THE MEANING OF MEANING: COMMENTS ON METZ'S *MEANING IN LIFE*

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I. INTRODUCTION

In the popular imagination the question of the meaning of life must be the most important philosophical question of all. Just consider how many religious and self-help bestsellers have been devoted to the question. For all that, in the professional philosophical literature the question is quite neglected. More – much more – is written on whether tables exist. More – much more – is written on whether triangularity exists. Why do professional philosophers neglect the biggest problem of all? Why do they spend their time instead debating about how many angels can dance on the head of a pin? Are they so uninterested in what interests their fellows? Are they so disinterested in money and fame?

No and no. I suspect that the reason is that analytic philosophers are embarrassed by the question. It rings of mysticism and self-help. And analytic philosophers don't do mysticism and self-help; just look at the sections of the bookshop where those bestsellers are sold. Analytic philosophers worry about tables and triangularity. And sometimes about such practical matters as animal rights and abortion. But, even then, they promise morality, not meaning. Analytic philosophers hate being imagined as mystical gurus, and they hardly want to foster the misperception.

I at least have been embarrassed by the question for this reason. To some extent I still am. I made sure to remove the dust-jacket from my copy of *Meaning in Life* by Thaddeus Metz (2013). It's a magnificent dust-jacket. But it has 'Meaning in Life' emblazoned across. I don't want anyone seeing me read stuff like that, least of all my tough-minded and sceptical philosophical colleagues. They'd think less of me: that I'm

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a hippie or spiritualist, or touchy-feely or desperate, or in some other way soft-minded and gullible.

Yet there's nothing analytic philosophers should fear on this count when it comes to *Meaning in Life*. It demonstrates all the virtues of analytic philosophical style and seriousness. The definitions stated are clear. The distinctions drawn are precise. The arguments defended are rigorous. The objections and replies are thorough. Indeed, the sheer number of original argumentative moves on every page makes this book a treasure trove for philosophers writing on the meaning of life. *Meaning in Life* is likely the best philosophy book ever written on the topic. No mean feat; despite the relative neglect, there are still some distinguished contemporary contributors to the debate (e.g. Wolf 2010; Benatar 2006; Cottingham 2003; and from the older crowd, Taylor 1970; Nagel 1971; Nozick 1981). It's certainly the sharpest analytic treatment of the topic. Alas, that means Metz won't be raking in the ca$h.

What follows are a couple of unconnected comments on the book. The first point is about the beginning, and the second is about the end. The first point is about the way Metz goes about framing the question, and the second is about the way Metz answers the question. The alternative answers considered in between are not addressed, and I do not summarize any of this either. I do not know whether my comments make for serious objections. The second might turn into some support for Metz's view.

II. THE FIRST POINT

I'm usually baffled by talk about 'the meaning of life'. I have found most such talk to be almost unintelligible – meaningless, if you will. I am not alone. Before putting forward his own proposal, G. E. Moore admits that he had 'been very much puzzled as to the meaning of the question "What is the meaning or purpose of life?"' (cited in Metz 2013: 25) and characterizes the question as 'vague'. I suspect that sense of vagueness might also be playing a role in scaring analytic philosophers away from the question. Fortunately, the beginning of *Meaning in Life* is devoted to a meticulous analysis of the concept.

Metz lands up with a pluralistic, family-resemblance concept in terms of what gives life purpose, transcendence and admiration: 'To ask about meaning, I submit, is to pose questions such as: which ends, besides one's

own pleasure as such, are most worth pursuing for their own sake; how to transcend one's animal nature; and what in life merits great esteem or admiration' (p. 34). I think I now understand the question and I am willing to pursue answers. The problem is that I do not understand how Metz arrives at his preferred concept.

The trouble is that my intuitions are silent on most of the counterexamples developed against rival analyses. For example, the first analysis considered is in terms of purposiveness. On this view, meaning in life is had by achieving goals, whether one's own or God's. An objection against this analysis is that it rules out the very logical possibility of life being meaningful because of conditions the subject can't control, like being a part of a royal family or being chosen by God. However, even though the idea is contrary to 'modern sensibility, [it] does not seem logically contradictory' (p. 25). The logical possibility of non-purposive meaning counts against an analysis in terms of purposiveness. We're supposed to have the intuition that cases of non-purposive meaning are logically possible. However, I have no such intuition.

Is non-purposive meaning logically possible? Suppose those who understand meaning in terms of purposiveness would contend that it is not. Are they then misunderstanding things? How can we tell? By checking what *most* people would make of the concept? But now we're into empirical questions: Do most people in fact think that it is not logically contradictory? I have no idea. Indeed, I have no idea whether what most people think about such things should bear on the issue at all.

For what it's worth, I similarly have no intuitions about whether respecting people's intelligence could confer meaning (p. 26); whether time in an experience machine could (p. 27); whether honouring one's soul could (p. 29); whether getting what one passionately desires could (p. 30); or whether living in a natural environment could (p. 34). Apparently, my pre-theoretical intuitions about meaning are impoverished. I have no idea whether this cognitive deficit is widespread. Perhaps the reader finds all these cases quite obviously. My first point might amount more to an embarrassing confession than to a real problem for Metz.

III. THE SECOND POINT

The book ends with a development of an original fundamentality theory of meaning. What confers purpose, transcendence and admiration

is the subject 'employing her reason and in ways that positively orient rationality towards fundamental conditions of human existence' (p. 22). The basic idea is then qualified in a few ways, and the conditions of human existence are spelled out in terms of the good, the true and the beautiful.

