

## Author Meets Critic

# Thad Metz's Fundamentality Theory of Meaning in Life: A Critical Review

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Thad Metz's book of the nature and value of the meaning of life, *Meaning in Life: An Analytic Study* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2013), is the single best discussion of the meaning in life in the literature. It is an extraordinary work and is required reading for anyone wishing to think seriously about the topic. It includes a comprehensive and in-depth study of the literature, devastating criticisms of rival theories, and a restructuring of the issues in a way that will shape future discussions of the field. It is also well-written, including interesting-and-enjoyable references to historical figures (for example, Mother Theresa, Adolf Hitler, and Paul Gauguin), artists (for example, Aldous Huxley and Woody Allen), and works of art (for example, Groundhog Day and Guernica). In this critical study, I summarize the book and then put forth objections to its central ideas. In particular, I argue that Metz fails to show that there is meaning in life and that, even if there is, his theory likely fails to capture it.

In the first part of the book, Metz begins by setting out the metaphysics of the meaning in life. In chapter two, he argues that meaning in life is a family-resemblance notion that focuses on related but distinct issues. The issues include which ends beside one's own pleasure are most worth pursuing for their own sake (purposiveness), how to transcend one's animal nature (transcendence), and what in life merits great esteem or admiration (admiration). His account is a pluralist one in that it grounds three different conditions for the concept of meaning.

In chapter three, Metz argues that both the parts of a life and life as a whole can be meaningful, albeit in different but related ways. In chapter four, he explains how meaning differs from pleasure, which he identi-

fies with happiness. Here are some of the differences. Meaning focuses on action, pleasure on sensation. Meaning is in part extrinsic, pleasure is not. Meaning cannot completely be a matter of luck, pleasure can. Meaning warrants different attitudes than pleasure (admiration or esteem rather than wanting to continue). Meaning can depend on posthumous events, pleasure can't do so.

In the second part of the book, Metz addresses whether the meaning in life depends on engagement with a spiritual realm. He rejects this because we know some aspects of people's lives (and some lives on the whole) are meaningful even if we do not know whether something perfect or spiritual exists, making it incoherent to claim to know that meaning is a matter of supernatural conditions. In addition, he argues, relation to the perfect or spiritual does not best explain why meaning in life exists. This section devastates such theories.

In the third part of the book, Metz puts forth and defends his naturalist theory of meaning in life, the fundamentality theory. He puts forth desiderata that an adequate theory of meaning in life must account for and argues that his theory alone does so. Here are the desiderata.

Desideratum #1: Supernatural conditions can add meaning to a life.

Desideratum #2: Certain mental states enhance meaning in life.

Desideratum #3: Certain mental states and actions lessen meaning in life.

Desideratum #4: Enhancing people's quality of

life (and final value generally) can enhance meaning in life.

Desideratum #5: Certain degrading behavior undercuts the meaning-conferring power of the good consequences the person has brought about.

Desideratum #6: Meaning is particularly enhanced when a person brings about final value (for example, virtue and excellence) in himself rather than promoting it in others.

Desideratum #7: Meaning in life is a matter of both internal (self-regarding) and external (other-regarding) conditions.

Desideratum #8: Meaning particularly comes about from dynamic reasoning, specifically, reasoning that is sophisticated, created, and unblocked by temptation, addiction, or emotional weakness.

Desideratum #9: Meaning comes about through general reasoning, roughly, reasoning that is directed at human nature rather than particular matters.

Metz's theory is, roughly, the following.

1. Meaning in life is a matter of positively orienting one's and others' rational nature towards the fundamental conditions of human existence (Metz 2013, 239).

A condition is fundamental to the extent it explains other conditions. The explanation can be metaphysical or epistemic. His actual theory is as follows.

2. 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.

(Metz 2013, 235)

This also captures, he argues, the uncontroversial elements of meaningfulness of the pursuit of the good, true, and beautiful better than rival objective-naturalist theories.

