to write another book—or to start an entirely different kind of project. It is for this reason that Beauvoir ultimately sides with Pyrrhus over Cineas in their philosophical disagreement. It is the former, not the latter, who has the proper attitude toward life.

A useful contrast can be made here between Beauvoir’s position and a recent one put forward by Kieran Setiya. According to Setiya, simply replacing one project with another turns life into a never-ending series of accomplishments, the result of which is often a deep sense of futility. Indeed, this phenomenon is one of the main contributors to mid-life crises, which, according to Setiya, are properly understood as crises of meaning. Setiya describes this phenomenon as “the suspicion of something hollow in the sequence of accomplishment.”<sup>11</sup> Setiya proposes a number of solutions, such as finding meaning in the process, living in the moment, and focusing on atelic activities instead of telic ones.

None of these solutions are incompatible with Beauvoir’s claim that projects are meaningful only while they are happening, or her claim that a meaningful life

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<sup>11</sup> Setiya 2017: 129.

consists in a series of such projects. That being said, Beauvoir need not necessarily endorse any of these solutions, either. On her view, as I understand her, engaging in one project after the next is simply *not* futile. True, it may be a matter of empirical (psychological) fact that some people feel this way, especially in mid-life, but such feelings are, according to Beauvoir, ultimately unjustified. According to her, projects are a source of meaning, and so engaging in projects makes a life meaningful—even if all of our projects eventually end and must be replaced by others. Feelings to the contrary might be typical—again, especially in mid-life—but that does not make them rational.

But even granting this point—that a life can be truly meaningful even if it consists in an indefinite series of projects, each of which must ultimately end—one might wonder if her claim that our projects are meaningful only while we are engaged in them (her third key idea) is too restrictive. After all, why not think that our projects can be meaningful, even after they end, in virtue of the products they leave behind? Suppose, for example, that my project consists in trying to write an interesting book. If I succeed, then my project is over, but the product of my project—the book—still exists. And if this book is meaningful, then it might confer some meaning on me, its creator. A similar idea is that my projects can remain meaningful, even after they end for me, so long as someone else takes them up. For example, suppose I start a book but then abandon it. If someone else takes up this project, and continues working on the book, then perhaps their doing so would add meaning to my life, even though I am no longer actively engaged in this project myself.

Beauvoir addresses these possibilities in *Pyrrhus and Cineas*, and her treatment of them leads us to fifth key idea in this book. Beauvoir admits that the products of projects can be meaningful, but only under certain conditions—namely, if these products are involved in other people’s projects. Thus, a book sitting on a shelf has no meaning whatsoever; it is meaningful only if somebody else uses it for a project of their own—such as a research project. The same holds for projects aimed at intangible products (such as the creation of institutions) or projects themselves that are carried on by other people after we are done with them. The underlying idea here is that nothing has meaning in itself; things have value only in virtue of their involvement in human projects, which can “transcend” those things and thereby confer meaning upon them. This is a *fifth* key idea in *Pyrrhus and Cineas*: a thing is meaningful only if it is involved in some human project. This applies to the products of projects (e.g., books) as well as to projects

themselves that can be “transferred” to another person (e.g., the writing of a book). Human beings confer meaning on things through their projects, so anything outside the sphere of human projects is meaningless.

Thus, Beauvoir admits that products and projects can be meaningful after a person is finished with them. But at the same time, she rejects the idea that this confers any meaning on the life of the person who produced that product or originated that project. How are these two positions compatible with each other?

This leads us to a *sixth* key idea in *Pyrrhus and Cineas*: the product of a project of mine can be meaningful in *someone else’s* life, if that person incorporates that product into one of their own projects, but this adds no meaning to *my* life. Likewise, a completed project of mine that is taken up by someone else can add meaning to *their* life, but it adds no meaning to *mine*. According to Beauvoir, we must distinguish between the meaning of a thing (or project), on the one hand, and the person for whom such a thing (or project) is meaningful, on the other. A thing (or project) is meaningful only for the individual who uses that thing (or engages in that project).

In fact, surprisingly enough, Beauvoir actually endorses the *inverse* of the proposal under consideration. According to Beauvoir, a project is meaningful only if the product of that project—or that project itself, if it has no product—is in some way taken up by other people and incorporated into their projects. In other words, the transferability of products and projects from one person to another is a *necessary* (but not sufficient) condition for the meaningfulness of those original projects. This is a *seventh* key idea in *Pyrrhus and Cineas*: if a person is engaged in some project that is not in some way taken up by other people after it is completed, for example through its product (if it has one), then this project has no meaning to begin with.

Given that the meaning of our completed projects depends on their being taken up in some way by other people, it follows that the existence of other people is essential for living a meaningful life. This is an *eighth* key idea in *Pyrrhus and Cineas*, and the final one I will discuss in this paper. Indeed, according to Beauvoir, the existence of other people is so important that the extinction of the human race is an even bigger threat to the meaning in our lives than our own individual deaths. For although our individual deaths will mark the end of our projects, and so take away all meaning from our lives, the future end of humanity will do so just as effectively—but while we are still alive. As Beauvoir writes: “My project loses all meaning not if my death is announced, but if the end of the world is announced

to me.”<sup>12</sup> And: “A man who survives alone on earth after a worldwide cataclysm must strive, like Ezekiel, to resuscitate humanity, or he will have nothing left to do but die.”<sup>13</sup> Without other people to build on our projects (or to use the products of our projects), our projects become meaningless—even while we are doing them. Thus, the end of humanity would be, for Beauvoir, literally a fate worse than death.

Beauvoir’s reasoning here is reminiscent of the point Samuel Sheffler makes in *Death and the Afterlife* with his “doomsday scenario” thought experiment. Sheffler asks us to consider the following thought experiment:

Suppose you knew that, although you yourself would live a normal life span, the earth would be completely destroyed thirty days after your death in a collision with a giant asteroid. How would this knowledge affect your attitudes during the remainder of your life?<sup>14</sup>

Sheffler argues that many of our projects would no longer seem worth pursuing. One of the reasons for this is that many of the things we do are to benefit other people, such as trying to find a cure for cancer, writing a book, or raising a family. Thus, according to Sheffler, the end of the human race would deprive our projects of more value and significance than our individual deaths would. As Sheffler explains: “There are many projects and activities whose importance to us is not diminished by the prospect of our own deaths but would be diminished by the prospect that everyone else will die soon.”<sup>15</sup> This echoes Beauvoir’s position.

Summing up, the eight key ideas related to meaning in life in *Pyrrhus and Cineas* are the following. First, pursuing projects is essential to human life. Not only is being a human being itself a project, but virtually all of our actions and activities are projects. Second, and relatedly, inactivity is an impossible and therefore absurd goal. Furthermore, as contrary to our nature, pure rest would be deeply unsatisfying even if it were possible. Third, our projects are meaningful only while we are engaged in them. Thus, once a project has been completed, it is no longer a source of meaning in our lives. From this it follows (fourth) that a meaningful life consists of the pursuit of one meaningful project after another. Beauvoir therefore sides with Pyrrhus over Cineas in the short debate with which

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<sup>12</sup> Beauvoir 2004: 129.

<sup>13</sup> Ibid.: 135.

<sup>14</sup> Sheffler 2013:18.

<sup>15</sup> Ibid.: 26.

she begins her book. Fifth, a thing is meaningful only if it is involved in some human project. This applies to the products of projects as well to our projects themselves once they are completed or abandoned. However, (sixth) this does not confer any meaning on the life of the person who produced that product or originated that project. Rather (seventh) the inverse is true: projects that are not in some way taken up by others after they have been completed have no meaning in the first place. And finally, (eighth) it follows that meaning in life requires the existence of other people.

## 2. Freedom as the Highest Value

The previous section focused on Beauvoir's ideas about projects and how they are related to meaning. This section focuses on Beauvoir's ideas about value. These topics are closely related, for it is common to understand meaning in terms of value. A project is meaningful if, and only if, it has value; and a life is meaningful if, and only if, it contains a sufficient quantity of valuable projects. What, according to Beauvoir, makes a project valuable? Answering this question will be the main purpose of this section.

In short, Beauvoir thinks that projects are valuable simply because we choose to pursue them. Choosing particular ends is precisely what confers value on them. Thus, we don't pursue certain projects because those projects are valuable; rather, our projects are valuable because we choose to pursue them. The very act of pursuing something makes that thing valuable for me. Beauvoir expresses this idea many times and in many different ways, and this notion has not escaped the notice of her commentators. Shannon Mussett, for example, writes: "For Beauvoir, one's project is in no way predetermined or valuable in itself. What I choose to do takes on meaning and value by the very fact that I choose it."<sup>16</sup> And again: "Beauvoir means to emphasize that human beings undertake meaningful actions... because to choose a course of action, to infuse it with value through the act of choosing it, is the clearest expression of our freedom."<sup>17</sup> Gwendolyn Dolske puts it as follows: "[Beauvoir] suggests that meaning must be pursued rather than provided from an external source."<sup>18</sup>

For Beauvoir, a project is valuable to us as soon as we choose to pursue it and

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<sup>16</sup> Mussett 2006: 233.

<sup>17</sup> *Ibid.*: 233-4.

<sup>18</sup> Dolske 2015: 112.

in virtue of our choosing to pursue it. But why? According to Beauvoir, choosing to pursue something is valuable because doing so is an expression of our *freedom*, and freedom itself has value and is the source of all other values. The centrality of freedom in existentialist thought cannot be overstated. One of the defining features of existentialism is that it is up to individuals to shape their lives, to “make” themselves, and to determine how to live. Since existence precedes essence, nothing is predetermined, including human nature, the meaning of life, and our values. This means that it is human beings who create values: “It is human existence which makes values spring up in the world on the bases of which it will be able to judge the enterprise in which it will be engaged.”<sup>19</sup> More specifically, the expression of human freedom creates all other value and meaning in the world. Thus, freedom is what we might call the “primary value,” because it is a value that is the source of all other values. This is why Beauvoir calls freedom the “universal, absolute end from which all significations and all values spring.”<sup>20</sup>

But, according to Beauvoir, it is not just our own freedom that is valuable: everyone else’s freedom is valuable, too. And this has a surprising implication for the meaningfulness of our projects. According to Beauvoir, because everyone’s freedom is valuable, projects that infringe on other people’s freedom are absurd and therefore meaningless. In *Pyrrhus and Cineas*, for example, Beauvoir argues that Pyrrhus’s project of conquering the world is ultimately meaningless, not for the reasons Cineas gives (which Beauvoir rejects), but because this project infringes on other people’s freedom. Likewise, in *The Ethics of Ambiguity*, Beauvoir gives *oppression* as an example of an absurd, and therefore meaningless, project. In her words: “A freedom which is interested only in denying freedom must be denied.”<sup>21</sup> And also: “If the oppressor were aware of the demands of his own freedom, he himself should have to denounce his oppression.”<sup>22</sup> For Beauvoir, then, there is at least one objective constraint on which kinds of projects can be meaningful: such projects cannot infringe on other people’s freedom. Projects that infringe on other people’s freedom are simply meaningless, no matter how freely they are chosen or how much they are subjectively enjoyed.

Beauvoir’s position that freedom is the source of all other values combined with her position that projects that infringe on other people’s freedom are

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<sup>19</sup> Beauvoir 1948: 15.

<sup>20</sup> *Ibid.*: 24.

<sup>21</sup> *Ibid.*: 91.

<sup>22</sup> *Ibid.*: 96.

meaningless highlights the special status of freedom as a value in Beauvoir's philosophy. But what exactly is the nature of this special status? On the one hand, Beauvoir seems to suggest that freedom is *objectively valuable* when she writes things like, "The fundamental fault of the nihilist is that, challenging all given values, he does not find, beyond their ruin, the importance of that universal, absolute end which freedom itself is."<sup>23</sup> On the other hand, Beauvoir apparently resists this conclusion when she writes in the same book things like, "[Freedom] is not a ready-made value which offers itself from the outside."<sup>24</sup> This suggests that freedom is only *subjectively valuable*, that is, has value because we choose to give it value. So, which is it?

There is a noteworthy parallel here with Sartre's philosophy, for Sartre finds himself in the same predicament when it comes to his own views on freedom. Like Beauvoir, Sartre seems to reject the view that there are any objective values, including freedom, and yet he describes freedom in the same way that Beauvoir does, namely as the primary value that gives value to everything else. Sartre scholars have frequently noticed this tension in Sartre and have offered a number of different explanations of it. In *Freedom as a Value*, for example, David Detmer diagnoses this tension in Sartre's philosophy as a shift in thinking between the early Sartre and the late Sartre. Whereas Sartre in his early works is a subjectivist about all values, including freedom, he later admits that freedom must be objectively valuable.

While I am not sure whether Beauvoir undergoes an analogous shift in views from an earlier to a later period, I do think that the position which Sartre (according to Detmer) ended up holding—namely, that freedom is an objective value—is best understood as her considered view. Certainly, Beauvoir does suggest at times that all values are in some sense subjective, but she is also clearly committed to the view that freedom has objective value. In other words, the latter seems so indispensable to her overall philosophy, both in *Pyrrhus and Cineas* and *The Ethics of Ambiguity*, as we have seen, that this simply must be her view. Perhaps when Beauvoir says that all values are in some sense subjective, she either doesn't realize that elsewhere she is committed to the existence of at least one objective value (namely, freedom), or else what she really means to say is that all values depend, in some sense, on the subject. Arguably the latter is true even if, strictly speaking, freedom is an objective value, for how freedom gets

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<sup>23</sup> Ibid.: 57-8.

<sup>24</sup> Ibid.: 24.

expressed varies greatly from individual to individual, and so is subjective in a loose sense.

These reflections on the status of freedom raise the question of how to categorize Beauvoir's view within the standard analytic framework. The two Beauvoir scholars who have written on this come to different conclusions. Jonathan Webber calls Beauvoir's view "objective" because Beauvoir is committed to the objectivity of the value of freedom. Elena Popa classifies Beauvoir's view as a "hybrid view" where the subjective element is "to decide meaning for oneself" and the objective element is "the constraints stemming from one's relation to others."<sup>25</sup> But calling Beauvoir an objective naturalist, as Webber does, seems to be diametrically opposed to the spirit of her view. Likewise, I think that it is misleading to categorize Beauvoir's view as a hybrid position, as Popa does, given that the term "hybrid view" applies to positions like Susan Wolf's, and Beauvoir's view is, as Popa herself admits, not at all like Wolf's. According to hybrid views, meaning in life is achieved through the subjective engagement in projects that have objective worth. This is not what Beauvoir thinks.

In the end, the question of whether to call Beauvoir's view a form of objective or subjective naturalism is a hard one to answer. The exercise of freedom, which is objectively valuable, is the source of all other values, which are subjectively valuable. This position involves both objective and subjective elements. In this regard, Beauvoir's view is usefully compared to the Desire Satisfaction Theory, which also has objective and subjective elements: objective because desire satisfaction is a value independent of what anybody thinks about it, and subjective because what each of us desires varies from person to person. Beauvoir's view, like the Desire Satisfaction Theory, seems to evade a simple classification within the standard categories.

### **3. Expanding Beauvoir's View**

We have now covered the fundamentals of Beauvoir's view of meaning in life, but there are a few important topics left to discuss. Any account of meaning in life needs to include an account of how meaning is related to death. Death plays an important role in Beauvoir's philosophy in general and in her view on meaning in

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<sup>25</sup> Popa 2019: 428.

life in particular (section 3.1). In addition, any account of Beauvoir's view on meaning in life is incomplete without a discussion of her views on old age and womanhood, each of which, she thinks, has an important connection to meaning in life (sections 3.2 and 3.3).

### 3.1 Death

Mortality plays an important role in Beauvoir's thinking about meaning in life. Of her book *Pyrrhus and Cineas*, she writes: "I wanted to demonstrate that without [death] there could be neither projects nor values."<sup>26</sup> Beauvoir's work is suffused with references to death, and as much as she detests it, she makes it very clear that the opposite—life without death—is even more undesirable. Indeed, she thinks that death is a necessary condition for meaning in life. In *The Prime of Life* (1960), she writes: "Though death challenges our existence, it also gives meaning to our lives," and "I learned that it was possible to accept death in order for life to keep its meaning."<sup>27</sup> In *The Blood of Others* (1945), she writes: "It is sometimes necessary to risk death for life to remain meaningful."<sup>28</sup> And in her novel *All Men Are Mortal* (1946), Beauvoir argues that an immortal existence would lose all meaning and value.

Why does Beauvoir think that death is a necessary condition for having meaning in life? This is not entirely clear, but the life of Fosca, the immortal protagonist of *All Men Are Mortal*, gives us a clue. As a result of his immortality, Fosca has lost all of his interests and desires. To say that he is bored is an understatement; Fosca is apathetic to the degree that he calls himself (ironically) "a dead man."<sup>29</sup> Having lost all motivation, Fosca hardly pursues any projects, which in turn renders his life meaningless. And this makes perfect sense since, according to Beauvoir, it is engaging in projects that gives our lives meaning in the first place. So, in short, mortality is necessary for a meaningful life because without it, we (like Fosca) would have no motivation to do anything; and without doing anything we could not have meaningful lives.

Beauvoir's view that life can be meaningful only if we die might sound similar to the position of Heidegger, who famously claims in *Being and Time* (1927) that

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<sup>26</sup> Beauvoir 1962: 606.

<sup>27</sup> Ibid.: 433.

<sup>28</sup> Beauvoir 1964: 318 & 322.

<sup>29</sup> Beauvoir 1946: 26.

our human reality (*Dasein*) is fundamentally “being-toward-death.” In fact, Beauvoir explicitly rejects this view. In *Pyrrhus and Cineas*, for example, she writes that “One must not say, with Heidegger, that man’s authentic project is being for death.”<sup>30</sup> Whereas Heidegger sees death as informing all of our projects and saturating our very existence, Beauvoir thinks that “The human being exists in the form of projects that are not projects toward death...but projects toward singular ends.”<sup>31</sup> Thus, for Beauvoir, although mortality is a necessary condition for a meaningful life, it is in no way part of the meaning of life itself, as it is for Heidegger.

### 3.2 Old Age

*The Coming of Age*, Beauvoir’s massive tome on old age, identifies a number of hardships faced by the elderly. One of these hardships is that it is difficult for old people to make their lives meaningful. It is important to note that Beauvoir does not think that the lives of the elderly are inherently any less meaningful than anyone else’s, or that elderly individuals cannot live meaningful lives. Indeed, she thinks that the elderly *can* live meaningful lives if they are able to overcome certain obstacles and pursue meaningful projects: “There is only one solution if old age is not an absurd parody of our former life, and that is to go on pursuing ends that give our existence a meaning—devotion to individuals, to groups or to causes, social, political, intellectual or creative work.”<sup>32</sup> Beauvoir’s position is simply that it is *difficult* for the elderly to pursue meaningful projects and so live meaningful lives. And this is for at least three reasons.

The first is a contingent reason that reflects a deep problem in modern society. Many unprivileged, uneducated laborers are exploited by the system and devote their entire lives to labor. As a result, they are not able to develop meaningful projects during their working lives, at least not outside of their jobs. This often comes to light at the time of retirement, at which point these former laborers have no meaningful projects upon which to fall back. In this case, old age does not so much cause as reveal a lack of meaning. And when it is revealed, it is often too late to do anything about it, at least according to Beauvoir. As she writes: “Even if decent houses are built for them, they cannot be provided with the culture, the

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<sup>30</sup> Beauvoir 2004: 114.

<sup>31</sup> *Ibid.*: 115.

<sup>32</sup> Beauvoir 1972: 540.

interests and the responsibilities that would give their life a meaning.”<sup>33</sup> Culture, interests, and responsibilities can provide one with opportunities for developing meaningful projects, but only when they are given to a person at an early enough age to properly cultivate them. By the time laborers are at the age of retirement, it is often too late. One implication of this is that being able to make one’s life—at any age—meaningful is partly a matter of privilege—a privilege that is denied to the poor and the oppressed.

A second reason why it is difficult for the elderly to pursue meaningful projects is more philosophical, and it is related to our previous discussion of projects. One aspect of our projects is that they are essentially forward-looking, which means that having meaning in one’s life requires looking forward into the future, not backwards into the past. As Beauvoir writes: “The whole meaning of our life is in question in the future that is waiting for us.”<sup>34</sup> But, of course, the elderly have more of their lives behind them than ahead of them, and this tempts them to spend their time looking backward rather than forward—on what they have done rather than on what they can still do. And this makes it harder for them to engage in meaningful projects, which by their very nature require looking ahead into the future.

A third reason why old age makes it harder to live a meaningful life is based on another aspect of projects, namely that they involve *doing* rather than *being*. We have seen that Beauvoir thinks that human beings are always active and can never be at rest. As Mussett says: “Beauvoir prioritizes doing over being as the individual is in essence, nothing.”<sup>35</sup> Yet, Beauvoir thinks that an old person’s life is more defined by being than by doing. For this reason, the elderly naturally don’t engage in as many active projects. Both a focus on looking backwards and a focus on being are in tension with the forward-looking, active nature of projects. Because of the active, forward-looking nature of projects, which is contrary to their own nature, it is harder for the elderly to make their lives meaningful.

### 3.3 Womanhood

In *The Second Sex*, Beauvoir argues that it is harder for women than it is for men to make their lives meaningful. Published in 1949, this book focuses on the

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<sup>33</sup> Ibid.: 542.

<sup>34</sup> Ibid.: p. 5.

<sup>35</sup> Mussett 2006: 232.

traditional gender roles of women at that time. To what degree these “traditional” gender roles still exist is an open question, but in what follows I will speak about them in the present tense.

