

Metz, Thaddeus. *Meaning in Life: An Analytic Study*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2014. 288pp. \$45.00 (cloth). ISBN: 978–0–199–59931–8

Questions about the meaning of life are among the deepest and most important questions humans can ask. Such questions include:

- Does the universe have any meaning or purpose? (The question of *cosmic meaning*.)
- Does my life have any meaning or purpose? (The question of *individual meaning*.)
- If my life does have some meaning or purpose, is that entirely up to me? Partially up to me? Or not up to me at all?
- Could it be—as existential nihilists claim—that life has no meaning whatsoever? If so, how should we respond to that complete lack of meaning?
- If life can have meaning, what forms do such meanings take, which modes of meaningfulness are most important, and how can I make my own life as meaningful as possible?

These are deep questions because they force us to think about ultimate issues about the nature of reality and what our highest priorities in life should be. They are also important questions because the quest for meaning is one of the most fundamental and persistent drives in human nature. How we answer such questions may determine whether we live lives of happiness and purpose, or instead struggle with feelings of apathy, anomie, and despair.

Over the past three decades, an extensive body of high-quality literature has developed in Anglo-American philosophy on the cluster of related issues collectively known as “the meaning of life.” One of the most significant participants in that discussion has been the South African philosopher, Thaddeus Metz.

Metz’s *Meaning in Life* is an important contribution to the growing academic literature on the meaning of life. Over the past fifteen years, Metz has published prolifically in the field and is the author of a superb *Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy* article on the topic. *Meaning in Life* is mostly cobbled together from previously published articles, and shows it in places with certain oddities of emphasis and focus. Whatever one thinks about the particular conclusions Metz defends, the book unquestionably provides a helpful framework and vocabulary for thinking about the relevant issues.

Like most contemporary philosophers who write on the meaning of life, Metz focuses almost entirely on questions of individual meaning. Issues of “cosmic” or “holistic” meaning are addressed only to the extent that they directly impinge on questions of individual meaning.

Metz’s book has three main parts. The first part seeks to clarify what we mean when we ask about the “meaning” of an individual human life. In Part II, he considers a number of supernaturalist theories of meaning, and in Part III he discusses two prominent naturalistic accounts of meaning: what he calls subjective naturalism and objective naturalism. He concludes with a critique of existential nihilism.

Metz begins by unpacking the general concept of *meaning* and setting forth what he believes a theory of meaning must include. In his view, meaning is something that comes in degrees, varies from person to person, can be manifested in both the parts and in the whole of an individual’s life, is intrinsically desirable as an end in itself, is roughly synonymous with terms such as “significance” or “importance,” and is exemplified most saliently by certain kinds of intellectual excellence (think: Albert Einstein), moral achievement (think: Mother Teresa), and artistic creation (think: Pablo Picasso). Meaning should not be confused, he argues, with absurdity, which consists in a kind of conspicuous or ludicrous incongruity. Nor should meaning be confused with futility, which is roughly the idea of persistent failure to achieve one’s ends (6).

More debatably, Metz argues that a meaningful life should not be identified with a happy life. Metz rightly notes that there is nothing contradictory in speaking of a “happy but meaningless life,” or, conversely, of a “meaningful but unhappy life.” As examples of meaningless but happy lives, he cites (a) Nozick’s example of an intensely pleasure-filled life lived inside an experience machine¹ and (b) Richard Taylor’s example of a drug-fueled Sisyphus joyously (but futilely) rolling a rock up a hill for all eternity.² Plausibly, he takes such examples to show that meaning does not *consist* simply in pleasure or happiness.

But Metz also argues for a stronger conclusion—that pleasure or happiness *as such* cannot even *contribute* to a meaningful life (27). As he sees it, a life of Sisyphean rock-rolling, however pleasurable or joyous, is a paradigm of absolute meaninglessness. It follows, therefore, that pleasure or happiness *per se* can contribute nothing to a meaningful life.