Very roughly: The good is fundamental insofar as it is positively oriented towards our rational nature, autonomy and shared conditions; thus, Mandela's life was meaningful for promoting liberty and equality. The true is fundamental insofar as it entails many other truths about ourselves and the universe; thus, Einstein's life was meaningful for discovering basic truths of physics. The beautiful is fundamental insofar as its themes are about aspects that bear the most and the most non-instrumentally on human experience; thus, Picasso's life was meaningful for painting *Guernica* and the like.

I wonder whether and how this theory can capture the meaning or lack thereof in certain cases. I have two in mind. The first is where a subject is not directed towards the good, the true or the beautiful but might have meaning. The second is where the subject is directed towards the good, the true or the beautiful but might not have meaning. Given what I said above, I cannot tell whether the life in the first case would have meaning, and whether the life in the second case wouldn't. But in conversations I've had about such cases, others have been apt to use such terms. So I will keep my reticence about counterexamples even while putting forward potential counterexamples. I can have my cake and eat it too.

As for the first case, imagine Bob devotes his life to studying and following religious teachings. He takes the scriptures to be profoundly true, the deeds to be deeply good, and the rituals to be sublimely beautiful. But imagine that he's got it all wrong: there are no gods, there are no substantive moral facts, and there are no substantive aesthetic facts. Thus Bob has not been oriented towards the good, the true and the beautiful. Questions: Could Bob's life still be meaningful? Could religion have made Bob's life meaningful? If so, then meaning in life does not consist in being so oriented.

If the answer is not so obvious – of course, it's not at all obvious to me – consider another question: Would you still engage in religious rituals or moral practices if you discovered that atheism and moral nihilism were true? Some of my friends do not know what they would do. Some answer that they would not. And some answer that they would.

The latter use the term 'meaning' in this regard. They say that these rituals and practices give and would still give their lives 'meaning'. Even if you would totally abandon religious rituals and moral practices, would you deny that others could find meaning in such rituals and practices? If so, then meaning does not consist in being oriented towards the good, the true and the beautiful.

As for the second case, imagine Sue does indeed devote her life to the good, the true and the beautiful. But imagine some sort of doomsday scenario: the day after her death the earth will be destroyed by an asteroid, or people will just stop having children. Samuel Scheffler (2013) describes doomsday scenarios as inducing their subjects with deep dismay and sapping them of motivation. I can't see whether he says doomsday would deprive them of meaningful lives in such terms. But his commentators wonder about it, especially Niko Kolodny (2013). Questions: Would Sue's life still have been meaningful? Would the meaning of her life have been reduced? If her life is deprived of meaning, then meaning in life does not consist in being oriented towards the good, the true and the beautiful.

I'm not at all sure what the right verdict about Bob and Sue are. I suspect that some readers will have the intuition that Bob's life is meaningful, while others will have the intuition that it is meaningless: after all, he's got it *all* wrong. I suspect that some readers will have the intuition that Sue's life is meaningful, while others will have the intuition that it is meaningless, or at least greatly deprived of meaning. Again, this is speculation. And I certainly don't know how the proportions would line up or what they would mean for the fundamentality theory.

However, there might be ways of forestalling the counterexamples altogether. In the first case, we might deny that the counterexample is possible. For example, we might deny that Bob could possibly exist in the absence of the good, the true and the beautiful; maybe there couldn't be a world like Bob's without God or moral facts or aesthetic facts. Indeed, I think that Metz should reject the counterexample for exactly this reason given his commitment to a naturalist moral realism (pp. 91-3), that identifies the good with certain natural facts around Bob. Then insofar as Bob's religion puts him in touch with the good, even if not the true and the beautiful, it helps make his life meaningful.

In the second case, we might deny that there is a real counterexample. We might insist that Sue is deprived of what makes life meaningful even on the fundamentality theory – the good and the beautiful. For the lasting good of Sue's deeds and the beauty of her paintings will be significantly

reduced with the coming apocalypse just as the beneficiaries and the canvases will be reduced to ash. It might be worth considering further how the fundamentality theory relates to the doomsday scenario, given how much attention Scheffler's proposal has been receiving.

If the above responses are right, then Bob and Sue hardly count as counterexamples against the fundamentality theory at all. On the contrary, insofar as the fundamentality theory fits with and explains what is going on in the cases, the cases *support* the theory. My second point might amount more to support for Metz's view than to a real problem.

IV. ANOTHER POINT

The above sections outline my main questions. I will end on a brief point about something nearer the middle of the book. There Metz relies on a new objection against purpose theory. The theory is, roughly, that meaning in life comes from the purpose God assigns to us. Metz argues that if meaning comes from God then that must be because he has unique attributes (like simplicity or infinity), but that such attributes are not consistent with his assigning a purpose to us, and thus that meaning does not come from God.

However, the argument here come down to questions and bewilderment, to things being 'hard to conceive' or 'difficult to imagine' (p. 117). Thus, for example, 'how could there be a simple and hence unchangeable being beyond time that is purposive? [...] [T]o the extent that we can conceive of an immutable being beyond time, such a being appears unable to engage in goal-directed activity' (pp. 112-3). However, I don't have such appearances, and even if I did I wouldn't take them too seriously without further argument; when it comes to extraordinary things bewilderment doesn't count for anything (compare fundamental physics).

To be sure, Metz recommends a 'promising' (p. 115) avenue in Aquinas for answering the problem, and his treatment of God and meaning (chapters 5, 6 and 8) is otherwise deep and wide. These chapters will be especially interesting to readers of this journal. But the whole of *Meaning in Life* is worth pursuing for its own sake, helps us transcend our animal nature, and merits admiration. It is beautiful and good. Is it also true?

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