One reason why it is harder for women to make their lives meaningful, according to Beauvoir, is that many tasks that women engage in, such as routine housework, are repetitive, cyclical, and unsatisfying. This type of activity is opposed to a project that is progressive, productive, or creative—that is, a project with which progress is made or a product is created. Beauvoir writes about women doing housework that they are “occupied without ever doing anything.”<sup>36</sup> Being in this situation does not make it easy for women to imbue their lives with meaning. The upshot of this is that, according to Beauvoir, a project must be in some way progressive, productive, or creative in order to be truly meaningful.

To make matters worse for women, the meaningless tasks in which they are so often engaged (at least traditionally) are not freely chosen. Rather, they are imposed on them by their society, which has a conception of what a woman is and how she ought to live. Gwendolyn Dolske captures this point (and the previous one) well when she writes:

Woman is at greater risk of losing sight of purpose than man because she is prone to behaving according to the structure of other’s ideas of her purpose. Therefore, finding meaning in women’s lives poses difficulties for them since the duties assigned to them by custom are duties entailing little creativity or possibility of defining and redefining one’s self (unlike the possibilities typically open to men).<sup>37</sup>

Beauvoir sees many women as finding meaning in marriage and in caring for others (namely, their husbands and their children), rather than living for themselves. This gives us another insight into Beauvoir’s view of meaningful projects in general: they must be freely chosen rather than assigned by others.

Finally, according to Beauvoir, women are often tempted to willingly conform to these societal roles rather than realize their freedom and create their own meaning. Beauvoir describes this as follows:

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<sup>36</sup> Beauvoir 1989: 604.

<sup>37</sup> Dolske 2015: 125.

When man makes of woman the *Other*, he may, then, expect her to manifest deep-seated tendencies toward complicity. Thus, woman may fail to lay claim to the status of subject because she lacks definite resources, because she feels the necessary bond that ties her to man regardless of reciprocity, and because she is often very well pleased with her role as the *Other*.<sup>38</sup>

This makes matters even worse. Not only are women coerced into playing the role of *Other*, but they are even further coerced into accepting it. Such women do not treat themselves as free subjects but rather as objects, which turns them into what Beauvoir calls an “immanence” rather than a “transcendence.”<sup>39</sup> As Dolske puts it: “Woman struggles more with transcendence because the world (and at times, her own self-deception) nudges her toward treating herself as project rather than acting autonomously in the world and creating her project.”<sup>40</sup>

#### 4. Conclusion

The previous section has yielded some additional ideas that can be used to supplement Beauvoir’s theory of meaning in life as articulated in earlier sections. To start, we have seen that our lives can be meaningful only because we are mortal. From Beauvoir’s discussion of old age we have also learned that having meaning in one’s life requires that one be sufficiently *active* and that one’s projects be sufficiently *forward looking*. Furthermore, we have seen that being able to make one’s life meaningful is, in part, a matter of societal conditions and privilege within society. And from Beauvoir’s discussion of gender we have learned that projects must be progressive, productive, and creative in order to be meaningful and that they have to be freely chosen rather than assigned to us by others.

These ideas about meaning drawn from Beauvoir’s discussion on death, old age, and gender are all compatible with the eight key ideas about meaning found in *Pyrrhus and Cineas*. According to the latter, it is virtually impossible for human beings not to pursue projects, and projects are only meaningful while we are engaged in them. One implication of this is that a meaningful life consists of a series of projects, and another is that other people are necessary for there to be meaning in life because they can take up our projects (or their products), thereby

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<sup>38</sup> Beauvoir 1989: xxvii.

<sup>39</sup> *Ibid.*: 603.

<sup>40</sup> Dolske 2015: 112.

safeguarding their meaning. Last, but not least, *Pyrrhus and Cineas* (as well as *The Ethics of Ambiguity*) argue that our projects are truly meaningful only if they do not infringe on anyone else's freedom: since freedom is the source of all meaning, pursuing a project at the expense of another's freedom is absurd and meaningless.

In conclusion, Beauvoir's ideas about meaning, dispersed over several works and embedded in her positions on other issues, add up to a coherent, interesting, and philosophically rich view of meaning in life.<sup>41</sup>

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# Meaning and Mistakes in Philosophy and Life

Benjamin Murphy\*

## Abstract

The history of philosophy is a history of contradictions, not consensus. This suggests that the history of philosophy is, for the most part, a history of mistakes. A scientist who devotes their life to a mistake can console themselves with the thought that they still contributed to scientific progress, but this source of consolation is not available to the philosopher. In *The Remains of the Day*, Kazuo Ishiguro suggests that dignity may be found in making your own mistakes. This suggests that my life might be meaningful because I attempted a difficult and worthwhile task appropriate to my station and failed. Failure might produce beneficial by-products such as conceptual clarity, but to pretend that this counts as success would be dishonest, not dignified. The true philosopher is disappointed at failure, but takes consolation in the fact that they at least made their own mistakes.

## 1. Introduction

Anyone who contemplates a career as a professional philosopher is likely to study the history of philosophy, at least a little bit, and the most cursory study of that history is likely to lead to the depressing conclusion that the history of philosophy is a history of mistakes. I do not think that a more thorough study of that history is likely to provide alleviation. If Aristotle was right, then Plato was wrong, if Descartes was right then Aristotle was wrong and so on. It is true that occasionally, philosophical research can lead to the development of a new academic discipline where some kind of definitive progress is possible – mathematical logic being a case in point – but even this kind of victory is rare. Anyone who sets out to devote their life to philosophical research must face up to the fact that the most likely result will be that they add to the long list of philosophical mistakes.

If there is no such thing as a meaningful life, then the fact that the professional philosopher seems to be doomed to make mistakes would not seem to matter very much since, *ex hypothesi*, nothing would matter very much. The follower of Camus can pursue the futile path of the academic happy in the knowledge that futility is the lot of us all, and that if everyone is Sisyphus, it is preferable to find

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\* Professor in Philosophy and Religious Studies, Florida State University, Republic of Panama Campus, PO Box 0819-05390, El Dorado, Panama, Republic of Panama. bmurphy[a]fsu.edu

a rock that can be pushed without much physical effort. However, if one thinks, as I do, that someone who spends their day building a good solid house has done something meaningful, because they have succeeded in leaving something worthwhile that will outlast them, then the decision to pursue the life of a philosopher begins to look unwise.

In saying that time spent building a good house (or perhaps digging an irrigation ditch) is meaningful, I am aligning myself with the form of moral cognitivism advanced by David Wiggins in his “Truth, Invention and the Meaning of Life.”<sup>1</sup> As a moral cognitivist, I think that just as declarative sentences can be true or false and, when true, informative, feelings can be appropriate or inappropriate and, where appropriate, informative. Fear is an appropriate response to danger. A phobia is irrational not because fear is itself irrational, but because the person with the phobia reacts to something harmless as if that thing were dangerous. Gratitude is an appropriate response to receiving a good gift, and my sense of gratitude should guide me to find an appropriate way to share my joy with the giver. Just as a fear can be a phobia, so too gratitude can be misplaced – for example when the gift was a wooden horse and the recipients were the Trojans. But to say that our feelings are fallible is to contrast the situations in which they give us a false picture of how things are with the situations in which they really are bearers of information. A feeling of satisfaction really can be what it seems to be – an indication that I have completed a truly worthwhile task. As we describe situations in which satisfaction is the appropriate emotional response, we are describing situations in which someone has carried out a meaningful activity.

I will not here engage in a defence of moral cognitivism. In the first place, I have nothing to say in defence of moral cognitivism that has not already been said by Wiggins and others. Secondly, as I have indicated, it is only if one accepts moral cognitivism that the decision to devote one’s self to philosophical research becomes problematic. Satisfaction comes from constructing something valuable that will endure, not necessarily forever, but for a few generations after my death, and for the moral cognitivist, it is legitimate to use this fact about satisfaction as a guide to life. The professional philosopher is like the foolish man in the parable who chooses to build on soft sand, a man who is surrounded by the ruins of previous efforts as he toils daily, and who can see, in neighbouring fields, the solid structures erected by natural scientists, historians, and others who have found

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<sup>1</sup> Wiggins (1976).

good, firm, soil, and yet persists in the hope that his tower will not topple like all the others. One traditional defence of the philosopher is that the unexamined life is not worth living. There is certainly good reason to suppose that the person who consciously thinks about what is involved in living a meaningful life thereby increases their chances of attaining such a life, but that is not at issue here. The question is not whether someone who is a philosopher in the sense that Socrates or Kierkegaard were philosophers can lead a meaningful life, but whether the life of the academic philosopher is meaningful.

Another defence of the life of the professional philosopher would be to point out that everyone has to earn a living somehow, and philosophy is a harmless pursuit that can be used to support all kinds of meaningful activities in personal or public life. I think this is true, and one can point to many examples of philosophers who have helped the world through non-philosophical activities, but it would be nice to think that philosophical research itself can be meaningful despite the near inevitability of errors. It would be depressing to think that there really always is something better one could be doing than engaging in philosophical research.

Here Kazuo Ishiguro comes to the rescue. In his *The Remains of the Day*, the protagonist, Stevens, is a butler who spent his life working for Lord Darlington, an English aristocrat who set out to help Germany recover from the blow of the Treaty of Versailles and became, for a time, a pawn of the Nazis. Looking back, Stevens says:

...at least he had the privilege of being able to say at the end of his life that he made his own mistakes. His lordship was a courageous man. He chose a certain path in life, it proved to be a misguided one, but there, he chose it, he can say that at least. As for myself, I cannot even claim that. You see, I trusted. I trusted in his lordship's wisdom. All those years I served him, I trusted I was doing something worthwhile. I can't even say I made my own mistakes. Really - one has to ask oneself - what dignity is there in that?<sup>2</sup>

Ishiguro here offers the hope that a meaningful life can come not just from getting things right, but from getting things wrong in a certain kind of way, that there is a certain kind of mistake, a dignified mistake, that could give life meaning.

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<sup>2</sup> Ishiguro (2009), p. 243.

## 2. Lord Darlington's Mistake

I am not going to argue that Stevens' judgment about his own lack of dignity as compared to Lord Darlington is correct. The best reasons for accepting Stevens' judgment can be found by reading the book and I am confident that most readers will find the passage I have quoted to be a moment of insight and self-knowledge. My concern is whether, assuming we accept Stevens' judgment about Lord Darlington, this judgment contains any crumbs of comfort for philosophers. What is it that makes Lord Darlington's mistake one that confers a sort of dignity?

My aim is, by reflecting on *The Remains of the Day*, to come up with a set of prerequisites that would enable philosophers to produce work such that, even if it is mistaken, will contain the kind of mistakes that allow for dignity.

It is clear, after all, that not every mistake confers dignity. At one point, Stevens is left stranded after his car runs out of petrol. This is his mistake in the sense that nobody else was responsible, but it is not a courageous error that he will look back on with rueful satisfaction. It is a trivial error in a matter of little importance. It is moreover a careless error that results from a lack of attention. I can hardly attain dignity as a philosopher on the grounds that I was careless when preparing the references section of my work.

We can contrast the trivial error of the petrol with Lord Darlington's horrific political misjudgement. It is only possible to make a mistake if you are trying to do something. Aimless wanderers cannot be said to have lost their way. Lord Darlington is not Bertie Wooster, drifting through life. He has ambitions; noble ambitions to set right injustice and promote peace between nations. It is right that he feels wretched at the end of his life. It is not merely that he fell short of his goals; his actions were positively injurious to them. He committed an act of injustice (in which Stevens is complicit) by firing two Jewish servants, and he promoted the policy of appeasement whose disastrous results are well known. He is a failure when measured by the standards that he set for himself – but at least he set himself high standards to begin with. The higher the standards we set for ourselves, the more likely it is that we will fail. So, the first prerequisite for achieving meaningful, dignified failure is that we set ourselves a significant and worthwhile goal.

Stevens placed too much trust in Lord Darlington. He was exempt from making the kind of error that Lord Darlington did because he simply followed

Lord Darlington blindly – albeit with a culpable blindness at times. Philosophers too can be guilty of such blindness, either by unthinking devotion to the works of a great individual, or, what is perhaps more common, by unreflective acceptance of the agenda that was set by a previous generation. This is why some education in the history of philosophy is highly recommended to anyone who wants to pursue a career in philosophy: only by understanding the choices that shaped the tradition we belong to can we ourselves make a clear and conscious decision about what to accept and what to reject from that tradition. Stevens thinks of Lord Darlington as the hub around which the world turns. His inability to gain a broader perspective leaves him unable to see, until it is too late, that Lord Darlington is not a giant among men.

So, the second prerequisite is easily stated, although it requires careful elucidation: we need a sense of perspective.

Lord Darlington does have a sense of perspective. He is an English aristocrat in an age where that conferred wealth, status, and connections. This means that he has the opportunity to exert an influence on international relations, and he endeavours to use this opportunity for the good. He is right to think that his status confers an obligation to use his position to bring about a good result. Stevens lacks perspective. He is right, perhaps, to point out that there was no way for him to know that von Ribbentrop was a charming scoundrel, or that Sir Oswald Mosley was not to be trusted, but he can be blamed for failing to say a word when Lord Darlington fired two maids simply because they were Jewish.<sup>3</sup> Stevens had every reason to think that his own judgement was better than that of Lord Darlington in this instance, and just as it was reasonable of Lord Darlington to believe that his informal conferences might affect British foreign policy, it would have been reasonable for Stevens to conclude that if he were to offer his resignation, he might have persuaded Lord Darlington to reconsider his decision. The point is not that we are in a position to say that if Stevens had threatened to resign, Lord Darlington would probably have changed his mind. We are, after all, considering whether it is reasonable for philosophers to undertake tasks in which the probability of success is very low. The point is that if Stevens does not try to dissuade Lord Darlington from firing the maids, then nobody will (the housekeeper, Miss Kenton, considers doing so but does not precisely because she has no support from Stevens).<sup>4</sup> Had Lord Darlington stood by while injustices

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<sup>3</sup> Ishiguro (2009), pp. 147-150.

<sup>4</sup> Ishiguro (2009), p. 152.

were done to Germany (as he sees it, perhaps not without justification), had he wrung his hands and expressed a desire that somebody should do something, then he would have failed to achieve dignity in his errors, since nobody, or at least very few people, were in a better position than he was to do something.

Stevens thinks of Lord Darlington as a giant among men, and of himself as a pygmy by comparison. That is one error of perspective. The opposite error, that of overestimating your own abilities relative to those of others, is just as dangerous.

Stevens describes Lord Darlington as “a courageous man.” Stevens does not seem to have considered the possibility of offering his resignation, but Lord Darlington was willing to take a great risk in order to achieve his goals. When accused by Mr. Lewis, an American diplomat, of being a rank amateur, Lord Darlington responds:

Let me say this. What you describe as “amateurism”, sir, is what I think most of us here still prefer to call “honour”.<sup>5</sup>

“Honour” is perceived as an important value in societies where reputation matters. It is not that having honour is the same thing as having a good reputation, but to be honourable is to do the kind of deeds that should earn such a reputation (there is here an implicit commitment to moral cognitivism). Lord Darlington is able to exert an influence on international affairs because he has a reputation, and the price he pays for his mistake is that he dies with that reputation in shreds. A gentleman who surely regards dishonour as a fate worse than death is sentenced, in his final days, to a life of shame. To say that Lord Darlington had a kind of dignity in his error is not to say that he should have felt no shame – rather, he had a kind of dignity because he was willing to take this risk.

So, to set the conditions that render dignified error possible, the philosopher should have a sufficient understanding of tradition, a sense of perspective, ambition, and should be risking something through their devotion to philosophy. Most professional philosophers are expected to acquire a knowledge of tradition and a sense of perspective as part of the standard academic training. A typical doctoral dissertation will include some form of literature survey or historical introduction, and a clear statement about what can reasonably be achieved by

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<sup>5</sup> Ishiguro (2009), p. 102.

applying the chosen methodology. However, it is less clear that standard academic training encourages the kind of ambition and willingness to take risks that are prerequisites for dignified errors. Indeed, one might wonder whether good postgraduate programs – the kind of programs that give students a fighting chance of finding a decent academic job – will tend to make students somewhat risk averse.

So in the next section, I will look at two examples of philosophers who do show that they are willing to openly acknowledge the risk that they are producing work that is worthless, and who proceed anyway. Though they see the ground is soft, they persist in building their towers.

### **3. Philosophers with big dreams**

Derek Parfit confronts the possibility that much of his philosophical work might be a waste of time if it all rests on a mistake. It is true that Parfit is imagining how Henry Sidgwick might have responded to claims made by a hypothetical moral naturalist, but, as Parfit makes absolutely clear, he is on the same side as Sidgwick here, so the speech he writes for Sidgwick expresses his own position as well:

You have not seen how deeply you and I disagree. Though you and I are both Utilitarians, and Ross rejects Utilitarianism, my view is much closer to Ross's view than it is to yours. Your view does eliminate morality, as Ross and I both think we understand it. Ross and I both know that some acts have the natural property of maximizing happiness. We believe that we can ask an important further question, which is whether all such acts also have the very different, irreducibly normative property of being right. If your view were true, there would be no such property, and no such further question. That would be how, in trying to decide which acts are right, Ross and I would have wasted much of our lives.<sup>6</sup>

Lest we miss the point of this speech – and Parfit tells us that many Naturalists have missed the point – Parfit presents the following analogy:

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<sup>6</sup> Parfit (2011), p. 304.

Suppose that I believe in God, and I have spent many years trying to decide which religious texts and theologians give the truest accounts of God's nature and acts. You tell me that you also believe in God. Love exists, you say, in the sense that some people love others. God exists, because God is love. I could reply that, if your view were true, I would have wasted much of my life. I believe that God is the omniscient, omnipotent, and wholly good Creator of the Universe. If God was merely the love that some people have for others, I would have made a huge mistake, and all my years studying religious texts would have taught me almost nothing.<sup>7</sup>

By any of the usual metrics that are applied to measure the value of scholarly work, Parfit's achievement was magnificent. Most of us, I am sure, can only dream of writing the work that would have anything like the impact that his work has had. But here, he confronts the reader with the possibility that if Naturalism is correct – and to many philosophers the truth of Naturalism seems obvious – then his work, the very book we are reading, has been a waste of time. The book in question is Volume II of *On What Matters*, and if, as Parfit claims, the truth of Naturalism implies that nothing really matters, then the truth of Naturalism would imply that the very idea of writing a book on what matters (in the sense that Parfit thinks some things really do matter) is an absurd idea. Parfit could only hope to write about things that matter by taking the risk of writing a book that would be a complete waste of precious time.

Parfit is aware of the risk that he is wasting his time. It is true that Parfit is more confident than many philosophers about the possibility of making definitive philosophical progress, arguing that it is rational to hope that within less than a thousand years, philosophers might achieve the same kind of consensus that scientists do.<sup>8</sup> However, it should be noted that although Parfit has an argument against Naturalism, and he has an argument that philosophers may achieve a consensus after less than a thousand years, he does not have an argument that after less than a thousand years, the consensus will be that Naturalism is wrong. His optimism about the prospect of philosophical progress is not optimism about the eventual vindication of his own theories.

One philosopher who is less optimistic than Parfit is Peter van Inwagen. In his *The Problem of Evil*, he argues that the argument from evil is almost certainly

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<sup>7</sup> Parfit (2011), pp. 304-305.

<sup>8</sup> Parfit (2011), p. 193.

a failure on the grounds that most philosophical arguments, including his own, should rightly be judged as failures.<sup>9</sup> A successful philosophical argument, argues van Inwagen, is one that would convince an ideal philosophical audience in a debate that takes place under ideal conditions (van Inwagen contemplates the possibility of persuading an audience who initially hold the opposite view, and trying to win over a neutral audience).<sup>10</sup> Whereas Parfit hopes that after a thousand years we might achieve a consensus, van Inwagen suggests the gloomy conclusion that perhaps we humans just don't have the skills that are required to resolve philosophical questions. Humans attempting to solve metaphysical problems are like dogs walking on their hind legs. Having made this analogy, van Inwagen stumbles on his metaphysical way.<sup>11</sup> A dog that tries to walk on its hind legs has ambition.

An objection that might be raised to Parfit and van Inwagen is that they simply set the standards for philosophical success too high. We do praise philosophers, including Parfit and van Inwagen, recognizing that they have achieved something, without imagining that their work has created a consensus, or would create a consensus in idealized conditions. Indeed I did make this point to van Inwagen (in 2000) and clearly did not convince him. I now think he was right not to be persuaded. In the quest for philosophical truth we may stimulate interesting and worthwhile thoughts, and these may be regarded as beneficial by-products of our quest. But it would be dishonest to pretend that the beneficial by-products were in fact the goal that originally motivated our quest. (This may not be the answer that van Inwagen gave at the time, but it is the conclusion I came to after reflecting on whatever it was that he did say).

I think that Parfit and van Inwagen are correct that the goal that motivates the best philosophical research is to attain the kind of objectively true result that is the hallmark of scientific activity. But there are serious objections to this view of philosophical research that need to be considered, and that will be the focus on the next section.

#### **4. Philosophy Is Not Natural Science**

So far, I have been claiming that most philosophical work consists of mistakes

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<sup>9</sup> Van Inwagen (2006), p. 52.

<sup>10</sup> Van Inwagen (2006), pp. 41-47.

