

## Author Meets Critic

# Meaning in Life Does Not Exist and Would Not Focus on Rationality If It Did

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Thad Metz offers some insightful responses to my criticisms of his important book, *Meaning in Life: An Analytic Study* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2013), on meaning in life. Here I argue that his responses do not succeed. Earlier I provided two objections to Metz's theory. First, meaning in life is not a type of value distinct from the standard types of value, specifically, 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). Second, if there is meaning in life, then Metz's theory does not capture it because it is an overly intellectual account.

Metz argues that meaning in life is distinct from intrinsic good because it does not depend on intrinsic features. He provides three examples that make meaning in life depend on extrinsic properties. First, he claims that thinking is meaningful only if the thinking has not been controlled by an external source. If one's thoughts are a product of an evil demon, for example, this would not add meaning to one's life, or at least not as much as it would have otherwise have had.

Second, he claims, the meaningfulness of acting is a function of something beyond the act itself, in particular, the consequence (foreseeably) caused by the act. He gives an example of posthumous meaning in the classic case of Van Gogh, where, Metz claims, the widespread and positive reception of his artworks after his death conferred substantial meaning on his having painted them. As Metz notes, I reject this example as there is no time at which posthumous reception can make an individual's life more meaningful. It cannot be during his life because the reception has not occurred and cannot be after because the life no longer exists to exemplify greater meaningfulness.

In response, Metz provides a third example, ditch-digging. Metz argues that ditch-digging that is likely to achieve the aim of benefiting others is more meaningful than ditch-digging that has no chance of doing so. Also, he claims, ditch-digging that benefits others is more meaningful than ditch-digging that was likely to do so but did not in the end do so.

Because Metz does focus on extrinsic properties to a life, if the examples succeed then he has shown that meaning in life is distinct from intrinsic value. The first example, libertarian free action, is a non-starter for anyone, such as myself, who thinks that the luck argument is fatal to libertarianism (uncaused action is arbitrary and an arbitrary factor cannot explain why people are morally responsible). Libertarianism also fails for those, again such as myself, who think that libertarianism cannot adequately explain why brains stand outside the cause-and-effect relations that are true of other physical objects.

Perhaps Metz's soft-determinist defender could make the example depend on whether thoughts have the wrong sort of external cause. However, the issue then arises as to whether an internalist theory can explain why the wrong sort of external cause (for example, another agent's manipulation or coercion) undermines an agent's responsibility for her thoughts. Such internalist theories are, to my mind, quite plausible, but further discussion will take us too far afield.

Metz's example of ditch-digging is also unconvincing. Imagine two doppelgangers who dig ditches in what to them look to be identical circumstances. Given the circumstances, both are more likely than not to benefit others. In one world, the digging helps others. In another world, an unlikely event makes the digging

harm others. Perhaps the harm comes about because the digging creates swamps that lead to a new type of malaria. Native people are immune to it, but migrating birds transmit the malaria a continent away with deadly results. Metz must accept that the two diggers' lives are intrinsically identical but differ in their amount of meaning. Here I lack Metz's intuition. A lucky effect, unrelated to a difference in thought or action, is an implausible basis of meaning. Metz's position is that how meaningful someone's life is, to some degree, independent of who he is and what he does.

Let us assume, though, contrary to these objections that the two cases are legitimate instances of meaning if there is such a thing. The concern is that Metz's theory of meaning is just a theory of an objective-list good, that is, something that makes an individual's life go better independent of pleasure and desire-fulfillment.

Here Metz responds by claiming that it is possible that it is not merely an objective-list good because meaning in a person's life can come when she sacrifices her well-being for the sake of others. He provides two examples. First, he asks us to consider someone who volunteers to be head of a department, taking on mind-numbing administrative burdens and attending dull meetings so that his colleagues can avoid doing so and can instead realize objective goods. The chairperson's life, on Metz's account accrues some decent share of meaning for having done so, specifically, for having undergone boredom and a lack of objective goods so that others' lives could go better.

Second, he asks us to consider individuals who commit suicide for a good cause, such as protecting innocents. Here he provides a classic lifeboat scenario where there are not enough seats for all who need them, and where you volunteer to give yours to someone else—a meaningful action, albeit not one that would foster objective flourishing on your part.