One concern is that Metz fails to show that there is such a thing as meaning in life, at least in the sense that Metz suggests. Metz fails to distinguish meaning in life from intrinsic value and objective list goods.

3. Intrinsic value is the value something has in virtue of its intrinsic properties.

An intrinsic good is something that has positive intrinsic value. This is in contrast to extrinsic value, that is, value that something has in virtue of its relation to something else.

4. An objective list good is something that makes a person's life go better independent of pleasure and desire-fulfillment (Parfit 1984, Appendix C).

For simplicity, I will assume that desire-fulfillment by itself does not make someone's life go better. Among purported objective-list goods are: knowledge, agency, contact with reality, and virtue (Nozick 1974, 42-45). Other lists are more specific, including things like family, play, and health (Finnis 1980). The concern is that it is unclear how meaning in life relates to these concepts.

One of the family-resemblance conditions that Metz argues characterizes meaning in life is likely the same as one of these notions. Consider ends beside one's own pleasure are most worth pursuing for their own sake (purposiveness condition). Such an end is what makes the world good (intrinsic good), makes the world good for someone (prudential good), or makes the world good for someone independent of pleasure (objective-list good). It is hard to see how it could be anything else. If all intrinsically good things are prudential goods and if all prudential goods are either objective-list goods or pleasure, then the purposiveness condition just refers to intrinsic, prudential, or objective-list goods (or value).

A similar thing is true of the third condition, specifically, what in life merits great esteem or admiration (admiration condition). If Metz means what in life, by

itself, merits admiration (rather than what merits admiration because of its relation to other things), then, again, it is hard to see how this differs from intrinsic value. This is particularly true, again, if all intrinsically good things are prudential goods and if all prudential goods are just a combination of objective-list goods and pleasure. It is hard to see why we should admire something for itself other than what makes the world or someone's life better.

Here is the dilemma. Is meaning in life distinct from intrinsic value or an objective-list good? If Metz answers "yes," then it is hard to see what sort of thing we are talking about. Metz might respond by asserting that it is a grab bag of loosely related things, but then he cannot explain why we should value it. If he answers "no," then it is not clear that his theory is better than the various theories of intrinsic value (for example, Thomas Hurka's recursive theory) or objective-list goods (for example, Robert Nozick's minimalist account) that exist in the literature independent of discussions of meaning in life (Hurka 2003).

In addition, Metz does not tell us how meaning-based goods should be weighed against other prudential goods. He might argue that it is one type of intrinsic value to be weighed against others in the way we normally handle competing prudential goods. The problem is that we have some idea how to set up thought experiments in order to tell us how to weigh ordinary prudential goods (for example, knowledge versus pleasure). We have far less idea how to do so here (for example, knowledge versus meaning-based goods).

A second concern is that Metz's account is very pluralistic, by which I meant that it has many independent conditions. Meaning in life requires (a) avoiding degradation, (b) reasoning, (c) reasoning about the fundamental conditions of human existence, (d) a causal relation between parts of life, (e) narrative unity, (f) originality, and (g) a contribution to distinctively human existence and people as opposed to non-human existence and people. These features do not appear to have a more fundamental feature that explains them as would a theory of meaning in life that focuses on human flourishing, prudential goods, or satisfaction with how one's life has gone or is going.

Metz might respond that this type of value has many independent features and that this is just a function of the world's complexity. Perhaps this is so, but there

is reason to doubt that a messy grab bag of factors explains a type of intrinsic value. At the very least, it is aesthetically displeasing. What's more, it becomes extremely difficult to rank lives in terms of how much meaning they have when doing so requires us to balance off things such as the amount of reasoning, fundamentality of what is reasoned about, the degree to which the individual violated constraints, and the degree to which a life has narrative unity and originality. Again, the thought experiments by which we compare these factors are murky and hard to set up.

What's more, the account is over-intellectualized in that it makes reasoning the centerpiece of meaning in life. This is doubtful as it is hard to see why we care about reasoning independent of its instrumental ability to connect us to reality (specifically, the good, true, and beautiful). For example, it is hard to see why God's life would gain more meaning if he had to reason to know facts about the world as opposed to having immediate intuitive awareness of them. The emphasis on reasoning also fails to track our intuitions. Consider, for example, the following lives.