<sup>11</sup> Van Inwagen (2015), p. 15.

because philosophers reach contradictory conclusions. But perhaps this is based on a mistake about the goals of philosophical research. If two different scientists reach contradictory conclusions, we know that at least one of them must be wrong, and past experience gives us confidence that, over time, we will learn which of them is wrong because a consensus will emerge. Perhaps it is a mistake to suppose that, when two philosophers reach contradictory conclusions, at least one of them must be wrong because the goal of philosophical research might be quite different from the goal of scientific research.<sup>12</sup> In this section, I want to present the strongest possible case against the idea that philosophers should strive for the kind of success that we associate with science. To do so, I will consider proposals put forward by Gary Gutting and Nicholas Rescher about the differences between philosophy and science, proposals that I find plausible. Gutting and Rescher are correct that we should not expect philosophy to make definitive progress in the way that natural sciences do. However, I will also argue that if we accept the points that Gutting and Rescher make about the differences between philosophy and science, so far from providing consolation to the philosopher, we should conclude that the philosopher who errs is worse off than the scientist who errs, because the scientific mistake can be part of a success story in a way that the philosophical mistake cannot.

Gutting published *What Philosophers Know* in 2009 and Rescher published *Metaphilosophy* in 2014. As far as I can tell, the two books were written independently, and they do not agree in all respects, but they do converge on a number of key points. The fact that two observers of the philosophical scene arrive independently at the same conclusions gives those conclusions a certain amount of credibility, so I will be focussing on those points of convergence.

Rescher argues that if philosophers attempt to achieve the kind of consensus that we see in the natural sciences, they are pursuing a false goal.<sup>13</sup> Gutting thinks that philosophers have achieved knowledge, but might be blinded to their own achievements by a false idea about what knowledge involves, based on a misunderstanding of science:

To insist that knowledge excludes approximation and incompleteness would require claiming that, for example, physicists don't know anything

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<sup>12</sup> I would like to thank Yujin Nagasawa for suggesting that I engage with recent work in metaphilosophy, and an anonymous referee for helping me to improve this section.

<sup>13</sup> Rescher (2014), p. 125.

about matter because they don't know its ultimate constituents, or that chemists don't know that  $PV=kT$  because they haven't worked out all the limits on its application. In contrast to the natural sciences, philosophers ignore the knowledge that they have achieved because of what we might call the Philosopher's Fallacy: the assumption that all genuinely philosophical knowledge must involve ultimate final understanding – through a perfect definition, an explanation that itself needs no explanation, etc. ... Giving up the Philosopher's Fallacy does not, moreover, mean giving up the grand goals of ultimate understanding – to give perfect definitions of knowledge and justice, to discover the ultimate source and meaning of the universe, and so on. It is, rather, to realize that, even if these goals are never reached, there is still a substantial body of philosophical knowledge that our inquiry has discovered.<sup>14</sup>

What kind of knowledge can philosophers boast of if not answers to the big questions? The answer is knowledge of distinctions – we can understand that what seems to be a single concept might actually involve two or more concepts.<sup>15</sup> A philosopher who has read Kripke, for example, will realize that “necessarily” can be used to make either a metaphysical or an epistemic claim, and that the two are quite different. Rescher offers a variety of ways in which philosopher can make progress without providing a definitive answer to one of the big questions. He includes the introduction of a new distinction on his list, and adds some other examples that Gutting does not consider – a philosopher might offer a new argument for a familiar position, or one might be said to make a significant contribution to philosophy simply by posing a new problem.<sup>16</sup> Rescher and Gutting are correct that introducing new distinctions, offering new arguments and posing new questions are all the kinds of achievement that members of the philosophical community, (myself included), celebrate. Parfit and van Inwagen are both recognized as significant philosophers because of this kind of achievement. At the same time, Parfit and van Inwagen both seem to be saying that they will not have achieved what they set out to do unless they achieved more than this.

Gutting and Rescher both have similar ideas about why it is that we can only

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<sup>14</sup> Gutting (2009), p. 89.

<sup>15</sup> Gutting (2009), p. 228.

<sup>16</sup> Rescher (2014), pp. 155-156.

expect limited results from philosophy, even when it is done well. Both Gutting and Rescher insist that we do not do philosophy from within a void, nor should we try to. Gutting bids us remember Hume's dictum to be a philosopher but to be a man first: we have convictions that are pre-philosophical, that may be a core part of our identity, and that require no philosophical defence.<sup>17</sup> We should not abandon such convictions lightly, nor expect others to do so, because this would be to compromise our epistemic integrity.<sup>18</sup> Such convictions may be religious convictions – and Gutting is indebted to Alvin Plantinga's argument that belief in God is properly basic,<sup>19</sup> but they could be non-religious – Quine's radical empiricism, for example, can be regarded as a pre-philosophical conviction, since it is not the conclusion of Quine's argument, but a starting point from which Quine argues, expecting that there will be others who share this starting point.<sup>20</sup>

A good example of philosophical writing that springs from a pre-philosophical commitment is Michael Dummett's *On Immigration And Refugees*.<sup>21</sup> As Dummett clearly states, his commitment to working with refugees stemmed from a hatred of racism that stands in need of no philosophical justification. His wife Ann shared this hatred of racism and commitment to working with refugees, but had no interest in philosophy. His philosophical reflections on the topic were the result of, not the motivation for, his political activism.<sup>22</sup> It is clear from his intellectual autobiography that his hatred of racism preceded his study of philosophy, and so this commitment was pre-philosophical in a strictly chronological sense.<sup>23</sup>

Pre-philosophical commitments need not be ethical in nature. Consider for example the opening statement of David Armstrong's *Sketch for a Systematic Metaphysics*:

I begin with the assumption that all that exists is the space-time world, the physical world as we say. What argument is offered for this assumption? All I can say is that this is a position that many – philosophers and others – would accept.<sup>24</sup>

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<sup>17</sup> Gutting (2009), p. 147.

<sup>18</sup> Gutting (2009), p. 148.

<sup>19</sup> Gutting (2009), p. 120.

<sup>20</sup> Gutting (2009), p. 23.

<sup>21</sup> Dummett (2001).

<sup>22</sup> Dummett (2001), pp. xi-xii.

<sup>23</sup> Dummett (2007), pp. 8-9.

<sup>24</sup> Armstrong (2010), p. 10.

I can confirm that this is an assumption that many non-philosophers share, because many students are already committed to this idea when they take their first philosophy class (they are usually surprised to find that this is considered to be a metaphysical theory). Anyone who boldly accepts a challenge to spend the night in a reputedly haunted house to demonstrate that there are no ghosts is committed to the kind of worldview that Armstrong is defending, even if they have not considered exactly what such a worldview entails.

Like Gutting, Rescher thinks that philosophers always start within a pre-existing set of commitments, what he calls a ‘probative orientation’, within which we search for answers:

The resulting metaphilosophy roots in the view that in philosophy we are dealing with real issues that admit of real (and unique) solutions – albeit solutions that are only attainable through approaching the issues from the vantage point of a commitment to a definite probative orientation (evaluative methodology). And so we cannot say in philosophy “the real truth” is what holds from *every* methodological perspective. Nothing does. We cannot say that “the real truth” is what holds the *canonical* perspective (the correct one, the one at issue in the philosophers’ penchant for the myth of the God’s eye view). For only God knows what this is: there is no way for us to come to it...And we cannot say that the real truth is what holds from *some* perspective – that is, at least one of the diversified spectrum of available possibilities. For it is rationality [sic] incongruous to opt concurrently for incompatible alternatives. The best we can do on behalf of our own solutions to philosophical issues is to claim that they afford “the truth *as we see it*,” yielding a position that is correct for anyone sharing our basic commitment to a particular probative-value orientation.<sup>25</sup>

Two researchers have different probative orientations if they attach different weights to different epistemic variables when weighing up rival theories, and as a result adopt different methodologies.<sup>26</sup>

For a concrete example of a probative orientation that springs from a pre-philosophical commitment, consider the following statement by Dummett:

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<sup>25</sup> Rescher (2014), p. 131.

<sup>26</sup> Rescher (2014), p. 130.

It is just possible that some politicians believe the twaddle about firm and fair immigration controls as the key to good race relations, if indeed a politician can be said to believe anything but that such-and-such is the politically advantageous thing to say.<sup>27</sup>

Dummett's language makes it plain that he does not merely reject the idea that firm and fair immigration controls are the key to good relations after carefully and dispassionately weighing up the evidence. He regards the idea as absurd to the point where it is hard for him to imagine that anyone might believe it. One can imagine Dummett agreeing to review purported evidence for this claim with the purpose of debunking it and exposing the stupidity of certain politicians, but one also imagines that anyone who invited Dummett to examine serious evidence that makes such a claim credible would themselves become a target of his suspicion.

Dummett dismisses certain positions as “twaddle” because he is trying to set out the boundaries of legitimate political debate. Armstrong, who is not concerned with significant moral issues, does not engage in such rhetoric. But his probative orientation is still very clear. For example, he states:

We may call this position Possibilism in mathematics. It does involve a cost, the cost that an existence proof in mathematics gives us something less than one might hope for – it is only, I'm arguing, a proof of possibility. But it saves us from abstract entities!<sup>28</sup>

Armstrong might be more open to examining the case for abstract entities than Dummett is open to the case for solving racial tension with a “firm but fair” stance on immigration, but it is clear that, from Armstrong's perspective, the deck is stacked against abstract entities. He thinks that we need to be saved from abstract entities as we might be saved from a ghost – saved in the sense that both should be unmasked as impostors. The very fact that some theory implies their existence would be, for Armstrong, a strike against that theory. A dedicated pure mathematician who perhaps takes the existence of abstract objects for granted might say that Armstrong has a prejudice against abstract objects.

My statements that Dummett and Armstrong are prejudiced against certain

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<sup>27</sup> Dummett (2001), pp. 104-105.

<sup>28</sup> Armstrong (2010), p. 89.

positions is not intended as an accusation. Both are transparent about their starting assumptions, and from those starting assumptions there follows a certain probative orientation. To someone who does not share the initial commitments, the probative orientation will appear as a set of prejudices.

It is easy to think of other examples. A substance dualist is strongly committed to some form of the principle of credulity – until we have good reason to believe otherwise, we should accept that things are as they seem to be. A refusal to accept the reality of qualia is a threat to this principle, argues the substance dualist, not simply because if there are no qualia things would not be what they seem to be, but because without qualia, there would be no such thing as seeming. The materialist is not impressed, because the materialist thinks that a good scientific theory is one that overturns our initial impressions. The good scientist, like Hamlet, knows not “seems”. The substance dualist and the materialist seem to be in two different minds, but between those two minds there is no meeting.

So although the terms “pre-philosophical commitment” and “probative orientation” are not equivalent, a pre-philosophical commitment, in Gutting’s sense, leads to a probative orientation, in Rescher’s sense.

Gutting and Rescher agree that what sets a philosopher apart from a non-philosopher is that the philosopher thinks through the implications of the pre-philosophical commitments in a systematic manner: the good philosopher starts from intuitions (from things that seem intuitive within a particular orientation) and builds up a system.<sup>29</sup> When done well, this systematizing reveals what is truly involved in those initial commitments. It does not show that the commitments are correct, but it enables someone who stands by those commitments to know exactly what it is that they are standing for.<sup>30</sup> The person who observes such a debate between people with different orientations will not see a clear winner, because each participant has different criteria for winning, but they will at least know what is at stake when one chooses between the two stances.<sup>31</sup> This helps clarify the sense in which a philosopher can be said to have made their own mistakes – the dignified error comes from following without flinching the implications of those commitments that are central to one’s identity. My commitments are not correct because they are mine, but by being true to them I am doing the best that I can possibly do. In an extreme case, my inability to systematize my commitments in

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<sup>29</sup> Rescher (2014), p. 99; Gutting (2009), p. 81.

<sup>30</sup> Gutting (2009), p. 193.

<sup>31</sup> Rescher (2014), p. 92.

a satisfactory manner might persuade me that at least some of those commitments should be abandoned.

The problem is that there is nobody else who is really in a position to tell me that it is time to abandon my pre-philosophical commitments because, although I may face criticisms that seem compelling to other people, it might still seem to me that these criticisms are the result of their subscribing to a different probative orientation. Gutting, as we have seen, believes that philosophers should try to preserve their intellectual integrity. It would be a clear violation of intellectual integrity to endorse a position that you do not think is supported by the evidence and this implies that it would be a violation of intellectual integrity to betray your own probative orientation. So, we should expect that philosophers will engage in interminable debates without resolution.

We expect things to be different in the sciences. Suppose that I am trying to estimate the number of monkeys in two rainforests that are in two different locations. If I just selected two amateur observers and sent each of them to one of the rainforests and asked how many monkeys they saw, that would not give me a scientific result. Perhaps Bill reports twice as many monkeys in Forest A as Bob sees in Forest B because Bill mistakes other animals for monkeys. If Bill and Bob have both received the same scientific training, then, should Bill report twice as many monkeys in Forest A as Bob reports in Forest B, I should be confident that had Bill been sent to Forest B and Bob to Forest A, the results would have been the same (within the limits of experimental error). This is not just an empirical observation about how scientists tend to work. An academic discipline can be called a science precisely because it is an organized body of knowledge, organized in such a way that large scale research projects are possible where many researchers collaborate to produce a result, a result to which the whole team is committed because the team shares a commitment to a common methodology. To become a scientist means that one learns to evaluate evidence in the right way. To become a scientist is to be inducted into a community that is bound together by a commitment to a certain methodology, in other words, a community that shares a certain probative orientation.

Of course, a scientist may come to think that the methodology pursued by their research group is flawed. There might be occasions when, in order to maintain her intellectual integrity, the scientist may have to rebel against the status quo. One expects such situations to be rare in science. But there is a sense in which such a situation is impossible in philosophy, because in philosophy there is no

status quo against which to rebel. There is a certain amount of hyperbole in that statement. There have been times and places where particular philosophical methods have been taken for granted, and within one particular philosophy department, a certain *status quo* might prevail for a while. However, the kind of large scale collaboration that is usual in the sciences – where a typical research paper may have dozens of authors, and researchers in different countries rely upon each other’s established results – has yet to happen in philosophy. According to Gutting and Rescher, this is to be expected if all philosophers remain true to their pre-philosophical commitments.

But this also implies that philosophical errors are more serious than scientific errors.

Consider the case of a graduate student in the sciences who joins a laboratory engaged in the research for a vaccine. The staff of the laboratory have been divided into three teams, each focussed on a different possible formula. If two of the formulae fail but one is successful then that laboratory’s work will have been a success. The head of the laboratory assigns the student to one particular team. Of course, the student might hope that her team has been assigned to study a formula that will be successful, so that she will have the glory of being on the right team in the right laboratory. But as a scientist, a participant in an organized search for knowledge, she is expected to be a good team player. If her team simply reveals that one particular formula is a dead end, she should be satisfied that she contributed to the project by eliminating a hypothesis that initially seemed plausible. She should be willing to move from one team to another, if asked. The head of the laboratory, in turn, might be aware that there are other laboratories engaged in similar research but following different leads. If this particular laboratory does nothing but eliminate false trails, and some other laboratory discovers the correct formula, still, this laboratory was playing an important role in the search for a vaccine: it was right that all of these leads should be pursued. The scientist should be glad when the search for a vaccine reaches a successful conclusion, and whether or not his laboratory or her team had the glory of producing the correct formula should be a secondary concern.

A real example that follows the same pattern can be found in the history of astronomy. In the 16<sup>th</sup> Century, there were three competing theories of astronomy, the Heliocentric theory of Ptolemy, the Geocentric theory of Copernicus and the Geo-Heliocentric theory of Tycho Brahe. Tycho Brahe was responsible for improvements in astronomical instruments and he contributed a lot of important

new data to the study of astronomy. He did so in the hope that his data would contribute to the vindication of his Geo-Heliocentric theory. In the event, Kepler used Tycho-Brahe's data to vindicate the Heliocentric theory, with planets moving in ellipses rather than circles. We might imagine that Tycho Brahe would have been disappointed with this outcome but, at the same time, we can see him as an important contributor to astronomy. It was good that astronomers consider a variety of theories – the path to scientific success involved the consideration of the merits of his theory and its eventual rejection in favour of something better. He was part of the story of success in the same way that the laboratory whose work only serves to eliminate false candidates for a vaccine has played a role in the successful search for a vaccine. To show the scientific spirit is to see yourself as part of an organized search for knowledge, and to rejoice at the success of the whole team, even if your part turned out not to be a glamorous one. Of course, it is hardly news that a scientific methodology can bring success in the long term even though there are many errors along the way precisely because the errors and the dead ends can be incorporated into the progress. Science is a collaborative process in which one scientist can learn a valuable lesson from another's mistake.

To see how things are different in philosophy, let us return to Parfit's example of two philosophers who agree that there is a God, but disagree strongly about what God wants for the world. They share the same pre-philosophical commitments, but have different ideas about what the implications of those commitments are. They could well come up with some fine conceptual distinctions, and pose new questions, uncover new and interesting arguments for established ideas. Given their common starting point they might, between themselves, reach a consensus. But – and this is Parfit's point – if there is no God, then all of that was a waste of time. That whole finely developed apparatus of distinctions between transubstantiation and consubstantiation becomes merely quaint. An outsider might admire the intellectual ingenuity, while ruefully reflecting that it is a shame that such great minds wasted their time on questions that are simply worthless given the fact that the God they were arguing about does not exist. Parfit confronts head on the possibility that this could be the fate of his work – and goes on working nevertheless.

The scientists are working together to discover the motion of the planets, or to find a functioning vaccine. Even those who pursue blind alleys have played a role in the project, and they can all recognize that the project has been successfully completed, and that success gives their activity meaning. The failure of Tycho-

Brahe's theory was not the failure of Tycho-Brahe. But philosophers who have different probative frameworks do not share the same idea of the kind of success that would grant meaning. The two theists disagree about the will of God. A third philosopher looks at their work and concludes that the implications of their pre-philosophical commitments have been explored, and the result has been to expose the intellectual bankruptcy of theism. Suppose one of the theists is led to accept this appraisal of her work. We could imagine Tycho Brahe saying "Well, my particular theory was wrong, but at least I helped people uncover the most accurate theory about the Solar System", but our imagined theist is not in the same position. She cannot say "Well, my particular theory about the will of God was wrong, but at least I helped people discover what the will of God is." Could she say "Well, my attempt to discover the will of God was wrong, but at least I helped later generations to abandon all those principles that seemed to give meaning to my life"? For Tycho-Brahe, "at least" introduces a comforting consolation. In this case, "at least" introduces a thought that would only serve to rub salt into the wound. The best source of consolation I could consider for her is "at least I made my own mistakes."

## **5. Disappointment and Meaning**

At the start of this paper, I expressed a commitment to moral cognitivism (this may be regarded as a pre-philosophical commitment of my own). For the moral cognitivist, just as fear is an appropriate reaction to danger, and gratitude an appropriate reaction to gifts, disappointment is an appropriate reaction to failure. The person who fails may never come to learn of their failure, and so may never experience the bitterness of disappointment. Doubtless there are many second-rate philosophers who die with a sense of deep but undeserved satisfaction, fondly imagining that their half-baked theories were definitive solutions to the problems they considered. But what of the first-rate philosophers who experienced disappointment in their own lifetimes. Did any of them find meaning?

Confucius is, perhaps, the archetypal figure of the disappointed philosopher.

The earliest surviving biography of Confucius was written by Sima Qian, and according to Nylan and Wilson, it was Sima Qian's own experience of disappointment (his military career came to an end when he was castrated) that induced him to tell the story of Confucius as that of a man who gained wisdom

late in life as he learned to deal with disappointment.<sup>32</sup> Confucius had hoped to see his political vision implemented by one of the states that made up the Middle Kingdom, but in later life contented himself with being a teacher, and took up the study of music.<sup>33</sup>

It is this that gives piquancy to the first words of the *Analects*:

The Master said, Studying and from time to time going over what you've learned – that's enjoyable, isn't it? To have a friend come from a long way off – that's a pleasure, isn't it? Others don't understand him, but he doesn't resent them – that's a true gentleman, isn't it? (1,1)<sup>34</sup>

Confucius hopes to be understood not because he is insecure and seeks reassurance, but because he hopes to help humanity by advancing a political program. If he can overcome the resentment caused by his failure, he will have become a true gentleman – from Confucius' perspective, this is the most important mark of a true gentleman precisely because it was the hardest for him to attain.

Zilu stopped for the night at Stone Gate. The gatekeeper said, Where are you from? Zilu said, From the household of Confucius. The gatekeeper said, The one who knows there's nothing can be done but keeps on trying? (14, 40)

When he was in Wei, the Master was once playing the chiming stones. A man carrying a basket passed the gate of the house where Confucius was staying. He said, Someone of strong convictions is sounding the stones! After a while he said, Shallow – all this clang-clanging! If no one understands you, you give up, that's all.

*In deep water, let your robe get wet;*

*In shallow, hike it up.*

The Master said, Quite right – that would be the easy way out. (14,42)<sup>35</sup>

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<sup>32</sup> Nylan and Wilson, (2010), p. 5.

<sup>33</sup> Nylan and Wilson (2010), p. 8.

<sup>34</sup> Confucius (2007), p. 16.

<sup>35</sup> Confucius (2007), p. 102.

I only know Confucius' words through reading (a variety of) translations, so I cannot speak with confidence about the precise meaning of this passage in the original Mandarin. But I have long imagined that Confucius' point was that his bitterness, while undignified, was a symptom of the fact that he cared deeply about achieving a worthwhile goal. Recognition that the goal will never be achieved should not mean pretending that the goal was never important to begin with. I can feel good about myself because I tried my best and failed, but if I really tried my best, then I should feel bad about failing. The gentleman knows nothing can be done and yet persists, playing the stone chimes but without bitterness.