These examples are unconvincing. Remember that, other things being equal, meaning is supposed to make a life go better. These examples are cases where individuals' choices make their lives go worse. Intuitively, their choices (in the minimal fact pattern) make their lives go worse in every way, not merely all-things-considered worse. In fact, it is because they are cases of pure sacrifice that we think them virtuous,

worthy of gratitude, and so on.

In addition, even if we think that, other things being equal, the sacrifices made the individuals' lives go better by making the lives more meaningful, this does not show that meaning is anything other than an objective-list good. Like other objective-list goods, such as knowledge, an objective-list good can make someone's life go better, other things being equal, even if this effect is outweighed by the loss of other prudential goods (for example, pleasure). On this account, willingness to sacrifice for others (or doing so) is just a type of objective-list good (perhaps a type of virtue).

In summary, Metz's examples of things that make life meaningful and are extrinsic to the life fail because they focus on implausible meaning-adding factors (such as libertarian freedom or posthumous effects) or because they make the meaning-added factor entirely independent of what someone thinks or does. As a result, his examples do not distinguish meaning in life from intrinsic value. Still, he could reply that other things being equal, added meaning in life necessarily makes a life go better. The problem is that Metz cannot then distinguish meaning in life from an objective-list good. His examples of meaning-enhancing features that make a person's overall life are, again, implausible. In addition, because the having of an objective-list good can make a person's overall life go worse (for example, being brave and caring might cause an officer to be killed in wartime), so even were his examples successful, they would not show that meaning is anything other than an objective-list good.

On the second objection, I argued that if there is meaning in life, then Metz's theory fails to capture it because meaning should not be so closely tied to reasoning or intellectual endeavors. Specifically, I argued that Metz's account improperly devalues love, laughter, family, and other "Fiddler on the Roof" type values.

Here I posited the case of a peasant woman in a Jewish shtetl who does not engage in in-depth reasoning and is 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. I invite Metz to compare this woman's life to another woman's life, namely, that of a superb violinist and philosopher, who engag-

es in sophisticated reasoning about fundamental matters and whose ideas are widely read and influential. This woman has married late, has a strained relation with her adopted daughter, and has comparatively little love, laughter, family, and tradition in her life. I maintain that the former has more meaning in her life than the latter, which Metz's theory cannot explain.

Metz responds in two ways. First, he notes that he is not confident that the former's life is more meaningful than the latter's. Second, he claims that love, laughter, and family are rational processes because those affective, conative and emotive conditions that can be influenced by cognitive ones, sensibly subject to criticism, or judgment-sensitive attitudes that count as rational. Metz stretches the notion of rationality past the breaking point. We think that children, developmentally disabled individuals, chimps, and the mentally ill can love others to a significant degree. In fact, such love might be more central to their lives than it is for many normal human adults. Because children, chimps, and the mentally slow are at best minimally rational, Metz's notion of rationality is very thin because it is not closely related to critical thinking, sensitivity to evidence, self-reflection, and so on. It is thus hard to see why, given the centrality of rationality to his theory, Metz is not locked into the bullet-biting conclusion that the philosopher-musician's life is

more meaningful than that of the shtetl-mother. In addition, Metz's theory intellectualizes love by making it depend on subtle judgments about the beloved and the lover's relation to her. It is implausible that the greater rationality of geniuses makes them have a greater capacity for love than average people. This is true whether we think of general intelligence in terms of cognitive ability, emotional ability, or multiple intelligences.

Contra Metz, this second objection (if there is meaning in life, Metz's theory does not capture it) is consistent with the first one (there is no meaning in life). Meaning theories, on my account, run together judgments about intrinsic goods, prudential goods, and objective-list goods in a general pattern, but ultimately in a way that is inconsistent with the best theory of types of value. My objection is that this general pattern rules out Metz's theory. The fact that the pattern does not capture a real type of value is perfectly consistent with this conclusion.

Lest this response be considered too critical. I wish to emphasize that Metz's book is excellent and well worth reading. While I think it fails for the reasons mentioned above, this is true of many important theories from important philosophers, such as Metz.