#### Peasant

A peasant woman in a Jewish shtetl does not engage in in-depth reasoning about the fundamental conditions of human existence. She's happy just to accept what her Rabbi tells her is true. She has a good marriage and three happy daughters, all of whom also have good marriages and three healthy children each. Her life is filled with love, laughter, family, and tradition.

#### Peasant's Great Granddaughter

The peasant's woman's great granddaughter is a Harvard philosopher. Being an ethicist, metaphysician, and being a superb violinist, she is well connected to the good, true, and beautiful. She engages in very deep reasoning about the fundamental conditions of human existence and her ideas are widely read and influential. She married late, has a slightly strained relation with her adopted daughter, and considerably less love, laughter, family, and tradition than her great grandmother.

Contrary to Metz's theory, it intuitively seems that the former has a more meaningful life. Metz can try to claim that the peasant woman is exercising reasoning

in enjoying her love, laughter, family, and tradition, but only at the price of stretching reasoning about fundamental conditions of human existence past the breaking point. Alternatively, he might bite the bullet and say that while the great granddaughter has a more meaningful life, the great grandmother a better life. If true, then it is unclear why we should care about meaning in life.

There are some smaller but still important concerns with Metz's theory. One concern is on the focus on human-related meaning rather than non-human-related meaning is mysterious. It is hard to see if meaning is part of the world, why it would differ between human beings and other biological beings with similar or greater capacities. Perhaps Metz should delete "human" from his account and sidestep this concern.

A second concern is why the side-constraint does not rule out non-degrading wrongful acts, such as right-violations, undeserved suffering, unfairness, or exploitation. Perhaps Metz would argue that these are all degrading. I doubt it. Infringing on a moral right need not involve contempt for another as opposed to a mistaken view of trade-offs. People who want to push the fat man in front of the trolley might be wrong but do not have contempt for him.

A third concern is that the posthumous account of meaning is problematic. Consider a person who writes a great novel and wants people to enjoy it, but no one does so when he is alive. Large numbers enjoy it after his death. Metz notes that this can posthumously enhance the meaning in his life. If we ask when the audience's appreciation made his life more meaningful, we end up with unsatisfactory answers. It can't be during his life because if it wasn't yet true (assume here an open future) that people would later enjoy his book and it is hard to see how something that is not yet true of his life can make it have more meaning. After he is dead, he no longer exists and hence there is no bearer of meaning. It can't be an atemporal enhancement because it intuitively seems that if a life gains meaning then it gains it at a time. Metz might respond that this concern is true for all theories of posthumous welfare and hence not a special problem for his theory. Perhaps, but given his emphasis on posthumous meaning, this is an acute problem for his theory, even if it is not a unique one.

One takeaway point from the weaknesses of Metz's

book are that a theory of meaning in life has to be situated relative to what is good in itself (intrinsic good), good for someone (prudential good), or good for someone independent of pleasure and desire-fulfillment (objective-list good). The first task of a theory of meaning is to situate it relative to these types of value. A second takeaway is that theories of meaning with many independent factors that affect the overall amount of meaning in complex ways are to be avoided unless there is clear indication that meaning is irreducibly pluralist and complex. Such complex theories make it difficult to rank the value of lives, let alone quantify them. A third takeaway is that meaning should not be so closely tied to reasoning or intellectual endeavors, that it devalues love, laughter, family, and other "Fiddler on the Roof" type values.

These criticisms notwithstanding, Metz's book is tour de force. It is the single best book on the topic and the ideas, arguments, and examples greatly add to the discussion of this important issue. His organization and devastating criticisms of competitor theories (supernatural, subjective, and a series of objective theories) will reshape the discussion of this issue.<sup>1</sup>

## References

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## Endnotes

<sup>1</sup>I am grateful to Thad Metz for his extremely helpful comments and criticisms.