At the start of this paper, I said I was taking it for granted that a sense of satisfaction really can be a sign of a worthwhile job that has been completed. If satisfaction does indeed indicate completion of a worthwhile job, I think we can agree that such satisfaction can give a life meaning. I am now suggesting that a sense of disappointment at the failure to achieve a worthwhile task, a task appropriate to the individual's station, and a failure despite the individual's best efforts, can also give a life meaning. A meaningful life need not be a successful life.

We academic philosophers should certainly hope that this is the case, since that is the very best that most of us can expect from our chosen path.

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# Truth and Meaning in Life

## A Badiouan Theory of Meaning in Life

Jairus Diesta Espiritu\*

### Abstract

Owing to the analytic tradition, contemporary analytic existentialism deliberately avoids metaphysical discussions to the detriment of the field. Specifically, Thaddeus Metz' *Fundamentality Theory* invokes metaphysical categories without adequately clarifying what they really mean. This paper aims to remedy these problems by formulating a theory of meaning in life grounded on the metaphysical category of truth. Deriving from Alain Badiou's relevant writings, this paper formulates a theory of meaning in life based on a metaphysical notion of truth with the particular advantage of compensating for *Fundamentality Theory*'s (1) lack of metaphysical grounding, and (2) the inherent vagueness of its two central notions: fundamentality and substantiality. I argue that the Badiouan Theory that this paper formulates opens up the field to the rich conceptual repertoire of metaphysics and that it designates substantiality as fidelity to truths, while designating truths as fundamental.

### 1. Introduction

The leading theory of meaning in life today is Thaddeus Metz' *Fundamentality Theory*. While this paper does not contend its advantages against its non-consequentialist rivals, one significant shortcoming of the theory is that it does not locate itself in broader philosophical debates outside analytic existentialism. More specifically, while the name itself invokes a metaphysical category, it deliberately avoids this thorny issue. In a more rudimentary formulation of the theory, Metz disavows the exploration of "traditional, supernaturalist view" that his proposed criteria are unified by "God's higher-order purposes,"<sup>1</sup> which is clearly an allusion to traditional metaphysical problems. While this is a virtue in protecting the theory against possible criticisms, it needlessly ostracizes the field from more traditional philosophical discourses such as metaphysics. This deliberate isolation also leaves the already fragmented world of philosophy a little more fragmented. This paper aims to remedy this by

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\* Assistant Professor, Department of Philosophy, University of the Philippines-Diliman, Quezon City 1101, The Philippines. [jdespiritu1\[a\]up.edu.ph](mailto:jdespiritu1[a]up.edu.ph)

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<sup>1</sup> Metz (2011) p. 390.

proposing a theory of meaning in life based on the traditional metaphysical notion of truth, effectively reinserting metaphysical concerns in existentialist discussions. Such attempt is reminiscent of Heidegger's ontologico-existentialist concerns,<sup>2</sup> and potentially opening up the field to the rich conceptual repository of the history of Western philosophy, allowing for a semblance of unity in the whole of philosophy never again seen after the time of the ancients.

In this paper, I turn to one of the most influential philosophers today, Alain Badiou. A Marxist continental thinker<sup>3</sup>, Badiou concerns himself mainly with (meta)ontology<sup>4</sup> and the so-called "conditions" of philosophy—art, science, politics, and love.<sup>5</sup> While these conditions are of significance to any theory of meaning in life, Badiou does not explicitly tackle the question nor attempt to forward a theory on the subject matter. Because of this fact, one could immediately object that the project of the current paper is futile.

One of the key achievements of Thaddeus Metz' work is to consolidate the current literature on the subject<sup>6</sup>, but it is noteworthy how he usually derives theories of meaning in life from philosophers who practically did not write anything on the topic—or at least not explicitly. For instance, he ascribes an objective naturalism of sorts, i.e. the assertion that some natural features of life make it meaningful,<sup>7</sup> to Karl Marx.<sup>8</sup> With his materialist abhorrence of Hegelian Idealism, Marx would clearly be open to the idea that only natural features could account for meaning in life. This does not mean, however, that Marx actually devoted time to write about meaning in life as this is far from the concerns of emancipatory politics and capitalist societies. The nearest thing that he could have talked about would be his notion of "species being,"<sup>9</sup> the nature of human beings that he claims to be constrained by capitalism, and the very same nature that he thinks would be liberated by communism. Whether Metz' assessment of Marx is qualified or not is beyond the scope of this paper. What I attempt to do, however, is the same: to explicate a theory of meaning in life from a philosopher who did

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<sup>2</sup> Cf. Heidegger (1962).

<sup>3</sup> Cf. Bosteels (2010).

<sup>4</sup> From an outsider's perspective, what he clearly does is ontology. For Badiou, however, following the maxim "Mathematics is ontology," philosophy has no business doing ontology. Therefore, while he appears to be doing ontology, to his own understanding of what he does, he is involved in *meta*ontology.

<sup>5</sup> See Badiou (2008).

<sup>6</sup> Cf. Metz (2013), Metz (2011), Metz (2007), and Metz (2001).

<sup>7</sup> Metz (2013) p. 180, Metz (2001) p. 139.

<sup>8</sup> Metz (2013) p. 20.

<sup>9</sup> Eagleton (2011) p. 81.

not, at least explicitly, provide a theory on the topic.

Badiou concerns himself with traditionally continental questions (e.g. the event, subjectivity, etc.) and it could be argued that his concerns are alien to the concerns of existentialism, more specifically to *analytic* existentialism. His importance in contemporary philosophy, however, including analytic philosophy, can no longer be denied. For instance, he claims that the publication of his first magnum opus, *Being and Event*, marks “the nullity of the opposition between analytic thought and continental thought.”<sup>10</sup> The rigor of the mathematizations of *Being and Event* is surely attractive to analytic philosophers while the subject matter on which this was used was of course unwelcome. On the other hand, the subject matter of the book is a favorite among continental thinkers while its mathematizations would definitely be frowned upon. Another important aspect of Badiou’s philosophy is the resurrection of the centrality of truth (or more correctly, truths) in philosophical discourse. While it has been fashionable in early analytic thinkers to jettison truth to the scientists and in early continental philosophers to reduce it to interpretation,<sup>11</sup> Badiou was able to forward a mathematical model of truth without returning to a classical, strictly Platonic conception.

This only means, therefore, that Badiou’s thought goes perfectly well with the aims of this paper. Deriving from Badiou’s relevant writings, this paper formulates a theory of meaning in life based on a metaphysical notion of truth with the particular advantage of compensating for Fundamentality Theory’s (1) lack of metaphysical grounding, and (2) inherent vagueness of its two central notions: fundamentality and substantiality.

The attempt of this paper will begin by formulating a Badiouan Theory of meaning in life from his extant writings. I begin in the next section with his book, *The True Life*, where he comes nearest to the topic. Here I also discuss, albeit briefly, another *prima facie* related work of his, *Happiness*. In the third section, I defend that the Badiouan Theory is indeed a theory of meaning in life with the use of Metz’ criteria, i.e. that any theory of meaning in life talks about at least one of the following: (1) which ends are worth pursuing, (2) how our animal nature can be transcended, and (3) what merits esteem or admiration.<sup>12</sup> In the fourth section, I discuss the patent advantage of the Badiouan Theory, i.e. its ability to fill in the

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<sup>10</sup> Badiou (2005) p. xvii.

<sup>11</sup> Cf. Wittgenstein in TLP 4.11: “The totality of true propositions is the whole of natural science (or the whole corpus of the natural science)” and Heidegger (1993).

<sup>12</sup> Metz (2013) p. 34.

vagueness of the Fundamentality Theory. I begin by discussing my allegation of vagueness to the Fundamentality Theory and provide reasons why the Badiouan Theory is able to evade them. Lastly, in the fifth section, I discuss three counterarguments that can be hurled against the Badiouan Theory. Here I discuss that the theory seems to admit the possibility of degrading sacrifice, an unredeemed anti-matter, and morally despicable acts. It should be noted that while this paper extensively discusses a conception of meaning in life and its concept, it deliberately excludes the equally controversial issue of the conceptual differences between meaningfulness and worthwhileness.<sup>13</sup>

## 2. A Badiouan Theory

While Badiou did not explicitly pursue an existentialist project, the existentialist undertones of his philosophy can be easily laid down. The nearest that he got to an existentialist project was in his book, *The True Life*. It is a short collection of different lectures that were all addressed to the youth. As a 79-year-old during the time of publication, Badiou provides his young audience with an analysis of the contemporary dilemmas that they are facing; he diagnoses the youth with a disorientation brought about by modernity's "abandonment of tradition."<sup>14</sup> With the disintegration of feudal hierarchies, the naturalized tendency of man to respect these hierarchies was thrown away. The only alternative that contemporary capitalist society offers is Free Trade. The traditional, feudal world is singularly imposing while the contemporary capitalist world imposes nothing at all. For instance, while European monarchies in Medieval Times needed the Pope's blessing for their legitimacy, today's secularism pits all religions against all types of ideology. This vacuum created by too many choices and too much non-imposition is what Badiou diagnoses as the cause of the disorientation that the youth finds herself in today. As a result, the youth is faced with a dilemma. On the one hand, the youth desires to get out of the demands of contemporary capitalist society and to find her own identity—to *burn*. On the other hand, the youth wants herself to be established and to be successful in her career, a subservience to societal standards—to *build*. This is therefore the dilemma between burning and building.

As a remedy, Badiou turns to Socrates. In Plato's *Republic*, Socrates says that

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<sup>13</sup> Cf. Metz (2012).

<sup>14</sup> Badiou (2017) p. 29.

only when citizens gain “true life” that they will be inspired to have “contempt for power and the State.”<sup>15</sup> When such contempt has been exhibited, there is no longer any reason for citizens to abuse the government’s power for personal gain. This is because the true life ensures:

that young people don’t go down the paths already mapped out, that they are not just condemned to obey social customs, that they can create something new, propose a different direction as regards the true life.<sup>16</sup>

While this is not talk about meaningfulness per se, this can be read as an attempt at extending his philosophy to more existentialist concerns. The *true* life, he says, is characterized by a *radically new* creation. In Badiou’s metaontology, this is actually a tautology. I will explicate why.

First, a truth, for Badiou, is a “hole in knowledge,”<sup>17</sup> triggered by what he calls an *event*. An event happens in an evental site, a site within the situation which is at the edge of the void.<sup>18</sup> Being at the edge of the void only means that the site has no common elements with the situation it is in. This is why within the situation, an event is radically new because no one would have expected it to happen. The event, therefore, is a radically new happening which is unprecedented, indiscernible, undecidable, and unnameable.<sup>19</sup> An event is such because it collects its elements from a site where the situation is blind. Badiou’s classic example is the French riots of May 1968<sup>20</sup> of which he was part. These were spontaneous, decentralized, and unprecedented series of student demonstrations

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<sup>15</sup> *Republic* 502-521c as quoted in Badiou (2017) p. 6. The translation here is particularly interesting as this quote is directly lifted from Badiou’s very own translation into French of Plato’s *Republic* (2012), rendered into English by Susan Spitzer. The problem, however, is that Badiou does not call it a translation but a *hypertranslation*. This means that Badiou did not make fidelity to the original Greek text as the primary consideration; he deliberately altered the translation in accordance to how he reads Plato. In Grube and Reeve’s translation (1992), the closest phrase associated with this can be found in 512b where Socrates asks Glaucon, “Can you name any life that *despises political rule* besides that of the true philosopher?” [emphasis added]

However far from the original, this quote from Plato still drives home Badiou’s point: the true life, exhibited by that of the philosopher, is not subservient to current governing systems. While Plato intended this to be a critique of the popular democracy of his time that led to the execution of his teacher, Badiou contextualized the same contempt for the State through “hypertranslating” 512b into our current context, under a post-Medieval capitalist global order.

<sup>16</sup> Badiou (2017) p. 8.

<sup>17</sup> Badiou (2005) p. 558, Badiou (2008) p. 13.

<sup>18</sup> Badiou (2005) p. 182.

<sup>19</sup> Badiou (2004) p. 61.

<sup>20</sup> Badiou (1992) p. 84.

all over France which were widely successful in halting the French economy. While no one expected it to occur, it was an insistent resistance against the political situation's utter disregard of it. The May 1968 event in Paris was an event in the Badiouan sense, and therefore the starting point of truth. Badiou schematizes an event in the following way:

$$e_X = \{x \in X, e_X\}^{21}$$

This formulation is read as: “an event  $e$  of a situation  $X$  contains as its elements, elements of  $X$  and the event,  $e_X$ , itself.” While an event happens in an evental site, an event is still part of the situation it is in. Hence, the elements from which it is created are elements from the situation itself. It is also important to note that an event is self-containing. This self-containment means that the event is only recognizable from within the event itself. From without, the event does not seem to exist. It is therefore important for an event to be seized from within itself, by a subject. If it weren't properly seized, it loses its eventness.

It is clear, therefore, that an event is inherently fleeting in nature. It is therefore reliant on a *subject* to *decide* its existence.<sup>22</sup> When an individual decides an event, keeps collecting elements for it, and devoting herself to it, the individual undergoes the process of subjectivization. This process of post-decision element-collection, and devotion is called *fidelity*. The subject, therefore, is tied to the process of fidelity in maintaining the event—discerning it, and thereafter naming it—into a procedure of truth. This process of event, evental decision, fidelity, and naming constitute the process which Badiou calls *truth*.

The true life, therefore, is essentially new because it is *true*. It is a process stemming from an event which is a rupture from the situation. And since there are four domains in which truth could take place—love, science, art, and politics—the true life can be led in any of these domains. The same fidelity is involved in an artist painstakingly working on an artwork like an impressionist painting, or a modernist poem. These are radically new creations by the subject from an event. It can be asked, however, under what criteria can one recognize truths? As a summary of the preceding discussion, the following questions could provide a set of guidelines:

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<sup>21</sup> Badiou (2005) p. 188.

<sup>22</sup> Badiou (2005) p. 451.

- 1) Was it initiated by an unprecedented event?
- 2) Does it have a faithful subject?
- 3) Is it somewhat indiscernible in the situation it is in?

If a certain procedure satisfies the three abovementioned questions, then it can be said to be true. A love, for instance, can be true if and only if: (1) it began with a love-encounter, (2) it maintains the fidelity of both lovers, and (3) it only makes the most sense for the lovers. On the other hand, a love cannot be true, if it is, for instance, a product of a potion or a hypnosis. In such a case, the love in question would fail to satisfy the eventness of the encounter required in (1). If it is an arranged marriage, it could also not be true for it would fail to satisfy (3): it would only make sense for the arrangers and not even for the lovers.

Going back to the earlier dilemma, this does not mean that the true life is already a choice to *burn*. On the contrary, the true life lies in the middle of burning and building: it is a burning that builds. As an event builds from the elements of a situation, the true life builds from what remains of the burning. The procedure of fidelity is essentially a building process as it “distinguishes and gathers together the becoming of what is connected to the name of the event.”<sup>23</sup> While it is prohibited by the situation, fidelity builds the set from elements that are connected to the event into building what is called a *generic set*.<sup>24</sup> Genericity is a term borrowed from set theory where a set is generic if it avoids at least one mode of determination of the situation.<sup>25</sup> In other words, a generic set might not completely make sense to whoever comes from the situation. A truth, therefore, is characterized by the generic set: a prohibited, unrecognized set by the situation which is created by a forcing of the subject through the process of fidelity. As a generic set, a truth, therefore, does not make much sense from the perspective of the situation. A truth is a burning that builds.

Intuitively, it seems that living the true life is living a meaningful life, yet Badiou does not explicitly avow this position. There may be another work that fits the bill in dealing with the meaningful life, Badiou’s work entitled *Happiness*. As a systematic thinker, Badiou is able to tie up all aspects of his philosophy under a single (meta)ontological framework. Hence, his discussion of happiness is also

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<sup>23</sup> Badiou (2005) p. 539.

<sup>24</sup> Badiou (2005) p. 357.

<sup>25</sup> Badiou (2005) p. 541.

to his notion of truth as he defines it as “the infallible sign of all access to truth.”<sup>26</sup> It is therefore a necessary part of the true life that it is happy for it is in the process of fidelity itself that the subject finds happiness. There is, therefore, no other notion in the Badiouan corpus that comes close to the question of meaning in life. Moreover, happiness is merely corollary to a Badiouan Theory of meaning in life, as a necessary consequence of living a true life. A Badiouan Theory should therefore take truth as its central concept. I formulate the theory thus:

(BTM) A human person’s life is meaningful if it is a true life.

While this fully encapsulates the preceding discussion, such formulation needs to be further explicated for the conditions for meaningfulness to surface. Hence, BTM can be reformulated thus:

(BTM<sub>2</sub>) A human person’s life is meaningful if it is a true life, i.e. a life characterized by an engagement to a process of fidelity to at least one generic truth.

While Badiou admits that there are pluralities of truths, it would set too high a standard if the theory would require fidelity to multiple truths. Besides, this is also a question of quantifying truths which Badiou would take up in later works, which this paper would no longer delve into. It is, however, a useful assumption for our purposes to assume that truths are quantifiable in the sense that at least one truth is recognizable to be singular. BTM<sub>2</sub> therefore claims that fidelity to even a single truth is sufficient for meaningfulness.

At this point, it can now be clearly seen that BTM<sub>2</sub> is an *objective naturalist* theory. This is evident in Badiou’s insistence that truths are material, evidenced by the fact that they are subjective creations in material situations. While the term “subjective” has been repeatedly used in the preceding discussion, it need not be confused with the term “subjective” in subjective naturalism. While subjective naturalism insists on the sufficiency of subjectively set purposes for meaning, BTM<sub>2</sub> insists that these truths are distinct from the subject. While a subject *decides* an event’s existence, a subject does not *create* the event. Hence, even with the

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<sup>26</sup> Badiou (2019) p. 35.

decisive role of the subject, BTM<sub>2</sub> remains an objective naturalist theory of meaning in life.

### 3. A Theory of Meaning in Life

I now turn to defending BTM<sub>2</sub> as a theory of meaning in life, and not of anything else. In an earlier paper, Metz attempted to explicate what a theory of meaning in life is about. He observed that philosophers have respectively reduced the question of meaning into three broad categories: purposiveness, transcendence, and esteem. First, he showed that purposiveness does not exhaust the question of meaning by arguing that meaning is not purely teleological but can also be deontological.<sup>27</sup> Secondly, transcendence does not exhaust the concept of meaning either because a pursuit of an internal value, which is hardly an instance of transcendence, can still be considered meaning-conferring.<sup>28</sup> Lastly, esteem does not exhaust the concept either since it is not logically contradictory to suppose that a meaningful life may not invite esteem or admiration.<sup>29</sup> He concluded the paper by saying that “there are no necessary and sufficient conditions for a theory to be about meaning as opposed to something else.”<sup>30</sup> This means that there is currently no unified concept of meaning that the field is talking about.

His position, however, has changed later on albeit his analysis remained the same. In his book, *Meaning in Life*, he branded the previously discussed reductions as *monist analyses* of meaning in life,<sup>31</sup> replacing the term “esteem” with “apt emotions,” in what I suspect is an attempt to broaden the last category. Following his 2001 paper, Metz likewise concludes that they ultimately fail in their attempts to reduce the question of meaningfulness to a single question.<sup>32</sup> One of the non-starters that he cites is Wittgenstein’s insistence that the talk of meaning can be reduced to a talk of God.<sup>33</sup> While this claim by Wittgenstein seems more complicated than it looks, it is obvious that the question of meaningfulness is more than just any single question. But the conclusion in

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<sup>27</sup> Metz (2001) pp. 140-145.

<sup>28</sup> Metz (2001) pp. 145-147.

<sup>29</sup> Metz (2001) pp. 147-150.

<sup>30</sup> Metz (2001) p. 150, Metz (2013) pp. 33-34.

<sup>31</sup> Metz (2013) pp. 24-34.

<sup>32</sup> Metz (2013) p. 24, also see Metz (2001).

<sup>33</sup> Metz (2013) p. 23.

*Meaning in Life* is much more substantial than the negative one in 2001. Instead of an outright dismissal of necessary and sufficient conditions for meaning, Metz now forwards a “family resemblance approach.”<sup>34</sup>

He now claims that a theory of meaning in life actually answers the following *overlapping* questions, making it a real family resemblance approach: (1) which ends are worth pursuing, (2) how to transcend our animal nature, and (3) what merits esteem or admiration.<sup>35</sup> These three questions will now serve as guide in proving that BTM<sub>2</sub> is indeed a theory of meaning in life. In this section, I claim that BTM<sub>2</sub> talks about all three.

First, BTM<sub>2</sub> contends that the ends that are worth pursuing are obviously *truths*, which for Badiou can only be one of four: scientific/mathematical, artistic/poetic, political, or amorous. These four are specifically picked because it is only in these domains that generic truths can spring up. For instance, the lives of Mother Teresa and Nelson Mandela, examples often cited by Metz,<sup>36</sup> can be considered meaningful because of their fidelity to truths. Mother Teresa dedicated her life to taking care of the sick and dying, which is the generic truth of radical mercy and compassion. While Badiou does not recognize religious truths, the truths to which Mother Teresa was faithful could be considered political, even amorous. Mother Teresa’s love of the poor and suffering is indeed a generic truth procedure. Nelson Mandela, on the other hand, committed himself in ending apartheid in South Africa—a fidelity to the truth of emancipatory politics. On the other hand, a life spent in an orgasmatron would not count as meaningful because there is no truth that is given birth here. Pleasures are functions of knowledge while truth bores a hole in knowledge. In other words, pleasure is dictated by current modes of determination because nothing new is produced. In pleasure, we only replicate what is expected of our biology and psychology.