This claim is implausible. As Richard Taylor famously argues (but later retracted (Metz 174–75)), a joyous Sisyphean life of endlessly pointless rock-rolling would not, in fact, be a paradigm of complete meaninglessness. Rather, it would possess a kind of “subjective meaning” in virtue of the fact that Sisyphus *finds it* to be deeply meaningful, enjoyable, and fulfilling. Moreover, such a life may also possess a kind of objective meaning inasmuch as it involves at least two objective and intrinsic goods (happiness and pleasure). If, as many theorists claim, whatever has intrinsic value has at least some degree of meaningfulness, then (*pace* Metz) Sisyphus’s life does have at least some meaning, however minimal.

As Metz acknowledges, his view of the connection between meaning and happiness seems to commit him to the highly implausible claim that Taylor's classic discussion of the meaning of life isn't about "meaning" at all. Those theorists who speak of empty, objectively insignificant pleasures as contributing to meaningfulness are "conceptually confused," Metz argues (30). In his view, nothing that belongs merely to our "animal self" can confer any meaning whatsoever (29–30).

What has gone wrong here? The fatal mistake, I suggest, is Metz's virtual identification of "meaning" with the notions of "significance" or "importance" (see, e.g., 79). As Tom Morris argues, meaning has to do not only with significance or importance, but also, crucially, with the notions of *purpose* and *value*.³ Metz focuses unduly on one element of this triad, forcing him to draw counterintuitive conclusions at many points in his analysis.

Having clarified what he takes to be the generic concept of individual (human) life-meaning, Metz turns next to consider the leading theories of meaningfulness in the academic literature. His principal focus is on the conditions that contribute to what we might term a *highly* or *richly* meaningful life. He says relatively little—directly at least—about such important issues as:

- a) Are there any human beings that lead (or could lead) completely *meaningless* lives? If so, why? What are the necessary and sufficient conditions for a life to have *any meaning at all*?
- b) Given that some activities (e.g., twiddling your thumbs) can be meaning-neutral, and other activities (cf. 64) can be meaning-subtractors (e.g., blowing up the Sphinx just for the fun of it), what are the necessary and sufficient conditions for a human life to "meaningful" on balance?

Metz focuses on three main (families of) theories of what gives meaning to individual human lives: supernaturalism (roughly, the view that God, or something spiritual, gives meaning to life), subjective naturalism (roughly, the idea that individuals give their own lives meaning through their own freely-chosen values and commitments), and objective naturalism (the view that lives have meaning to the extent that they connect with important objective values, such as truth, goodness, beauty, etc.). (Confusingly, Metz classifies any naturalistic theory that allows for both subjective and objective modes of meaningfulness as an "objective" theory. It would be preferable to call these "mixed" theories.) Metz ultimately defends a version of objective naturalism.

Briefly, Metz argues that subjective naturalism is untenable because it implies that utterly pointless and insignificant activities like joyous Sisyphian rock-rolling or Nozickian experience-machine pleasure-surfing would be meaningful, when in fact they are completely devoid of meaning. We have seen how this analysis might be challenged.

Metz turns next to supernaturalist theories of meaning. His rich and complex eighty-page discussion of various supernaturalist theories of meaning cannot be summarized adequately here. One form of supernaturalism he scrutinizes in detail is what he calls "purpose theory." According to purpose theory, God is absolutely necessary for any form of meaning, and the closer a person

comes to fulfilling the (collective or individualized) purpose God has assigned to her, the more meaningful her life is.

Metz offers a mixed bag of objections against supernaturalist accounts of meaning. One plausible objection he gives is that, intuitively, some things can be meaningful even if nothing supernatural exists (144). For example, feeding a hungry child seems to have significance—and therefore meaning—even if we decide that there is no God or spiritual realm.