This now leads us to the second condition: that a theory of meaning in life talks about a certain transcendence of our animal nature. Metz has been explicit that only a rational nature geared towards fundamentality is meaning-conferring.<sup>37</sup> The reason behind this is that the satisfaction of base desires *alone* does not seem to confer much meaning. In BTM<sub>2</sub>, the key to establishing this transcendence of animalistic nature is the process of fidelity.

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<sup>34</sup> Metz (2013) p. 34.

<sup>35</sup> Metz (2013) p. 34, Metz (2011) p. 401, and Metz (2003) pp. 64-65.

<sup>36</sup> See Metz (2015), Metz (2013), also Metz (2011).

<sup>37</sup> Metz (2013) pp. 222-223.

It is Badiou's conviction that human action thinks. His attempt has always been to explicate the rationality of *praxis*, or human action, by providing the mathematical complexities of historical change instigated by subjective intervention. Fidelity involves a decision on the part of the subject, deciding whether the event has happened or not. Clearly, Badiou's notion of fidelity cannot be fulfilled by a non-human animal. It is only with a rational capacity that one can distinguish elements from one another and gather them together into a single category, i.e. into the event in question. Does this mean, therefore, that BTM<sub>2</sub> excludes the possibility of animal lives being considered meaningful? This would certainly throw stones at contemporary objective naturalists like Peter Singer and even Thaddeus Metz himself.

Metz, in a more rudimentary version of his Fundamentality Theory then called *Transcending the Animal Self Theory* or TAST,<sup>38</sup> admits the possibility of a dog leading a meaningful life by virtue of her saving her master.<sup>39</sup> While this seems contradictory given the name of the theory, Metz admits the possibility of a dog's meaningful life because his heroic act of saving her master can be considered a form of transcending her animal self. While such act is admittedly commendable, this seems to be helplessly anthropomorphic. As discussed, the transcendence of the animal self is precisely a function of reason and in this regard, the dog could have exhibited certain rational capacities such as decisiveness and courage in saving her master. This, however, is questionable since such ascription of transcendence, more so rationality, to the dog is, again, anthropomorphic. If we are indeed to recognize the inherent worth of non-human species, ascribing anthropomorphic characteristics to them is a denial, and not a promotion, of their inherent worth. Hence, instead of uplifting the dog for being rational, and ergo human-like, one has to evaluate their lives on the basis of their own criteria, the epistemology of which is beyond our reach.<sup>40</sup> While this is an obviously controversial claim, suffice it to say that BTM<sub>2</sub> *prima facie* does not allow for animals to lead a meaningful life on the assumption that we do not know whether they are capable of being faithful to truths. Whether this assumption is correct or not may be the subject of future research.

On the other hand, Badiou talks about the subject as being essentially tied to

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<sup>38</sup> Metz (2003) p. 65.

<sup>39</sup> Metz (2003) pp. 65-66.

<sup>40</sup> Cf. Wittgenstein's discussion on animals' forms of life in *Philosophy of Psychology—A Fragment* (formerly PI Part II) or PPF i.1. and PPF xi.327.

fidelity itself: “I will call *subject* the process itself of liaison between the event (thus the intervention) and the procedure of fidelity (thus its operator of connection).”<sup>41</sup> The subject, therefore, is a subject only by virtue of its fidelity to truths. If BTM<sub>2</sub>, however, adopts this essential embeddedness of the subject to fidelity, would this make the theory too broad as to include *all* human subjects regardless of the lives they live? Are not all living human beings faithful to at least one generic truth? In other words, are not all human beings subjects in their own right?

This seems to be contrary to the aims of a theory of meaning in life as the Badiouan Theory cannot seem to discriminate between meaningful and non-meaningful lives. But Alain Badiou admits the possibility of being a human being without necessarily being a subject: he admits that “out of these registers, there is only *existence*, or *individuality*, but no subject.”<sup>42</sup> Her composition as subject is characterized as a “particular route, a sustained break, and it is very difficult to know how this composition is to be superimposed upon or combined with the simple perseverance-of-self.”<sup>43</sup> A subject, therefore, is rare and being a subject is worthy of admiration. The Badiouan Theory therefore holds that a life lived faithful to truths, lets itself transcend one’s animal nature and thus lead a meaningful life. This leads me to the last condition.

Badiou, in his short essay *Philosophy for Militants*, calls on a figure who can genuinely represent genericity, a figure who is generic as well. He traces the history of this figure from the ancient warrior whose achievements are of his own, fighting for a divine destiny. The warrior then evolved into the soldier, the anonymous fighter for the abstract nation.<sup>44</sup> He therefore calls for the soldier’s successor who would be anonymous as the soldier was but represents generic truths for the whole of humanity—this is the figure of the *hero*.<sup>45</sup> The genuinely generic figure, therefore, is the hero. While in this context, Badiou only talks about the hero in politics, we can extend this into other realms into saying that subjectivity is heroism. It is therefore worthy of esteem—a heroism—to remain faithful to truths. Moreover, it is only in fidelity to truths that one can achieve happiness.<sup>46</sup> If we then agree with Aristotle that happiness is the greatest good,

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<sup>41</sup> Badiou (2005) p. 252.

<sup>42</sup> Badiou (1992) p. 108.

<sup>43</sup> Badiou (2012a) p. 46.

<sup>44</sup> Badiou (2012b) pp. 46-47.

<sup>45</sup> Badiou (2012b) p. 45.

<sup>46</sup> Badiou (2019) p. 85.

we also agree that a happy life is a life worthy of admiration.

#### 4. Advantages

In several of his works, Metz provides a taxonomy of theories of meaning in life currently available in the literature.<sup>47</sup> Metz locates the Fundamentality Theory under the objective naturalist category and the most mature account of this is found in his 2013 book, *Meaning in Life*. The theory is quoted in full below:

(FT<sub>3</sub>) A human person's life is more meaningful, the more that she, without violating certain moral constraints against degrading sacrifice, employs her reason and in ways that either positively orient rationality towards fundamental conditions of human existence, or negatively orient it towards what threatens them, such that the worse parts of her life cause better parts towards its end by a process that makes for a compelling and ideally original life-story; in addition, the meaning in a human person's life is reduced, the more it is negatively oriented towards fundamental conditions of human existence or exhibits narrative disvalue.<sup>48</sup>

He argues that a life, which may include certain negative events, dedicated to so-called "fundamental conditions," is a meaningful life. He points out the role of certain negative and value-negating life events in meaningfulness which he calls *anti-matter*. Anti-matter does not include the amount of time in a life spent asleep as this neither confers nor negates meaning,<sup>49</sup> but only certain negative life events such as blowing up the Sphinx<sup>50</sup> or torturing people for fun.<sup>51</sup> FT<sub>3</sub> is conscious that anti-matter could potentially render one's life meaningless but that they may be allowed so long as they contribute to a more appealing narrative or to the benefit of the fundamental conditions themselves. In other words, we could say that anti-matter should be *redeemed*.

Although it remains as the best available theory, FT<sub>3</sub> needs to answer certain glaring issues. The first of the criticisms that has already been hurled against the

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<sup>47</sup> Cf. Metz (2013), Metz (2011), Metz (2007), and Metz (2001).

<sup>48</sup> Metz (2013) p. 235.

<sup>49</sup> Metz (2013) p. 64.

<sup>50</sup> Ibid.

<sup>51</sup> Metz (2013) p. 234.

theory is that fundamentality seems to be insufficient for meaning.<sup>52</sup> For instance, knowing that  $1 + 1 = 2$ , while fundamental, cannot give much meaning to a life. Metz responds to this by saying that not just any “bare fact of rationality directed towards a fundamental object”<sup>53</sup> is required. A “*substantial* contouring of one’s intelligence towards such an object”<sup>54</sup> is needed. First and foremost, for whom is it substantial? Landau argues that the most defensible interpretation of substantiality would be “depending on [each person’s] abilities and education.”<sup>55</sup> Metz, however, rightly rejects this interpretation as it practically reduces FT<sub>3</sub> into a subjective naturalist theory,<sup>56</sup> running contrary to the objective naturalist classification of Metz of his own theory.<sup>57</sup> The question of the meaning of “substantiality,” therefore, is still an open question.

Moreover, what does it mean for a contouring to be substantial? In a rejoinder to Landau, Metz provides us an idea of how rationality may be considered as “substantially engaged”: “working hard and in a sophisticated manner, and it must be contoured towards a particular object, namely, one fundamental to human life.”<sup>58</sup> While working hard and sophistication both provide an insight to what substantiality is, it remains to be a question which acts would count as one of these. As Landau has pointed out, this train of thought leads us to conclude that not only people like Einstein would have meaningful lives but even the freshman Physics student who studies his works.<sup>59</sup> Metz admits this lapse in the theory and proposes that a certain level of “advancement” is needed to differentiate lives with greater meanings such as Einstein’s from those with less such as that of the freshman Physics student.<sup>60</sup> While the notion of advancement might help in further qualifying substantiality, this issue is far from being settled. This lack of resolution only proves the inherent vagueness in Metz’ notion of substantiality. In a sense, the process of clarification only leads the theory to invoke other notions that only need further qualification.

Secondly, there is a fundamental problem in Metz’ notion of fundamentality. Fundamentality can be understood in two ways: metaphysically and

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<sup>52</sup> Landau (2013) p. 511, Metz (2015) p. 118.

<sup>53</sup> Metz (2013) p. 236.

<sup>54</sup> Ibid.

<sup>55</sup> Landau (2013) p. 507.

<sup>56</sup> Metz (2015) p. 119.

<sup>57</sup> Metz (2013) p. 12.

<sup>58</sup> Metz (2015) p. 115.

<sup>59</sup> Landau (2013) p. 507.

<sup>60</sup> Metz (2015) p. 119.

epistemologically.<sup>61</sup> Epistemologically, a judgment is fundamental when it *takes into account* other judgments in a context. Metaphysically, an event is fundamental when it *brings about* other events.<sup>62</sup> Fundamentality, therefore, accounts for succeeding objects in a certain causal chain and sometimes certain judgments or beliefs. While ambiguity can easily be alleged here, this paper notices an inherent *vagueness* in the concept as well.

Consider, for instance, the equation  $1 + 1 = 2$ . It is a fundamental principle of arithmetic, but is it significant enough to become meaning-conferring? Metz describes fundamentality as “that of conditions that are largely responsible for many other conditions in a given domain.”<sup>63</sup> This means that while the necessary condition of X is necessary for X to obtain, it is not necessarily a fundamental condition. On the other hand, the fundamental condition of X is *responsible* for the obtaining of X. Although this clearly differentiates fundamentality from necessity, it still does not qualify what fundamentality really is. Does this mean that fundamental conditions of X are *causes* of X? Metz implies that they are.<sup>64</sup> Metz gives the example of Mother Teresa’s compassion to sick and dying persons. When she tended to them, the resulting well-being was *responsible* for these people’s subsequent actions and decisions, making Mother Teresa’s life oriented towards the *fundamental condition* of people’s health. In other words, their health *caused* them to do and decide everything else that followed their ill conditions. If this is the case, then FT<sub>3</sub> is helplessly in need of a metaphysical discussion to ground the concept of causality, and by extension, of fundamentality. What does it mean for a fundamental condition to *cause* X? What does it mean for a condition to be *fundamental* or *responsible*?

There is therefore a need to further substantiate the “substantial” requirement of fundamentality. Moreover, there is a need to locate these notions shown to be important in analytic existentialism in more traditional metaphysical debates. What does it mean for a certain condition to be deemed “fundamental”? I argue that BTM<sub>2</sub> is able to address these two striking issues precisely by being more explicit in its metaphysics.

First, it evades any allegation of vagueness of the term “substantial” which

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<sup>61</sup> Metz (2013) p. 226.

<sup>62</sup> “Events” here should be understood as broadly as possible as Metz, at least in his extant writings, is not conscious of the underpinnings of this term in continental philosophy, especially in Badiouan philosophy which is the subject matter of this paper.

<sup>63</sup> Metz (2013) p. 226, see also Metz (2011) p. 402.

<sup>64</sup> Ibid.

was used to describe the contouring of one's life to fundamental conditions. BTM<sub>2</sub> does not, in any way, put primacy on the notion of substantiality because it does not need to. It already presupposes the notion of fidelity as the mode of contouring of the self towards these conditions. Hence, whatever FT<sub>3</sub> meant as substantial contouring, BTM<sub>2</sub> has already qualified as the procedure of fidelity. In this aspect, therefore, BTM<sub>2</sub> provides no vagueness whatsoever; it is clear that the *substantial* act characteristic of the subject's contouring to fundamental conditions is the procedure of fidelity.

More importantly, BTM<sub>2</sub> is able to further clarify what it means for a condition to be fundamental. While Metz contents himself with calling these conditions "fundamental," the reason for their fundamental status is not clear. BTM<sub>2</sub>, however, asserts that truths, being essential to meaningfulness, are building processes and are therefore fundamental. Any process of fidelity collects the elements of an event from the situation it is in. An event only happens in an evental site which, as discussed earlier, is at the edge of the void. Why is a site at the edge of the void? This is simply because the intersection of an evental site with the situation it belongs to is empty. In other words, the evental site does not share any elements with the situation it is in.

In set theory, there is an assurance that every situation has an evental site, making it *possible* for an event to happen in any situation at all. This assurance is given to us by the axiom of foundation: "Every non-void multiple contains some Other."<sup>65</sup> While we do not know if an event will ever or did happen, we know that there is a site in each situation where an event *could* happen. Every day, a revolution might start, a scientific discovery might take place, or we could fall in love. More importantly, the axiom of *foundation* assures us that the site is *fundamental* to the situation. It is therefore the possibility of an event that is fundamental—the same event that begins a truth. It is therefore in the evental site that truth grounds its being; events, as starting points of truths are *fundamental* to truth.

This discussion on the axiom of foundation only proves that there is, again, no vagueness involved in BTM<sub>2</sub>'s notion of fundamentality. If truths begin with events and events happen in an evental site assured by the axiom of foundation, the foundation of the situation seems to be rooted in truths. In other words, for BTM<sub>2</sub>, truths remain fundamental. While FT<sub>3</sub> still needs to clarify its notion of

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<sup>65</sup> Badiou (2005) p. 195.

fundamentality, BTM<sub>2</sub> already provides a very clear notion of what it is to be fundamental with the repertoire of concepts from mathematics, owing to its explicit metaphysical underpinnings.

Interestingly, it is not just the event that is fundamental to truth. Truth itself is also *fundamental* to subjectivity. For Badiou, a subject does not exist before an event. A subject can only *be* because of its fidelity to the event as “the process of truth *induces* a subject.”<sup>66</sup> Hence, truth is shown here to be fundamental to subjectivization.

Most importantly, BTM<sub>2</sub>'s emphasis on the notion of truth signifies a return to a more metaphysical approach to the existentialist question. While I do not wish to return to a Heideggerian approach in doing existentialism, this is an important step in bridging certain discordant discourses in philosophy today. First, with the notion of truth, BTM<sub>2</sub> connects analytic existentialism to metaphysics. Although this connection was unimaginable during the inception of analytic philosophy, the latter has seen unimaginable changes as well such as the rise of analytic existentialism itself.<sup>67</sup> The field is young, as pointed out by Metz,<sup>68</sup> while the metaphysical tradition is as old as philosophy is. This opens up the budding field to the repertoire of concepts metaphysics has stacked up for the last thousands of years. Secondly, with the notion of truth still, BTM<sub>2</sub> is able to connect analytic philosophy in general to continental philosophy. The fragmentation of philosophy into two hostile traditions may have been the most unfortunate product of Modern Philosophy in Western thought. In invoking the Badiouan concept of truth, BTM<sub>2</sub> opens up analytic philosophy to traditionally continental subjects such as subjectivity, event, and being *qua* being. While the bridges that BTM<sub>2</sub> has potentially made may be unwelcome to some, it is undeniable that because of these, BTM<sub>2</sub> opens a new field of research. Succeeding articles can be written on the relationship between the event and meaningfulness, freedom and meaningfulness, and the supernaturalists' response to a completely objective naturalist account of meaning in life grounded in immanent truths.

## 5. Counterarguments

With the preceding discussion, we are able to formulate BTM<sub>2</sub> and defend that

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<sup>66</sup> Badiou (2012a) p. 43.

<sup>67</sup> Espiritu (2019) p. 54.

<sup>68</sup> Metz (2013) p. 1.

it is indeed a theory of meaning in life. Moreover, the previous section provided reasons to prefer this theory over the currently accepted theory today, FT<sub>3</sub>. While substantive, BTM<sub>2</sub> has yet to encounter criticisms. This section is devoted to these.

Let me first discuss the patent disadvantages of BTM<sub>2</sub> compared to FT<sub>3</sub>. It is indeed glaring that BTM<sub>2</sub> lacks many features present in FT<sub>3</sub>. For instance, FT<sub>3</sub> explicitly prohibits the possibility of “degrading sacrifice,” requires a “compelling and ideally original life story” in order to justify anti-matter, and mandates that fundamentality outweighs anti-matter. With the blatant disregard of these safeguards, does this mean that BTM<sub>2</sub> allows: (1) degrading sacrifice, and (2) *unredeemed* anti-matter?

I first contend that a degrading sacrifice is not in itself an anti-matter. This can be seen with the case of Jesus: while he allowed himself to be crucified naked after being mocked and spat on while carrying his own cross, one can hardly deny that he lived a meaningful life. Hence, if we deny that degrading sacrifice and meaningfulness can go together, we might as well deny the meaningfulness of Jesus’ life. I submit that even to the non-religious, this is a counterintuitive conclusion.

While the previous response is a very controversial one, I propose another response. Badiou is explicit in the independence of truth to the logic of the situation it is in. Because of the radicality of its break from the situation, the truth becomes unrecognizable from the situation. Hence, the standards for goodness, or of what is ethical, within the truth, is completely determined by the truth. Badiou summarizes the ethical dictum as “Keep going!” or “Continue!”<sup>69</sup> In a way, what is ethical is to continue the path to fidelity to a truth. Therefore, whatever is degrading, and therefore unethical, in Badiouan terms at least, can never come from a fidelity to truths. Moreover, if fidelity to truths induces a subject, infidelity to these truths would only entail the demise of the subject. What else is more degrading than the ceasing of the subject as subject? Hence, the mere fidelity to truth of the subject evades the possibility of a degrading sacrifice altogether.

Furthermore, I argue that the mere fidelity to truths should already “redeem” whatever anti-matter has been left behind in a life. Metz carefully safeguarded FT<sub>3</sub> against what I call the problem of *unredeemed anti-matter*. Consider for instance a person who was once a drug dependent who successfully overcame her addiction but later on reverted back to her old abhorrent ways. To exclude this life

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<sup>69</sup> Hallward (2012) p.xi.

from meaningfulness, Metz had to add the extra safeguard of not exhibiting a “narrative disvalue”<sup>70</sup> only because the redemption needed for meaning is not inherent in the notion of fundamentality. He later on admits that this addition still lacks adequate qualification.<sup>71</sup>

When it comes to BTM<sub>2</sub>, however, such safeguard is not necessary and at most redundant. Since it has been clear that an event, as a starting point of truths, is a rupture from the situation, fidelity to it means that there is no going back. To use the famous Allegory of the Cave, the philosopher’s return to the cave is no longer a return of a prisoner but of an altogether different person—the event of the encounter of the outside world has changed her forever.<sup>72</sup> Badiou characterizes evental fidelity as “a *real* break (both thought and practised) in the specific order within which the event took place (be it political, loving, artistic, or scientific...).”<sup>73</sup> The person who falls in love truly, for instance, can never see the world the same way again; she now sees it in the perspective of the both of them. The person who begins her life as a political activist can also never see the world the same way again; she cannot fight for a revolution without having to see the world differently. These examples seem to go hand in glove to the requirements of FT<sub>3</sub> of a “compelling” and “ideally original” life story as if these lives were made to be adapted into a novel or an HBO series. But I think it is obvious that not all meaningful lives would make good novels; some evental ruptures are much calmer and peaceful than one would think. A bird pooping on one’s windshield, for instance, can be an event for the truth of a religious conversion—who knows?

Having discussed the seeming disadvantages against FT<sub>3</sub>, I will now turn to another objection. It can be argued, for instance, that BTM<sub>2</sub> does not dismiss morally despicable acts in a subject’s pursuit of truths. As admitted earlier, a degrading sacrifice is not despicable per se and would have nothing to do with meaningfulness. This seems to allow that other morally despicable acts are permissible as long as they are done in the service of fidelity. This can easily be referred back to Badiou’s notion of genericity and his notion of evil.

Badiou claims that a procedure is generic if at least one of its elements eludes the situation’s recognition.<sup>74</sup> On the other hand, Badiou calls evil the attempt to

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<sup>70</sup> Metz (2013) p. 235.

<sup>71</sup> Ibid.

<sup>72</sup> Cf. the discussion of *thaumadzein* of Hannah Arendt (1990).

<sup>73</sup> Badiou (2012a) p. 42.

<sup>74</sup> Badiou (2005) p. 541.

name what is supposedly unnameable.<sup>75</sup> To put it in more concrete terms, evil can happen in three ways: as *terror*, as *betrayal*, or as *disaster*.<sup>76</sup> Terror happens when the event that began the process of fidelity is not real. His example here are the Nazis. The German situation gave birth to the unprecedented situation of Nazism to which a lot of German subjects became faithful to. If Badiouan truth proceeds this way, then we have the counterintuitive conclusion that unrepentant Nazis or even Hitler could have lived meaningful lives.<sup>77</sup> However, Badiou dismisses this “truth” of the Nazis as a mere *simulacrum* because the event to which subjects were faithful to was the illusory event of racial superiority and the “Jewish problem” propagated by Hitler in his *Mein Kampf*. It must be remembered that events are never a subject’s own doing. Although subjects *decide* an event, the event itself is not a subjective *creation*. Hence, the “Jewish problem” and Arian supremacy were not genuine events. The “truth” that followed them, therefore, is not real; it was a mere *simulacrum* of truth but not truth as such.

Secondly, evil can come as a betrayal when the subject stops being faithful to the truth it was once faithful to. It is a betrayal because there can never be any possibility of going back since the fidelity has already been severed. After the betrayal, the truth would no longer make sense to the individual. Like a lover who broke off a relationship, she would no longer think of going back unless she was never sure of the break up. Lastly, evil may come as a disaster when truth is identified with total power. Evil begins when the truth begins to demand order when there is no order, i.e. to name what is supposedly unnamable. This is characteristic, for instance, of Christian dogma demanding that definite lines be drawn on human sexuality: that everyone is either male or female, and nothing in between. But the event escapes the orderliness of the situation and it is only when a subject remains faithful to it that it begins to make sense.

With this threefold manifestation of evil, one can see that no evil act can be justified for the sake of fidelity to truths. When evil happens, it can only be because what was used to justify it was never the truth in the first place. It should be clear, therefore, that evil and truth are opposites and never composites.

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<sup>75</sup> Badiou (2008) p. 126, see also Badiou (2012a).

<sup>76</sup> Badiou (2012a) p. 71.

<sup>77</sup> While Metz (2013) does not dismiss this outright, I do think that this is a putative intuition. This could be the subject matter of further debates on the matter.

## 5. Conclusion

This paper was able to formulate BTM<sub>2</sub> and critically evaluate it. Coming from the lack of metaphysical consciousness of the field, and the theory's potential to inform the current literature on its current problems, there is a need to derive such a theory. As discussed in the second section, the Badiouan theory can be summarized as the claim that *being true is a sufficient condition for a life to be meaningful*. Truth, as the qualifier for life, should be understood here as *generic*, i.e. a truth that escapes the situation's determination.

In the third section, I discussed the advantages of BTM<sub>2</sub> against the most widely accepted theory today, FT<sub>3</sub>. Aside from current counterarguments against FT<sub>3</sub>, I allege that there is an inherent vagueness in the notion of fundamentality and that the requirement of a substantial contouring is also vague. This vagueness, in turn, made Metz admit that FT<sub>3</sub> is sometimes metaphysical and sometimes epistemological, illustrating the need for the metaphysical grounding of our existentialist concepts. I have shown that BTM<sub>2</sub> evades these problems by positing truths as fundamental and positing fidelity as substantial.

In the fourth section, I have shown three seeming counterarguments to the proposed theory. First, unlike FT<sub>3</sub>, BTM<sub>2</sub> seems to endorse the possibility of degrading sacrifice being compatible with meaningfulness. Drawing from the degrading fate of Jesus, I showed that a degrading sacrifice per se does not warrant lack of meaning. Much like Jesus', a degrading sacrifice could even enhance rather than reduce meaning in life. Moreover, I have argued that seizing a subject's fidelity to a truth is the more degrading act rather than actually continuing in the path of fidelity. Secondly, the theory seems to allow so-called unredeemed anti-matter. This objection, however, does not hold as the fidelity required for meaningfulness is capable enough to redeem whatever anti-matter is left to be redeemed. Lastly, following the question on degrading sacrifice, the theory seems to allow even the most despicable acts so long as they are at the service of truths. I argued, however, that evil and genericity are opposites and therefore the former can never be employed at the service of the latter.

Given the weaknesses of the FT<sub>3</sub> outlined herein, this paper has therefore shown that BTM<sub>2</sub> is a formidable theory to be reckoned with in contemporary analytic existentialism.

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# The Meaning of Life

## What We Mean by ‘Meaning’

Aaron Brooks\*

### Abstract

There are two types of arguments found in the literature on existential meaning: (1) debates over existential meaning as a concept; and (2) debates over conceptions of existential meaning. Concepts are what make a question possible – i.e. they are the more-formal definitions assumed by a question. Conceptions, on the other hand, are like answers to the question. This paper will focus on the first type of argument about the formal concept of meaning. I claim that existential meaning is a valuable connection between a life and something valuable. I draw this concept mainly from the work of Robert Nozick, who claims meaning arises as a person *seeks* to connect to *external* values. However, due to objections considered in this paper, I contend that ‘meaning’ denotes valuable connections to value(s), period. At the end of this paper, I defend this concept against three objections.

### 1. Introduction

I am not concerned in this paper with answers to the question of life’s meaning, for I think the more fundamental issue is what we mean by the concept that makes the question possible. I echo the suspicion of G.E. Moore, who famously claims in the preface to his *Principia Ethica*: “It appears to me that in ... philosophical studies, the difficulties and disagreements ... are mainly due to a very simple cause: namely to the attempt to answer questions, without first discovering precisely *what* question it is which you desire to answer.”<sup>1</sup> In particular, the task of this paper is to spell out the concept of meaning as it relates to the question: “what is the meaning of life?” To avoid any confusion, I will henceforth follow the convention of calling this type of meaning ‘existential meaning.’<sup>2</sup>

So far, I have been implicitly assuming the concept/conception distinction employed by John Rawls in his discussion of conceptions of justice in *A Theory*

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\* Instructor of Philosophy, Durham Technical Community College, 1637 E Lawson St, Durham, NC 27703, USA. aaronbrooks1[a]gmail.com

<sup>1</sup> Moore (1993), p. xvii.

<sup>2</sup> To be clear, the concept of existential meaning is broader than human life. We may wish to ask, for instance, about the meaning of the existence of the universe, or about the meaning of the existence of a particular phenomenon (like a black cat crossing our path). But I will be using the term ‘existential meaning’ as a shorthand for the meaning of (a) human life.

*of Justice*.<sup>3</sup> For Rawls, a conception of justice is an *interpretation* of the role of principles of justice in assigning rights and duties.<sup>4</sup> Generalizing, it would seem that, for Rawls, conceptions are interpretations of concepts. What, then, is a concept? Rawls elsewhere explains the distinction (as it pertains to ‘justice’) in the following manner: “it seems natural to think of the concept of justice as distinct from the various conceptions of justice and as being specified by the role which these different sets of principles, these different conceptions, have in common.”<sup>5</sup> In other words, the concept of justice is specified (and implied) by the shared role of differing sets of principles in differing conceptions of justice. A bit later, he explains it somewhat differently, claiming the abstract concept of justice is a “proper balance” between competing principles of justice posited by (and composing) competing conceptions of justice.<sup>6</sup> Putting Rawls’ two descriptions of a concept together, then, it would seem that a concept is a balance between or common denominator shared by differing conceptions.

Analogously, we could think of the concept of existential meaning as that idea shared by the various conceptions of meaning that people hold. Conceptions of meaning, on the other hand, would be interpretations of the concept of meaning. But if this is how we are to understand the distinction, it is far from satisfactory. These definitions are circular – to understand a concept, we must know what its conceptions are, and vice-versa. Thus, more specificity about what the distinction amounts to when applied to existential meaning will be helpful here.<sup>7</sup>

Thaddeus Metz applies the concept/conception distinction to existential meaning in his book, *Meaning in Life*. He explains that there are two types of arguments found in the literature on existential meaning: (1) debates over existential meaning as a concept; and (2) debates over different conceptions of existential meaning.<sup>8</sup> According to Metz, concepts are what make a question possible – that is, they are what questions assume. It is helpful to think of the concept as being something like an abstract, formal definition that lacks substance. So, in discussing existential meaning as a concept, philosophers are primarily

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<sup>3</sup> Rawls is not the first to make this distinction. As far as I can find, the distinction between concept and conception is first made by W. B. Gallie in his paper, "Essentially Contested Concepts" (1955).

<sup>4</sup> Rawls (1971), p. 8.

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

<sup>6</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 8.

<sup>7</sup> I do not mean to imply that Rawls has no more to say on this distinction – he does. I introduce Rawls because he is popularly cited with reference to this distinction, and his construal of a concept as that idea shared in common by its various interpretations is helpful.

<sup>8</sup> Metz (2013), p. 18-19.

concerned with asking what we mean by ‘meaning.’ Conceptions, on the other hand, are answers to questions. Offering a conception gives the formal concept substance. Indeed, another possible way to characterize the concept/conception distinction is to denote (1) as a debate about form and (2) as a debate about substance.

With that said, the distinction between concepts and conceptions should not be pushed too far, if for no other reason than philosophers disagree about what counts as an analysis of what. Rather than viewing the concept/conception distinction as one which is unambiguous and clear, it will be helpful to view the distinction as demarcating different areas along a continuum, where some discussions tend towards elucidating the concept/question, while others tend towards elucidating the conception/answer. Still, as alluded to by Rawls, looking at differing conceptions and real-world examples can help us get clear on what concept those conceptions/examples share in common. This paper will focus primarily on the former end of the concept/conception continuum. We can think of this idea as the one shared by all answers (conceptions) to the question.

An analysis of the concept of existential meaning should say something about the method that will be used in the analysis. I do not have space here to defend my method, but I do want to make it explicit. In this paper, I will mainly be searching for necessary and sufficient conditions for our concept of existential meaning. To do so, I will consider specific examples of existential meaning and consider whether or not a concept does or does not properly account for those examples. But we may have left the preceding paragraph still wondering about how to know what counts as a proper example of existential meaning. For instance, people may disagree about whether a certain life,  $L_0$ , has meaning. My basic assumption is that if certain examples can be argued to be valid illustrations of a life with meaning, then our concept of meaning should allow for those examples to be included under its umbrella.

The idea is this: if Philosopher X gives us a purported case of meaning and can explain what the supposed meaning of that life is, then we have reason to include the case in our analysis. The reason must be based on *form*, since, as posited, we may disagree about its substance. Concretely, what I am proposing is that if Philosopher X can give us an intelligible sentence with the following form, then the example in question deserves to be *considered* in our analysis: “ $L$ ’s life means  $M$ .” The assumption here is that if  $L$  means something, then  $L$  has meaning,  $M$ . Thus, it answers to the concept, even if in a very bad way. The only – and

important – restriction would be that *M* must be an intelligible proposition vis-à-vis *L*. So, if Philosopher X says that *L*'s life means that rocks are hard, we would probably have no reason to consider it, since our understanding of *L* undoubtedly has nothing to do with rocks being hard.

My central claim in this paper is that there is a unified concept of existential meaning assumed in the question: “what is the meaning of life?” In order to argue for this concept and flesh out some of its implications, this paper will proceed in two parts. In section two, I examine Robert Nozick’s concept of meaning, along with several objections and clarifications. In section three, I present and defend my own proposal, which is a modified version of Nozick’s. At the conclusion of that section, I consider three objections and argue that they are not a significant problem for my thesis.

## 2. The Value-Transcendence Concept

Robert Nozick’s formal concept of meaning relies upon the notion that meaning is about how a life *connects* with value(s) external to it. For Nozick, this connection to external values brings with it a transcendence of limitations. I will give a more precise exposition of his concept in just a moment. After I have refined the concept later in this section, I call it the “value-transcendence concept”. After considering several objections, I argue that it is unsatisfactory. However, in section three, I offer a concept that is built on the backbone of Nozick’s claim that meaning is about connection to value.

Nozick makes several comments about the concept of existential meaning in his *Philosophical Explanations*. For instance, Nozick says the problem of existential meaning is “*created* by limits, by being just this, by being merely this . . . . To see something’s limits, to see it as that limited particular thing or enterprise, is to question its meaning.”<sup>9</sup> Elsewhere, Nozick says: “Meaning involves transcending limits so as to connect with something valuable; meaning is a transcending of the limits of your own value . . . a connection with an external value.”<sup>10</sup> Nozick specifies that the connection may be one of ‘tracking’ values or ‘fitting’ external purposes.<sup>11</sup> Moreover, we see the value must be external. Importantly, he also clarifies elsewhere that the value he is concerned with is

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<sup>9</sup> Nozick (1981), p. 595 & 597, emphasis added.

<sup>10</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 610.

<sup>11</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 594-5.

intrinsic.<sup>12</sup>

Before moving on, it will be helpful to look at Christine Korsgaard's essay, "Two Distinctions in Goodness", in order to flesh out some important differences in types of value.<sup>13</sup> In that essay, she makes clear that there are at least four different types of value: intrinsic, extrinsic, final, and instrumental.<sup>14</sup>

Let us get clear on these values. I offer the following not as the definitive analysis of value (for I have not analyzed them at all). Indeed, further analysis itself warrants (and has received) book-length treatment. Rather, these will be functional definitions for the purposes of our discussion; these definitions should accord with standard philosophical usage of the terms and make sense of our discussion.<sup>15</sup> For our purposes, an object of analysis has *intrinsic value* if and only if that object carries value in itself, regardless of anything outside of it. I will not specify in-virtue-of-what the object has that value, nor how it comes to have that value, since no such specification will be necessary for this project. I posit that 'knowledge' of this value would seem to be based on one's pre-analytic commitments, and not on an appeal to experience. On the other hand, an object of analysis has *extrinsic value* if and only if that object derives its value from some other source. Here, it would seem, there are at least two options: the value can either be projected onto the object,<sup>16</sup> or be derived from some other object with intrinsic value, final value, or instrumental value.

An object of analysis has *final value* if and only if that object is valuable *for its own sake*. For the purposes of our discussion, I posit that this value is based on experience. I draw this idea from J. S. Mill. When considering the nature of final value, Mill draws a comparison between it and visible/audible objects. He says the best evidence that something is visible/audible is whether you can see/hear it. By analogy: "[T]he sole evidence it is possible to produce that anything is desirable is that people do actually desire it."<sup>17</sup> Though Mill is talking about the status of happiness as desirable, the same argument could be made for whether something is valuable. The argument is that something is valuable – value-able – if someone values it. Indeed, that very valuation shows it is able to be valued. And for Mill: "Questions about ends are, in other words, questions about what things

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<sup>12</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 611.

<sup>13</sup> Korsgaard (1983).

<sup>14</sup> Though I do not follow her definitions here, she gets the credit for distinguishing the four types.

<sup>15</sup> I do not claim that these definitions get at the 'essence' of these concepts.

<sup>16</sup> This would seem to be true for Nietzsche (1996).

<sup>17</sup> Mill (2001), p. 35.

are desirable.”<sup>18</sup> So I follow Mill in claiming that questions of final value are questions of what things people value as ends. On the other hand, an object of analysis has *instrumental value* if and only if that object is able to be valued as a means to a final value and/or an intrinsic value. Notice that some things can have both final value and instrumental value, as Aristotle makes clear in his *Nicomachean Ethics*. Moreover, something can also have final and intrinsic value. Most people conceive of happiness in this way.

An example might be instructive here. Consider the activity of playing cards. Some people cannot stand it. This is evidence that playing cards does not carry value ‘in itself’, and is thus not intrinsically-valuable.<sup>19</sup> But if you ask those who do enjoy card-playing why they like it, they may just tell you: “I don’t know, I just do!” This response indicates that card-playing is valued by many *for its own sake*. We’ve called this ‘final value.’ In order for something to have value as a means, it simply needs to bring about some state of affairs with a final value or intrinsic value (or both). We’ve called this type of value ‘instrumental value.’ For instance, some people value card-playing simply as a means to gamble for money. Notice that in these latter two cases, the value is projected onto the activity, and is thus extrinsic.

Nozick’s account relies upon intrinsic-value, period. However, that makes it susceptible to at least one objection: Hitler’s life.<sup>20</sup> By Nozick’s standards, lives such as Hitler’s (presumably) do not have meaning because they do not connect with intrinsic, external values. Indeed, Hitler’s life would seem to lack meaning precisely because it connected to *disvalue*. But while Hitler’s life may not, in fact, have meaning, we don’t want to rule out by definition the possibility that it may. But if Hitler’s life is not intrinsically valuable, what meaning could it have?

First, his life might be seen *by Hitler* as valuable for its own sake. Thus, it might have final value. Second, it might be seen as extrinsically-valuable, perhaps because it brought about intrinsically-valuable states of affairs, such as German citizens helping Jewish families to escape concentration camps. Third, it might be seen as instrumentally-valuable, perhaps because it teaches us a valuable historical lesson about the dangers of fascism and nationalism. In all these ways, it might still have value and thus be a candidate, at least in theory, for some type

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<sup>18</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>19</sup> I am not trying to press this example too far by making the strong claim that playing cards is most definitely not intrinsically-valuable. It is simply a plausible illustration of this point.

<sup>20</sup> Metz (2013) raises the example of Hitler in a different context, but it applies to this discussion as well.

of existential meaning. Thus, I will depart from Nozick's account on this point and specify that the value we are concerned with may be any of the four (intrinsic, extrinsic, instrumental, final) so far discussed.

In addition to connecting to external values, Nozick claims "attempts to find meaning in life *seek* to transcend the limits of an individual life."<sup>21</sup> Presumably, he means that one must recognize one's own limitations and intentionally try to overcome them.<sup>22</sup> Thus, there is an intentional aspect to the connection. So, let us formalize Nozick's concept like this:

*Value-Transcendence Concept (VTC):* (a) life, *L*, has meaning if and only if  
*L* seeks to transcend limitations by  
connecting with external value.

The question of existential meaning, then, is a question of connecting with external value. Answers to the question should account for *which* values beyond ourselves we should seek, and how we might connect with them. But how should we understand 'external value'?

When analyzing Nozick, Thaddeus Metz claims Nozick's concept is lacking because it doesn't permit conceptions of meaning that allow desire-satisfaction or pleasure-seeking to be meaningful (because those states are realized internally). For instance, Richard Taylor's conception of meaning, which he extracts from the myth of Sisyphus, allows pursuit of animal-desires, such as itch-scratching, to have meaning.<sup>23</sup> If we are right to interpret such desires as 'internal', then the *VTC* excludes those as examples of meaning. But presumably, animals should be allowed the possibility of having meaning in their lives (or so Metz thinks). Because Metz thinks Taylor's account deserves to be considered as a conception of existential meaning based on its popularity over the last 40 years, he rejects the concept of value-transcendence for existential meaning.<sup>24</sup> But, as I will argue in the following paragraphs, such rejection is unnecessary.

Metz's interpretation of the *VTC* can be easily avoided by staying true to Nozick's formulation of the concept, which simply talks about a life connecting with values 'outside' of it. There is a clear sense in which objects of desire and/or

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<sup>21</sup> Nozick (1981), p. 594 (emphasis added).

<sup>22</sup> Credit to David McNaughton for bringing this point to my attention.

<sup>23</sup> See Taylor (2000).

<sup>24</sup> Metz (2013), p. 29.

pleasure, when not yet experienced, are ‘outside’ of me, even though it is within my nature to experience them. For instance, because we are often limited by circumstances and hardships from attaining pleasure, the future attainment of pleasure could properly be considered ‘external’ to my present state. Thus, attaining it would be a transcendence of limitation. Moreover, this interpretation allows for Taylor’s account to be included, as there is no worry about whether enjoyment-seeking preemptively excludes animals from the possibility of living a life with meaning. On this point, I am joined by Mirela Oliva, who agrees that Metz’ interpretation of Nozick is too narrow.<sup>25</sup>

So let us define the internal/external distinction in this way: A value is *external* to a life if and only if that value is not being evidenced in that life right now, nor is it immediately possible (given the appropriate circumstances) for it to be so evidenced. A value is *internal* to a life if and only if that value is being evidenced in that life right now, or if it is immediately possible (given the appropriate circumstances) for it to be so evidenced. The idea here is that external values will require a person to do some work to internalize those values. Internal values require no such work, and can be manifested when circumstances require them. For instance, if Jane has internalized the value of courage, then when put in a situation requiring courage, she would be able to manifest that value. If Jane has not internalized courage, then when put in a situation requiring courage, she would not be able to manifest that value.

But supposing I do connect with external values by transcending my current limitations and incorporating them into my life – does the new *value-of-my-life-in-itself*, now that the value has been internalized, give my life meaning? For Nozick and the *VTC*, the answer is ‘no.’ The reason is that, once it is incorporated, I am no longer *seeking* it. Indeed, it is no longer external. There is a tradeoff, on the *VTC*, between meaning and value. Once one has made the connection to value and successfully transcended current limitations, the meaning of that particular act of transcendence ceases, for the value has now been attained. Later in his essay, Nozick says: “The *value* of a person’s life attaches to it *within its limits*, while the *meaning* of his life attaches to it as centered in the wider value context beyond its limits.”<sup>26</sup> Value is based on what one currently is. Meaning, it would seem, is

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<sup>25</sup> Oliva (2019), p. 474. But unlike Oliva (2019), who seems to accept Nozick’s Value Transcendence Concept as I have formalized it above (p. 473), I believe we need to make some further distinctions and modifications to the VTC.

<sup>26</sup> Nozick (1981), p. 611.

based on a wider context – I will say much more on this later.

For now, an example – based on comments Nozick makes to explain the meaning/value tradeoff – will be useful here. Let’s quickly visit Taylor’s thoughts on the myth of Sisyphus. Recall that in the original myth of Sisyphus, Sisyphus is punished by the gods with the task of rolling a stone up a hill, only to have it roll back down again, *ad infinitum*. Taylor asks us to consider a case where all of Sisyphus’ stone-rolling actually results in a temple. Before the temple is built, Sisyphus’ life has less value. As Sisyphus seeks to bring more value into the world – value that currently lies outside of Sisyphus’ own limits – his life is filled with meaning. But once he attains his desired end and brings that value into the world, the meaning ceases and Sisyphus is faced with “eternal boredom”. Truly, this experience is familiar to most people. While engaged in the *pursuit* of some desired end, we often find incredible meaning. But once we attain the end (and thereby increase the value of our life), the meaning vanishes. Indeed, we may get bored and think our lives are meaningless, even though we can see (and manifest) the internalized value in our life. Hence Nozick’s *Value-Transcendence Concept*. Meaning arises in a life while it *seeks* connection to external value.