Metz's primary argument against supernaturalism is more questionable. Essentially, he argues that supernatural accounts of meaning depend on a conception of God that is ultimately incoherent. He argues that meaning can be wholly dependent on God only if God is an absolutely perfect being, and God can be an absolutely perfect being only if he is outside of time and completely unchangeable. But if God is wholly atemporal and immutable he presumably cannot do things like "choose" to create a universe or to "assign" individual life-purposes. Such activities, Metz argues, are possible only if God exists in time and can change (106–14). Here four things should be noted:

1. Many contemporary philosophers of religion do not accept the kind of classical "perfect being theology" Metz's argument presupposes. Traditional notions of God as immutable, atemporal, and perfectly simple have been widely challenged.⁴
2. There are familiar and plausible responses to the sorts of incoherence-arguments Metz offers. For example, Thomists would deny that we can speak of God "acting" or "choosing" in the same univocal sense that we employ when speaking of human agency. Likewise, might not God be wholly immutable and outside time and yet able to *express* his eternal will in ways that have temporal effects?
3. It is far from clear that the most defensible account of how meaning could be entirely dependent on God must presume that God is absolutely perfect.
4. Nor is it clear that the most defensible supernaturalist account of meaning must claim that all possible meaning is *totally* dependent on God. Why not adopt a mixed theory, which claims that some kinds of meanings (e.g., certain kinds of "deep" or "ultimate" meanings) are dependent on God, but other sorts of meanings (e.g., feeding a hungry child or finding a cure for AIDS) are not (except perhaps in the sense that all things are dependent upon God for their existence)?

In general, Metz's entire discussion of how meaning(s) might depend upon God could benefit from a closer engagement with the (vast) theological literature on notions such as the divine "will" or "purpose." To take but one example: Suppose God's individualized "purpose" for Smith is that he write ten world-class religious novels and save 1,000 lives from a burning building. Smith, alas, writes only nine world-class novels and saves only 999 people from the fire (unhappily, one victim

jumped to her death). Jones, on the other hand, has a much more limited “purpose” or “assignment” from God—namely to produce a single crayon drawing of an angel before tragically dying at age three. As Metz describes it, purpose theory seems to imply that Jones led a more meaningful life than Smith did, because Jones *perfectly* fulfilled God’s purpose for his life and Smith did not. A brief glance into the theological writings of (say) Aquinas, Molina, or Suarez, would have steered Metz into much more plausible waters.

Having rejected supernaturalist and subjectivist theories of meaning, Metz next turns to consider a variety of leading objectivist naturalistic theories. After arguing that all of the most widely discussed objectivist theories have fatal weaknesses, Metz lays out and defends what he takes to be the correct theory, a view that he calls the “fundamentality view.” The final, heavily qualified version of this view (labelled “FT₃” in the absurd fashion all-too-common in hyper-analytic philosophy) is stated as follows:

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. (235)

Or, in a simplified nutshell: Individual lives have meaning to the extent that they positively engage, through active uses of reason, with fundamental values such as truth, goodness, and beauty. On such an account, a deeply and paradigmatically meaningful life would be one of outstanding moral achievement, high-flying intellectual excellence, and significant artistic creation.

This is a not altogether implausible conception if you accept the network of naturalistic and objectivist presuppositions on which it rests. From a theistic view, of course, it is wildly off the mark. Metz’s view seems to imply (for example) that babies, the severely mentally challenged, and people with Alzheimer’s do not live meaningful lives (or live only minimally meaningful lives) because they cannot actively use their reason to perform acts of moral, intellectual, or artistic significance. It is true, of course, that they cannot perform such acts in *this* life. But according to classical theism, this life is tiny, infinitesimal fraction of the actual lives of such persons, all of whom may be destined to lives of eternal significance, value, and purpose in the hereafter. Moreover, according to one widely held version of theism, every human life has meaning—and in fact transcendent meaning and value—because all human persons are created in the image of God and thereby possess equal inherent worth and dignity. Furthermore, on a theistic view the value or

meaning of a human life cannot be measured by actual achievement or worldly “significance” or “importance,” for these are all partly matters of luck and all human achievements are smoke and “vanity” from what Sidgwick called “the point of view of the universe.”⁵ The Christian view, rather, is that of Milton: “They also serve who only stand and wait.”⁶ And the Christian view is also that of Mother Teresa: Some are called merely “to be faithful.”⁷

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Notes

1. Nozick 1974, 42–45.
2. Taylor 2000.
3. Morris 1999, 284–85.
4. See generally Morris 1991.
5. Sidgwick 1907, 382.
6. Milton 1963, line 14.
7. Chawla 2008, xxv.

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