But must a person, *L*, *seek* external values in order for *L*’s life to have meaning? At this point, we might wonder if Sisyphus’ life, construed as an object-lesson, might still have meaning. In the original myth, the gods punish Sisyphus with eternal stone-rolling. Presumably, one of the reasons they do so is because they want to use his life as a warning – a lesson to others who would dare to cross the gods. In that way, his life has instrumental value for all those who heed the warning. But the meaning of Sisyphus’ life as an object-lesson disappears vis-à-vis the *VTC* because Sisyphus does not *seek* that value himself. Yet, it would seem beneficial to our definition of existential meaning if it allows for the possibility that Sisyphus’ life has meaning as an object-lesson. If such meaning is possible, the *VTC* fails to supply necessary conditions of meaning.<sup>27</sup>

We might also wonder if the value to which *L* connects *must* be external. If not, then the *VTC* would again fail to provide necessary conditions of meaning. To see why the *VTC* may fail in this way, we can consider the case of an unlimited being. Nozick analyzes just such a being in his chapter on existential meaning. There, he asks us to consider a being – he labels it with the Hebrew term “Ein Sof”

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<sup>27</sup> Though he seems to accept Nozick’s *VTC*, David Benatar (2017, p. 18) agrees that lives can have ‘objective meaning’ for others, even if they are not felt to be meaningful for the person whose life is in question (p. 24-25).

– which ‘exists’<sup>28</sup> without limits. In many ways, *Ein Sof* is like God. Not only would such a being ‘exist’ coextensively with the universe (which still has limits), but this being would include the set of all possible worlds/universes – it excludes nothing.<sup>29</sup> Nozick explains that because existing requires a thing to exist as one thing and not another, *Ein Sof* would not really exist, since there is no thing that *Ein Sof* is not. Rather, *Ein Sof*, would transcend the distinction of existent/non-existent. Such a conception of the unlimited sounds much like the Dao or Brahman, which are also said to transcend that distinction.<sup>30</sup> Nozick believes that under the *VTC*, the *question* of how to obtain existential meaning could not arise for *Ein Sof*. That is because the question itself presupposes a world existing outside of *Ein Sof* – a world which, by definition, does not exist vis-à-vis *Ein Sof*. Thus, the *VTC* implies that this unlimited being *cannot* have existential meaning. It cannot have meaning because it has no limitations to transcend, i.e. no external values. But that would seem to be a problem for the concept, since we tend to think that, besides being unlimited in value, an unlimited being has existential meaning.

So, then, the *VTC* places two conditions on meaning that are problematic. In requiring *L* to *seek* external values, it rules out the meaning of *L* as an object-lesson. In requiring the sought values to be *external*, it rules out the possibility that a being like *Ein Sof* can have meaning.<sup>31</sup> For now, I conclude that Nozick’s explicit endorsement of the *VTC*, as it stands, has deficiencies. But there may be a solution to these problems within Nozick’s own philosophy. In section 3, I examine some of Nozick’s other comments on meaning and offer a modified concept of meaning rooted within Nozick’s own thought.

### 3. The Connectivity Concept

We saw in the last section that the *Value-Transcendence Concept* failed because it could not account for the meaning of the lives of unlimited beings (*Ein Sof*), nor the meaning of Sisyphus’ life as an object-lesson. In this section, I

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<sup>28</sup> The reason for the scare quotes will become evident in just a few sentences.

<sup>29</sup> Nozick (1981), p. 600.

<sup>30</sup> Ames & Hall (2003), p. 14.

<sup>31</sup> As we have seen, other philosophers, notably Metz (2013), Oliva (2019), and Benatar (2017) have critically engaged Nozick’s account as well. However, they do not explicitly raise the objections to his account that I have raised in this section, nor do they explicitly modify his account in the way that I suggest we ought to in section 3.

present and defend my own monist proposal for the concept of existential meaning. First, I examine the more-formal concept hinted at in my discussion of Nozick at the end of the last section. I explain how this revised concept can accommodate the existential meaning of unlimited beings and how it makes room for the meaning of object-lessons. I also raise two further cases and show how it can accommodate those. However, I ultimately abandon Nozick's use of 'transcendence' as the operational term due to the idiosyncratic ways in which I would have to put the term to use. Instead, after unpacking other aspects of Nozick's account, I opt for what I call the *Connectivity Concept (CC)*.

The notion of existential meaning that we are exploring concerns connection to value. Let us look at the following passage from Nozick, which I quote at length because of its importance for our task:

The value of a person's life attaches to it within its limits, while the meaning of his life attaches to it as *centered in the wider value context beyond its limits*. This meaning will depend upon the *array* of external or *wider values* connected with it and upon *the nature of the connections*, their strength, intensity, closeness, the way his attachment unifies those values. The meaning of a life is its *place in a wider context of value*. We might imagine a life as having a view of value: clearly in view and more in the foreground are what the life is connected to most closely. *The meaning of a life, then, would be how the whole realm of value looks from there*, its perspective on the realm of value as a function of its interconnections with it. If intrinsic value is degree of organic unity, then the meaning of a person's life is the organic unity of the realm of values as centered on, as organized around, him; it is the value of the realm of value, when transformed so as to center on him. It is a measure of the degree of organic unity his life brings to the realm of value.<sup>32</sup>

There is much in this quote to unpack. First, I note that this passage does not seem to be consistent with the *VTC*. This passage is inconsistent with the *VTC* because the *VTC* requires that the life in question *seek* connection to values. There is no hint of the notion of seeking in this passage. Rather, in this passage, the meaning of a life – denote it with *L* – is “how the whole realm of value looks from there”.

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<sup>32</sup> Nozick (1981), p. 611 (emphasis added).

The meaning is *L*'s "place in a wider context of value" that is "beyond [*L*'s] limits". Meaning depends on the "array ... of wider values" and how those values are "organized around [*L*]". However we are to interpret these comments, they clearly do not indicate that *L* must *seek* value in order to have meaning.

So what do these comments mean? Are they even consistent with one another? We have meaning as a "place", meaning as a perspective on the "whole realm of [intrinsic] value", and meaning as organization and connection to an "array ... of wider values". Before moving to an interpretation of these rather cryptic suggestions, let us put this passage back into context.

In this passage, Nozick tries to explain how it is a life might lose meaning when it finally obtains the valued end it seeks. This is the value vs. meaning tradeoff we saw earlier. Recall, we considered the example of Taylor's temple-building Sisyphus, who is eternally bored upon completion of his project. If that is all the value left for Sisyphus – if he has exhausted all connections with value – then Nozick means to say that his life is meaningless. That's because, as the lengthy passage makes clear, Nozick thinks meaning requires there to be a broader realm of value outside of one's life. Clearly, the existence of those values alone is not sufficient to give meaning to *L*. Rather, *L* must connect to them in some way in order for *L* to find meaning. What the quoted passage, on its own, does not make clear – but which the *VTC* *does* make clear – is that for Nozick, meaning is possible only if one is able to make connections to that wider context of value. Thus, Nozick is saying that connection-to-*external*-values is necessary for meaning.

It is unclear when interpreting Nozick if his final understanding of the concept accords more with the *VTC* (where the values are sought by *L*), or whether he finally opts for the view of meaning suggested in the passage above (where connection to a wider context of value alone seems to be the necessary and sufficient condition for meaning). It seems that, where he is clearest, his concept of meaning is indeed the *VTC*. But I think the direction he heads in the above passage, along with refinements that I make in a moment, would be the better way for him to go. Next, I clarify and refine Nozick's concept vis-à-vis the objections I have raised so far.

Let us first revisit the example of Sisyphus. The key ingredient in salvaging meaning from the original story of Sisyphus is the notion that someone, somewhere, finds meaning in his story. In order for someone to find meaning, I

argued that his story must be instrumental in helping them to see<sup>33</sup> an intrinsic-and/or end-value. What is the nature of the connection, then, that bestows meaning on Sisyphus' life? It must be that the story of Sisyphus plants ideas<sup>34</sup> in people's minds about the relation of Sisyphus' life to some value. Most importantly, people learning about Sisyphus must judge that this connection is valuable.<sup>35</sup> And what is the nature of that judgment? They *value* the connection of Sisyphus' life to a valuable object-lesson. If they don't see the connection they've made between Sisyphus' life and value as valuable, it would seem that they will not see the meaning. That is, if they don't value the connection itself, they may simply yawn and ask: "Who cares? So his life connects to value – it's not a value or connection that I care about". Such an attitude toward Sisyphus' life would seem to indicate that they find it meaningless. Thus, the connection itself must be valuable. Let's consider another example to see why.

Throughout this paper, I have raised several examples of meaning that my readers may have found dubitable. The example of itch-scratching as having meaning is one such example. But for those who may have balked at the possibility that such a life can have meaning, we now have a reason why: while those readers might acknowledge that itch-scratching has a final value for the person engaging in that action, those same readers fail to value the connection themselves. Indeed, even if we posit that itch-scratching is intrinsically-valuable, it will fail to convince most readers that the activity bestows meaning. They will not value the connection between the itch-scratcher and the value of itch-scratching. Most importantly, they will not see a meaning that answers their question about the meaning of life. Yet, while the reader may not value the connection, the person engaging in that connection does. Therefore, since, as I am claiming, meaning is a valuable connection to value, the itch-scratcher's life will have meaning for the itch-scratcher, but not for those observing it. As Nozick says, "the meaning of a person's life is the organic unity of the realm of values as centered on, as organized around, him; it is the value of the realm of value, when transformed so as to center on him."<sup>36</sup> As long as someone finds the connection between *L* and value as valuable, it increases the value of the realm of value when centered on *L*. Again, the important point is that the connection itself must be

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<sup>33</sup> This word is rather vague at this point. I will give a stronger interpretation in a few paragraphs.

<sup>34</sup> Here, too, we must be more specific about what 'plants ideas' amounts to.

<sup>35</sup> *This* is the important takeaway point about the connection.

<sup>36</sup> Nozick (1981), p. 611.

valuable.

Now let us consider two more examples, which I label *Neo* and *Barbie*.<sup>37</sup> Consider the life of Neo. Suppose Neo is in a computer simulation, and is none the wiser about it. Further, suppose that everyone who is a part of Neo's life are real people who are also in the simulation, and who love Neo in just the same way they would love him and interact with him if they were not in a simulation. Moreover, suppose that Neo's life would be experienced by everyone in exactly the same way if Neo lived in the 'real' world. Finally, suppose that by some coincidence of quantum physics, matter and energy would be distributed in either world in exactly the same way. Which life has more meaning? Many would answer that his life in 'real' world has more meaning, since it is connected to what is 'real' in a way that his life in a 'simulation' world is not. That is, the connection itself has more value, and thus increases the "value of the realm of value" by one connection. And this increases the meaning of Neo's life when compared to the simulated world.

Now consider Barbie. Suppose Barbie lives in a world of 'fake' plastic objects, but does not know they are not real – nor does anyone else. Barbie's and everyone else's mental states would be the same in either world. Further suppose that the distribution of matter and energy would be the same if Barbie lived in the 'real' world. Most would agree that Barbie's life would have more meaning if she lived in a world surrounded by 'real' objects. Again, that is because her connection to what is real is itself valuable, and increases the "value of the realm of value" in that world.

Why do we find more meaning in the 'real' world, rather than the simulated or plastic ones? In both examples, Neo and Barbie perceive objects with intrinsic-value ('realness' being intrinsically-valuable) when in the 'real' world, but they do not value their perceptions of value as such because they do not know about them. But the reader being told of the example *does* know about their perceptions of valuable objects compared to the simulated and plastic worlds. Indeed, if those examples carry any weight for getting the reader to believe in the added meaning of the 'real' world, it is because the *reader* values the connection that Neo and Barbie make to value. So, though Neo and Barbie do not value the connection as such (because they do not know about it), the reader does. In that way, the lives of Neo and Barbie form a valuable connection for the reader. So the reader, who

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<sup>37</sup> Metz (2013) uses examples like these in a different context. Credit to him for their substance.

values a connection between a life and intrinsic-value (the ‘real world’), finds added meaning – i.e. a valuable connection to value – in these examples, even though Neo and Barbie do not. If the reader sees no added meaning in the lives of Neo and Barbie, my claim is that it is because the reader does not value the connection that these characters make to the added value of the ‘real’ world.

But what if we completely remove the perspective of the reader, and (to the best of our ability) stipulate that you, the reader, do not know about the examples. In other words, imagine that no one, nowhere, at no time – the reader included – knows about Neo’s and Barbie’s perceptions of value in the ‘real’ world. Are their acts-of-perception, these connections, valuable if *no one* values them?

Obviously, the act-of-perceiving-the-real-world now has no added instrumental value – it brings no intrinsic or final value into the world, since the intrinsic value of ‘real’ objects in their world (and ours!) would be the same regardless of that act, and the act-of-perception changes no one’s mental states by causing them to value that act. The remaining options for the act itself to be considered valuable would be as a final value, an extrinsic value, or as an intrinsic value.

Since, earlier, I defined final value based on a person’s actual judgments, and since, as stipulated, no one is around to form judgments about this connection, the act cannot have final value. Thus, the other possibilities would be for it to have intrinsic value or extrinsic value.

It’s not at all clear that the act-of-perception qualifies as valuable under the heading of intrinsic value, since I have not adequately explained what makes an object of value carry value-in-itself. I imagine my readers will share different intuitions about how to judge the intrinsic value of this connection. But in any case, we must remember the act-of-perception cannot derive any value from the *reader’s* judgment. So, it seems that in order for us to figure out whether or not the act-of-perception has intrinsic value, we need a theory of intrinsic value. Are we, then, at a standstill in analyzing the concept of meaning? My contention is that we are not, for two reasons.

The first reason is that it may have extrinsic value. It would seem that the perception-of-value has extrinsic value in virtue of connecting with intrinsic value (reality). That is, the connection derives value, at least in part, from the intrinsic value that is perceived. Because the act-of-perception is dependent on something with intrinsic value, it does not seem implausible to suggest that it has at least some extrinsic value for that very reason. In other words, it is the intrinsically-

valuable object of the act-of-perception which *makes* the connection extrinsically-valuable. Even still, not all readers may share that intuition. So, let us consider a second reason for thinking that we are not at a standstill.

The reason for thinking we can proceed with our analysis is based on the assumptions of our method. It seems that if there is value in the posited connection, then there *could* be meaning in it (our methodological pre-commitments give us reason to accept this marginal case as a case of meaning). Moreover, it would certainly seem that if there is any meaning derived from the act-of-perception, it must be because there is value in it (as I have been arguing). Thus, whatever the nature of the value of the act-of-perception, it will determine whether or not there is meaning in that connection. In other words, the claim, while perhaps at first dubious, is this: their perceptions-of-value are valuable if and only if they have meaning. But meaning *for* whom?

In order to defend my dubious biconditional claim and answer this question, I must emphasize the distinction between the meaning of the *question* of existential meaning, and the meaning of the *concept* of existential meaning – a distinction that I have not explicitly made clear. But I believe this distinction may help us see where our doubts about the biconditional claim are coming from. For, depending on which thing we are seeking to understand, the concluding question of the last paragraph seems to warrant two different responses, depending on which we are concerned with. These different responses are most likely the source of our doubts about the biconditional. I contend that in defining the *concept*, an answer makes sense to the concluding question of the last paragraph – there is meaning for the lives of Neo and Barbie (because their connections to value have value) or there is no meaning at all (because their connections to value have no value). Taking the reverse of each of these claims, if we reject the idea that the perception-of-value bestows meaning, then we should also reject the idea that the perception-of-value itself has value.

On this point, I believe those who deny the existence of intrinsic-value (like Nietzsche) would agree. They would agree that the ‘real’ world has no added intrinsic value, since no such value exists anywhere. Thus, the connection can have neither intrinsic nor extrinsic value. But, importantly, Nietzsche would (and should) agree that it also, then, has no meaning.

However, when it comes to the *question* of existential meaning (which the *concept* of existential meaning makes possible), the second response to the concluding question of three paragraphs ago, viz. “meaning for whom?”, must be

one of puzzlement. Indeed, the question might even seem absurd. In asking the question, the person, *Q*, asking the question expects an answer which will explain the value of the connection. That is, *Q* wants to *value the connection* as well. So an explanation of the value of the connection will only be successful if *Q* is persuaded to value the connection. If *Q* is persuaded, the connection will also have meaning for *Q*. Since, as stipulated, there is no one asking the question, and since (as with any question about anything) there is a *question* of existential meaning if and only if there is a *Q*, there can be no answer, either. The person, *Q*, asking the question about a life, *L*'s, meaning – be it Tolstoy, Kierkegaard, or any other existentially-anguished individual – wants to find a way that *L* connects to value. But *Q* will only be satisfied so long as the connection offered to *Q* is valued by *Q*. And it will only be valued by *Q* if the connection is to a value that *Q* recognizes.

So, let us clarify a couple of points. What are the necessary and sufficient conditions for the *concept* of existential meaning? The connection of *L* to value is itself valuable. And what is the nature of the connection? *L* makes a difference to the total value of the world by raising its total value by one valuable connection. What is the meaning of the *question* of existential meaning? The question seeks a connection to value for *L* – a connection that is valued by *Q*.

Thus, I am proposing that we get rid of the *VTC*'s condition that *L* seek a connection to value and replace it with the notion that *L* form a valuable connection to value. Let us turn now to the second condition the *VTC* places on meaning: must the object of the connection be an *external* value?

Recall that in the case of *Ein Sof*, there are no values external to *Ein Sof*. Thus, *Ein Sof*'s life cannot have meaning, which is a counterintuitive result. It can be avoided quite simply. We can avoid the *Ein Sof* objection if we generalize the *VTC* and stipulate that meaning is about valuable connections to value – either internal or external value. Suppose lives within *Ein Sof* transcend their particular limitations through connection to values within *Ein Sof*. Such connections would lend their lives meaning. And presumably, if a part of *Ein Sof* has meaning, then *Ein Sof* has meaning as well. So let us further stipulate that *L*'s valuable connection may be made to an internal or an external value.

We are now in a place to formalize our concept of existential meaning:

*Connectivity Concept (CC)*: (a) life, *L*, has meaning if and only if  
*L* forms a valuable connection to some value.

Notice, ‘valuable connection’ is a normative requirement. By it, we mean that the connection must be valuable (in any of the four senses). Second, the object of the connection carries a normative requirement as well. The thing(s) to which *L* is connected must be valuable (in any of the four senses – they need not be intrinsically-valuable).

One might object to this concept by saying that it is too broad, precisely because it allows for an object-lesson to have existential meaning. The idea here would be that, in asking the question of meaning for myself, I am not interested in answers that would make my life into an object-lesson for someone else. That is because I don’t value that type of connection for my life. As the *Q* asking the question, that’s not what I meant by the question. But that is to confuse *my question* of existential meaning with the *concept*. Even if my-life-as-an-object-lesson is not the meaning I seek for myself, I can still admit that my-life-as-an-object-lesson might have meaning for others when they are weighing the meaning of my life *for them*.

Thus, I do not think it is a mistake to apply the concept of meaning to lives that serve as object-lessons. Lives-as-object-lessons still have existential meaning; the value of the connection, however, is different. It has instrumental value for others, if not intrinsic or final value for the *L* being considered. Perhaps offering an object-lesson answer to the existentially-anguished person would be to offer a *bad* answer considering *the motivation* for that person’s question. But it would not be a theoretically-confused answer that failed to understand the *concept* in question.

Secondly, one might object that the *CC* is too broad because it allows lives in an experience machine (similar to that of Neo’s) to have meaning. Many philosophers would claim that lives lived in experience machines are meaningless. Thus, they would argue that if the *CC* allows such lives to have meaning, then that is a problem for the *CC*.

In reply, let me say, first, that if we were to pump the intuition that lives lived in an experience machine are meaningless, presumably we would think so precisely because lives lived in experience machines lack value. If it is indeed the case that these lives lack value – and indeed, that there is no value to be had in an experience machine – then there would be no values to which those lives could form valuable connections. Thus, the *CC* could render us the verdict that lives in an experience machine are indeed meaningless (by definition) because they do not form valuable connections to value.

Second, even if we allow for the possibility that there are values to be found in an experience machine, then we still do not need to worry about many philosophers' intuitions that such lives are, in fact, meaningless. To see why, we need only consider the distinction between the concept of meaning and its many conceptions. If lives in an experience machine connect in valuable ways to the values that are possible in an experience machine, then we would not be confused in claiming that they are, by definition, *candidates* for meaning. That is, we would not be conceptually confused if we rendered the verdict that they *might* have meaning (by definition). But remember, we are *only* claiming that the *concept* of meaning is applicable to such lives. Still, we could exclude such lives from our *conceptions* of meaning. For instance, if we offer a conception of meaning that requires a life, *L*, to promote intrinsic value, and if we think there are no intrinsic values in experience machines (though we might concede that there are instrumental and final values), then we would still be in a position to deny that *L* has meaning, even though it is not ruled out by our definition of the concept.

Lastly, one might object that the *CC* cannot distinguish between the value of animal pleasure (or subjective well-being) and meaning in life. In other words, since most philosophers agree that there's a conceptual difference between the two, and because the *CC* would allow for a life of animal pleasure to count as meaningful, this is a problem for the *CC*. This is a bullet I am willing to bite. I accept the implication that my account cannot distinguish between some theories of subjective well-being (both desire-satisfaction and pleasure-based theories) and the concept of existential meaning. I am willing to accept this implication because I believe it would be incredibly presumptuous to call someone conceptually-confused if they find a life of animal pleasure or itch-scratching to be meaningful. I might (correctly) argue that they are wrong about the meaning they are finding in life, but I wouldn't want to tell them that they don't even understand what meaning is. But on that note, I believe my analysis can and does allow for philosophers analyzing *conceptions* of meaning to make the distinction between subjective well-being and existential meaning, and to argue that the best *conception* of existential meaning does not reduce to a theory of subjective well-being. In fact, I am very much inclined to believe that very thing to be the case.

#### **4. Concluding Remarks**

In this paper, I have argued that the concept of existential meaning is the

Connectivity Concept. This concept is rooted in the work of Robert Nozick, with some important revisions given some examples that were examined.

There remains much work to be done. *CC* is so broad and formal that it risks allowing conceptions of meaning that may strike some readers as counterintuitive, such as the case of Sisyphus as object-lesson or the itch-scratcher. But this is not a failure of the concept. Many concepts, formally-defined (such as ‘justice’) allow conceptions that would strike many as inaccurate or erroneous. That is why it is incumbent upon philosophers to argue for their *conceptions* of existential meaning. But remember, this paper was not attempting to offer a conception of existential meaning that the reader would find persuasive. Rather, this paper was concerned to show that whenever philosophers conceptualize the existential meaning of a life, they are always conceptualizing some valuable connection between a life and something valuable.

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[Essay]

# The Meaning of Life is the Pursuit of Love

Heidi Cobham\*

## Abstract

What is the meaning of life? In this paper, I defend the claim that love, either in part or in full, is the answer to this question. As love occupies such an overarching and central position within human existence, I believe it plays a fundamental role in our understanding of life. In this paper, I argue that humanity can roughly be divided into three groups: theists, atheists and cosmic thinkers and that while each group holds different and often conflicting views, one belief about which they can all agree is the belief in love. This consensus helps to demonstrate that the pursuit of love is the meaning of life.<sup>1</sup>

## 1. Introduction

There is nothing more human than wondering whether life has meaning and, if it does, what its meaning is. For a small minority, the concept of ‘the meaning of life’ is meaningless.<sup>2</sup> While, for the vast majority, at an intuitive level at the very least, it is impossible to deny that life has meaning. As the answer to the meaning of life has the potential to transform all aspects of human life, it is certainly worth assuming that life does have meaning and then proceeding to uncover this meaning.<sup>3</sup> Admittedly, it is far from clear what life’s meaning is, and therefore, such an important question deserves due attention and careful investigation. The question is, without doubt, of the utmost importance, as it underscores what it means to be human; its answer will shape our place in, perception of and interactions within the world. Discovering the meaning of life will help make sense of whether we have a purpose, or, as the Greek philosophers might put it, whether there is a *telos* to all of this.

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\* Ph.D. candidate, University of Sussex, Sussex House, Falmer, Brighton, BN1 9RH, UK.  
heidicobham[a]hotmail.co.uk

<sup>1</sup> As agnostics are sympathetic to both the theistic and atheistic frameworks, I have deliberately decided not to include agnosticism as a category for consideration. I have instead focused on categories/groups of people that are more sharply contrasted.

<sup>2</sup> Luc Ferry, *On Love: A Philosophy for the Twenty-First Century*, trans. by Andrew Brown (Cambridge: Polity Press, 2013), p. 4.

<sup>3</sup> I begin from the premise that life does have meaning. However, this is, of course, disputed. For more, see, Richard Hare, ‘Nothing Matters’ in *Life, Death & Meaning: Key Philosophical Readings on the Big Questions*, ed. by David Benatar (London: Rowman & Littlefield, 2016), pp. 43-51.

In this paper, I will assume that this question can be answered and I set out to convince my readers of my answer. The basis of my argument is that irrespective of the different beliefs each of us hold – whether we are theist, atheist, or have a more cosmic view of the world – love is the single universal belief held by all. It is the powerfulness and centrality of love that renders it so fundamental to what it means to live, that one cannot but argue that attaining love is the meaning of life. To argue for this, I will begin this paper by describing love, for, if I am to claim that it is the meaning of life, it is important first to clarify what is meant by the term. After this, I will show that love has undisputed significance for the theist, the atheist and even the more cosmic thinkers among us. Following this, I will set out the reasons behind thinking that love is the answer, highlighting its gravitas and importance.

## 2. Love

Love, understood in its broadest sense, to include *eros*, *agape*, *storge*, *philia*, is notoriously difficult to define. Many scholars have steered clear of devoting space to defining what one might call ‘indefinable’. The reluctance is certainly understandable. The phenomenon of love is extremely ambiguous, perplexing and confusing. We all long to experience love and freely admit that we cannot adequately describe that for which we long. Love is elusive and while this does not prevent us from pursuing it, it certainly prevents us from understanding it in its entirety. Its mysteriousness is likely part of why many have been hesitant to pay love the attention it deserves. Perhaps because we have not really been able to understand what love is, we have, in turn, been reluctant to champion it as the meaning of life. Hence, I believe that by setting aside the seemingly inexpressible nature of love and arriving at a convincing definition of it, it will then allow more of us to agree that love is the meaning of life.

In a bid to define, or perhaps describe love, I will turn to one of the most current and convincing characterisations in the literature, offered by philosopher Simon May, in his book *Love: A History*, in which he proposes his own account of love. He begins by examining how love has traditionally been portrayed in theology, philosophy and psychology, with a focus on Hebrew scripture and Christian doctrine, paying particular attention to philosophers such as, Plato, Aristotle, Friedrich Nietzsche and Sigmund Freud. Through this trajectory, May highlights the strengths and limitations of each approach towards love and goes

on to synthesise what it is that is common to all before finally offering his own account of love.

According to May's account of love, love is an expression of, what he calls, 'ontological rootedness'. By this, he means that we love that which has the ability to ground us or make us feel at home both in ourselves and in the world. He argues that a desire for love is really a desire to feel rooted in our place in the world, feel validation and feel that we really belong. He admits that only a rare number of people, things, ideas or even landscapes can promise us such feeling. Unlike other popular thoughts about love, for May, such love is not unconditional, but is 'inescapably conditional' and lasts only as long as the objects of our love promise us this grounding for our existence.<sup>4</sup> 'Love', he writes, 'is the rapture we feel for people and things that inspire in us the hope of an indestructible grounding in our life'.<sup>5</sup> This description is convincing for many reasons. May's view is broad enough to encompass a vast number of things that people claim to love. He, I believe, captures an understanding of love with which most individuals resonate. His position explains why, for example, one individual may love a work of art and another individual may not – because it produces in the former individual a feeling of ontological rootedness, whereas it does not in the latter. May captures the human tendency to search for grounding, belonging, or what he calls 'home'. By nature, we humans are home seekers, we are in search of what will fill us with a sense of belonging, attachment, affirmation and a greater sense of self-identity and self-awareness. As May puts it, we essentially search for confirmation that we 'exist as [...] real, legitimate and sustainable being[s]'.<sup>6</sup> Homer's Odysseus famously must travel from a place of chaos to a place of harmony, until he has returned 'home'. This love of home and love of one's own is what philosopher Roger Scruton called '*oikophilia*' from the Greek 'love of home'. Like May, Scruton felt that this love of rootedness, belonging, or homeness runs deep in human culture.<sup>7</sup>

Helpfully, May's portrayal of love appears to capture what is common to human culture – his phenomenological perspective appears to match our experience of love. Therefore, it strikes me that a vast majority of readers will be able to agree with May's words. This portrayal of rootedness speaks to a

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<sup>4</sup> Simon May, *Love: A History* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2012), p. 7.

<sup>5</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 6.

<sup>6</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 36.

<sup>7</sup> Charles Taliaferro, 'Loving One's Home in a Philosophical Culture' in *The Religious Philosophy of Roger Scruton*, ed. by James Bryson (London: Bloomsbury Publishing Plc, 2016), pp. 217-236.

fundamental human need to feel connected and grounded. Through this, May implicitly shows that the pursuit of love, or the search for ontological rootedness, is what gives life its meaning. Essentially, we are forever engaged in a longing for belonging.

A turn to the thoughts of philosopher Luc Ferry will help add weight to May's perspective. In *On Love*, Ferry sets out to convince his readers that the ideals we once thought give life its meaning, such as freedom, democracy, revolution and God, are now suspect. He observes that a large proportion of contemporary society is sceptical about these ideals and, as a result, no longer hail them as the answer to life's greatest question. Ferry argues that in their place, love is the only ideal that has transformed human lives in significant and unrecognisable ways, by permeating both the private and public spheres. He holds that love has become the central value in society, the new principle of meaning and the good life. He asserts that love is 'a new principle of meaning, a principle that shapes a completely new conception of the good life: it inaugurates a new era in the history of thought and of life' and has 'changed the tenor of our lives'.<sup>8</sup>

To some extent, we all strive for ontological rootedness, which only love can provide. Although theists, atheists and cosmic thinkers hold conflicting views about the world, one belief that they can all agree with is love. It is the task of the second half of this paper to show how these thinkers cling to their belief in love. Owing to this, it will be shown that the pursuit of love, or ontological rootedness (as would May put it), is the meaning of life.

### 3. Theism

For the theist, love is essential and central to their belief in God. For those who declare faith in the Judeo-Christian God, it would not be difficult to agree with the claim that the meaning of life is love. Within the theistic framework, the purpose of life is to love: to love God and to love others in a Godly manner. God's first commandment given to His people is to, 'love the Lord your God with all your heart, with all your soul, with all your mind', with the second being, 'love your neighbour as yourself'.<sup>9</sup> The instruction to love appears in the very first two commandments from God. The commandment is that love, above all else, is pleasing to God, and hence, there being such a thing as 'Christian' love. Such

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<sup>8</sup> Ferry, *On Love*, p. 1.

<sup>9</sup> Mark 12:30-31, *The New English Bible with Apocrypha* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1970).

supreme love can be characterised as the Greek, *agape* love, which is altruistic, selfless and unconditional, making it the highest form of love.

Love is the New Testament's resounding language, as theists are to love God with their whole being: *all* of their heart, soul and mind, with a love that cannot be provided on command. In addition to loving God, theists are also to love others just as they love themselves. They are to care about the needs of others and love them unconditionally in the same way that God loves. This love is not merely a favour given out on merit, but a duty that one owes. Upon realising that everyone is a neighbour, such love is to be given to all people without discrimination. The core message is that a loving disposition is pleasing to God.

According to the Bible, this outpouring of love is the correct way to respond to God and others. There are countless examples of this loving disposition shown throughout the Bible, but the best exemplar is Jesus Christ Himself, the Son of God. Jesus is born out of God's love for humanity and He is, therefore, the human embodiment of God's love for the world, 'for God so loved the world that He gave His only begotten Son'.<sup>10</sup> During His time on earth, Jesus showed His disciples how to respond to situations with a loving and forgiving attitude. Even in death, Jesus modelled love by sacrificing Himself on the cross because of His love for humanity.

Theists are to mimic the ways of Jesus and reciprocate this love back to God and others. The underlying message is that love of God and love of neighbour are dependent on one another. To correctly love God, one must love their neighbour and vice versa. Philosopher Søren Kierkegaard's gloss on this is that, 'in loving towards the neighbour, God is the middle term, so that only by loving God above all else can you love your neighbour in the other man'.<sup>11</sup> However, it is not only theists that accept the gravitas of love.

#### **4. Atheism**

For the atheist, unlike the theist, there is no belief in God, but, like the theist, there is the belief in love. For the atheist, love does what God does for the theist: it provides the ultimate source of meaning and happiness and helps cope with moments of pain and turmoil. As May observes, with the rapid decline in religion,

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<sup>10</sup> John 3:16, *The New English Bible with Apocrypha* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1970).

<sup>11</sup> Søren Kierkegaard, *Works of Love*, trans. David Swenson (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1949), p. 48.

there has been a synonymous increase in the pursuit of human love. The reason is that human love fills the gap that religion would otherwise fill as it has the double job of providing atheists with happiness in times of celebration and also helps them make sense of devastating situations. Owing to this, where the theist declares ‘God is love’ the atheist reverses the adage to ‘love is God’; whereby love has become ‘the West’s undeclared religion – and perhaps its only generally accepted religion’.<sup>12</sup> The reason is that it allows them to believe in an eternal, unchanging and powerful force, something greater than themselves, without having to accept the existence of God.

Within the atheistic framework, love occupies an exalted position, as it speaks to humanity’s deepest need for security, togetherness and belonging. Love is called upon in all situations. In times of celebrations – births, birthdays and bar mitzvahs – love is present because one feels love for the happy individual and the occasion. Similarly, in times of disappointment – death, illness and unemployment – it is to love and to loved ones that one clings. The love they feel for one another is what they hold onto as it helps them overcome the hardship. Even the current romanticised climate testifies to the extent to which society pursues love. Reality shows, films, music lyrics, literature, artwork, dating apps, academic books and newspaper columns are largely premised on love: the search for love, finding love, sustaining love and expressing love.

## 5. Cosmic

Similarly, for those who do not wish to adopt a spiritual view of life, either directly (as a theist) or indirectly (as an atheist), love can still be shown to be the answer to the question of the meaning of life. For those who subscribe to a more cosmic view of the world, love, they hold, is a fundamental force or principle of nature that puts everything into motion. In Dante’s *Divine Comedy*, he famously describes how love is the underlying force of life when he says, ‘love, that moves the Sun and the other stars’.<sup>13</sup> The transcendence, grandeur and beatific vision stemming from love is clear for Dante. Though love transcends the world, it also sustains it, supporting the common cliché that ‘love makes the world go round’.

In the same vein, philosopher Troy Jollimore agrees that love has a cosmic

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<sup>12</sup> May, *Love*, p. 1.

<sup>13</sup> Dante Alighieri, *Divine Comedy Poem*, Paradiso, Canto XXXIII, lines 142-145, trans. by C. H. Sisson (Oxford University, 1998).

significance. In his book *Love's Vision*, he argues that love is guided by reason even though it often eludes rationality. For our purposes, the most relevant part of his argument is his observation that popular solar metaphors often portray love as a catalyst for the cosmos' function. He notes that songs such as, 'You Are My Sunshine' and 'Ain't No Sunshine When She's Gone' suggest that love is akin to the sun. These solar metaphors are significant because they suggest that love, like the sun, is necessary for life on earth, such that without it, life would be futile. The further suggestion is that love, like the sun, is visionary. It affords individuals clear vision that allows humanity to see the world and others as they really exist, as opposed to how they think they exist. This approach Jollimore champions as his 'Vision View'.<sup>14</sup>

Also, human connections are created and sustained by love. Connections are strongest with those we love; 'we are all always connected, but you can also strengthen the power of this connection – when you love. So please, do not ask the Cosmos for strength but live the love inside you. It is there and it wants to live.'<sup>15</sup> Love enhances the human network and acts as the energy that undergirds conversations and creations – a turn to Plato's *Symposium*, for example, shows that one of Diotima's well-known assertions is that creative ideas are born out of love.<sup>16</sup>

## **6. The motivation for thinking that love is the answer**

As has been argued, love serves as the driving force for the theist, atheist, and the more cosmic thinker. Love is hailed as the meaning of life because, as the crux of this paper has shown, it serves as a hallmark to what it means to live. Love is the answer because, without love, life is futile. Plato, in one of the greatest works on love, his *Symposium*, revealed that love alone has the power to fix our brokenness, incompleteness and inevitable longing to be whole. Using his protagonist Aristophanes, Plato writes, 'love is the name for our pursuit of wholeness, for our desire to be complete'.<sup>17</sup> All in all, these points illustrate that love has the power to make us feel connected to something greater than ourselves and in so doing can give us a sense of purpose.

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<sup>14</sup> Troy Jollimore, *Love's Vision* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2011), p. 4.

<sup>15</sup> Sylvia Leifheit, *Initiation to the Secrets of Cosmos* (Germany: Silverline Publishing, 2015) p. 105.

<sup>16</sup> Plato, *Symposium*, trans. by Robin Waterfield (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1994), pp. 48-50 (206a-207e).

<sup>17</sup> *Ibid*, p. 29 (193a).

Love is the appropriate candidate as the answer to life's toughest question because it satisfies the human desire for freedom. Love allows us to realise that we are free and autonomous beings. Love reminds us that we have the capabilities to make sense of ourselves, others and the cosmos. As theologian Norman Wirzba sees it, love is 'the indispensable prerequisite for wisdom because it opens our hearts and minds to the wide and mysterious depths of reality'.<sup>18</sup> As previously mentioned, the thought is that love allows us to refocus our attention away from ourselves and our preferences. Love retunes our attention by allowing us to see others and the world as they really are and not as we want them to be. Hence, love remains one of the most powerful forces in society. To rephrase Karl Marx, it is *love* that is the opium of the people.

Given the importance of love, it is unfortunate just how little we acknowledge love as the answer to the meaning of life. Etymology tells us that 'philosophy' translates as 'the love (*philo*) of wisdom (*sophia*)'. Therefore, by virtue of being a philosopher, one is already, by default, concerned with matters of love. It is not as if philosophers can choose when and when not to engage in love matters, as if love is an optional affair. Instead, philosophers always have a fundamental disposition to love: 'to practice philosophy is always already to be implicated in the ways of love'.<sup>19</sup> As philosophers, our wisdom reflects our ability to love or not to love, as our ways of thinking impact the way we interact and engage with others and the world.

As Plato stresses, we must be consumed with *eros* if we are to be authentic philosophers. Love must guide our rationale because it is love that allows us to see ourselves, others and the world objectively, honestly and faithfully. Love attunes our focus; it allows us to be reflective – love is 'the indispensable prerequisite for wisdom because it opens our hearts and minds to the wide and mysterious depths of reality'.<sup>20</sup> The giants of philosophy, such as Plato, Aristotle, Augustine and Thomas Aquinas, understood this well, as love was central to their philosophy. For these thinkers, love was not an add-on to their enquiry, but as an essential feature of their wisdom.

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<sup>18</sup> Norman Wirzba, 'The Primacy of Love' in *Transforming Philosophy and Religion: Love's Wisdom*, ed. by Norman Wirzba and Bruce Ellis Benson (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2008), pp. 15-27 (pp. 17-18).

<sup>19</sup> Norman Wirzba and Bruce Ellis Benson, 'Introduction' in *Transforming Philosophy and Religion: Love's Wisdom*, ed. by Norman Wirzba and Bruce Ellis Benson (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2008), pp. 1-10 (p. 1).

<sup>20</sup> Wirzba, 'The Primacy of Love', (pp. 17-18).

Plato, in particular, was certainly an advocate for love as his *Symposium* attests. The *locus classicus* of the text is love. On the surface, the subject matter may appear to be a frivolous and sentimental choice for serious philosophical reflection, but, on closer inspection, Plato shows his artistry in his ability to weave together love and philosophy. He takes matters of the heart and exploits them for philosophical purposes, showing throughout each speech how and why love is central to his larger philosophical project. For him, the concept of love is central to our humanity and, therefore, central to our philosophy – the interface between philosophy and love is a given.

There is no greater human need than to feel affirmation, security and a sense of belonging; and it is love that plays this role in humanity. I believe love is to be championed as the ultimate source of happiness because it aids us in making sense of some of the most difficult questions about nature and life itself. In agreement, philosopher David Naugle holds that love is ‘an ultimate, if not the ultimate, human concern, it is the object of all human striving and the universal principle undergirding all human activity’.<sup>21</sup> In making this point, Naugle captures society’s fascination with love - we are constantly told, ‘all you need is love’, and, if this is correct, then it makes sense to suppose that the meaning of life is the pursuit of love.

## 7. Conclusion

To conclude, this essay has argued that love is the answer to the meaning of life. Love occupies a fundamental role in human society. That which we love allows us to feel at home and rooted in the world. It affords us a sense of ontological rootedness. As has been argued, despite the many beliefs that divide human society, it is the pursuit of love, or ontological rootedness, that unites us. The paper showed that this position is true for the theist, the atheist and the cosmic thinker. Love plays an important role for all groups of people as it helps them make sense of the world and their place in it. As opposed to any other ideal, it is love that deserves the title of the meaning of life because it is love that unites, enlightens and heals humanity. In this way, I hope that this paper has gone some way to defend Mahatma Gandhi’s assertion that ‘life without love is death’.<sup>22</sup>

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<sup>21</sup> David Naugle, ‘The Platonic Concept of Love: The Symposium’ in *David Naugle: Academic Papers* <<http://www3.dbu.edu/naugle/papers.htm>> [accessed 8<sup>th</sup> October 2020].

<sup>22</sup> Mahatma Gandhi, *All Men Are Brothers: Autobiographical Reflections*, ed. by Krishna Kripalani

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## Information about the Authors

*Drew Chastain*

Visiting Professor, Loyola University.

*Mirela Oliva*

Associate Professor, Rudman Chair of Philosophy, Philosophy Department,  
University of St. Thomas.

*Masahiro Morioka*

Professor, Human Sciences, Waseda University.

*Kiki Berk*

Associate Professor of Philosophy, Southern New Hampshire University.

*Benjamin Murphy*

Professor in Philosophy and Religious Studies, Florida State University, Republic  
of Panama Campus.

*Jairus Diesta Espiritu*

Assistant Professor, Department of Philosophy, University of the Philippines-  
Diliman.

*Aaron Brooks*

Instructor of Philosophy, Durham Technical Community College.

*Heidi Cobham*

Ph.D. candidate, University of Sussex.

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