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Agreement and Sympathy On Metz's *Meaning in Life*

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Abstract

In this paper I argue that we can appreciate the real worth of Thaddeus Metz's recent book *Meaning in Life* just by regarding it as the product of his existential struggle in our endless quest for life's meaning. In other words, we could not understand in what respect Metz's work is valuable if we read it from the purely analytical-theoretical perspective. My paper is, therefore, meant to challenge the idea of 'analytic study on meaningfulness'. My general suggestion is that the analytic philosophers should go beyond their narrow theoretical concerns when they tackle the philosophical problem about life's meaning, because, I argue, what fundamentally matters in our perennial conversation on life's meaning is, not our universal agreement about the view on the condition for a life's being meaningful, but rather our mutual encouragement in devoting our lives to various meaningful activities. I suggest, particularly, that Metz's philosophical investigation is in fact piloted by his deep practical-existential concern to make his own life meaningful, and so we should not be preoccupied with his overt theoretical interests when we read the book in question. We should rather pay a significant amount of attention to how much the author cares about his own life's meaning in dedicating himself to the philosophical study on meaningfulness, because we would thereby be in a position to say that the real worth of Metz's study should consist in encouraging and enabling us to cherish a hope for making our own lives more meaningful by undertaking the philosophical search for life's meaning.

1. Introduction

One of my general suggestions is that there are at least two ways to read an analytic philosopher's theoretical writings about the issue of meaningfulness. One of them, schematically, can be dubbed 'the way of reading from the detached standpoint' and the other 'the way of reading from a fellow's standpoint'. They differ from each other in important respects, as we will see later. I would like to suggest, therefore, that it is a significant matter to decide in which way we should read Thaddeus Metz's analytic-philosophical study, *Meaning in Life*.

Among the goals of this paper is to develop the point of what is quite

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roughly presented in the last paragraph. Anticipating what I'm going to argue, I would say here that we cannot appreciate the so-called 'real worth' of Metz's book if we take it for a work of the purely theoretical kind and evaluate it according to a quasi-scientific or quasi-mathematical standard. We can really appreciate its worth, rather, just by regarding it as the product of his existential struggle in our endless quest for life's meaning. This is what I suggest. However, how can I suggest that? Or, more fundamentally, what does my suggestion mean? I will answer these questions step by step.

Before proceeding into the main subject, I should explain in what respect my suggestion is significant. At the opening stage of *Meaning in Life*, Metz manifests that the aim of his study is to find the best theory which explains under what condition a life would be meaningful, as we will see soon. In reading the book in question, therefore, we understandably tend to focus on theoretical points, e.g., about whether the proposed theory is adequately justified. I do not want to say that such theoretical issues are trifles. However, if what I am going to suggest is right, those points turn out to be subsidiary in the sense that there exists a more important matter which is essential to grasp how valuable Metz's work is. One of the consequences from my suggestion is, then, that in order to get some crucial point of the book in question we must go beyond the purely theoretical concerns although these follow the natural reaction to the impartial, specialized style of writing Metz has adopted in his study.

The general purpose of this paper is to develop my idea about what kind of concerns we should have when we tackle the philosophical problems about the meaning of life. I will argue that there is a certain distortion within Metz's concern guiding his thinking in the book in question. I remark, however, that my intention is not to blame the author for lacking a right kind of interests. I will, rather, finally show that a hiding type of concern piloting Metz's intellectual journey gives his work the essential depth without which it would be crucially shallow and unattractive.

The main part of this paper is divided into three sections. In Section 2, I explain how I read *Meaning in Life*. I thereby introduce what I think to be the central points of the book in question to the readers of this paper. In Section 3, I criticize Metz's theoretical position for suffering from a fatal fault. In Section 4, I nevertheless suggest that his book has a certain excellence, which I would like to name 'value for the fellow-seekers of the meaning of life'.

2. Argumentation, Method, and Theory in *Meaning in Life*

In this section, by referring to the relevant passages of *Meaning in Life*, I will introduce Metz's theory of meaningfulness and explain how he argues for it. To do so, I will shed special light on the author's method according to which he seeks the best theory of life's meaning, because we would thereby be in a position to understand accurately in what respect his investigation is problematic, as we will see in Section 3.

In what follows, I firstly outline Metz's argumentation towards the theory which he thinks would best explain the condition of life's meaning, and secondly explain what sort of a theory he has finally reached. I remark that my discourse in this section is meant to devote itself to the *objective* kind of presentation of Metz's view in the sense that I try to concentrate just on describing what the author suggests and postpone the critical scrutiny about it till the next section.

2.1

The silhouette of Metz's argumentation is simple and distinct. He divides the extant views about meaningfulness into three mutually excluded types, *i.e.*, supernaturalism, subjectivism, and objectivism, while the latter two are subtypes of naturalism; he then searches for the best theory of the topics in question by considering the merits and demerits of each of the three rival views; and he finally judges a particular theory of the objectivist kind to be "the most defensible, given the current state of the academic literature."¹

Before going into the details, we must look through the definitions of terms. In the author's terminology, supernaturalism claims that "one's existence is significant just insofar as one has a certain relation with some spiritual realm," and naturalism denies it; among the naturalist theories, the subjectivist ones are positions "that meaningful conditions vary, depending on the subject," while the objectivist ones are "that certain features of our natural lives can make them meaningful, but not merely by virtue of a positive attitude toward them."²

¹ Metz (2013), p.2. All the citations in this paper are from Thaddeus Metz, *Meaning in Life*, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2013. I refer to it by 'Metz 2013'.

² Metz (2013), pp.20-21.

Given these definitions, Metz suggests that naturalism is more plausible than supernaturalism, by arguing, *e.g.*, that someone's life can be meaningful without anything supernatural.³ In addition, he suggests that, among the naturalistic views, objectivism is more appealing than subjectivism, by denying that any subjective factor is essential for making one's life meaningful. Less abstractly, it would not be the case that the subjective factor of a person's being mentally attracted to the activities in her life is either sufficient or necessary for her life's being meaningful.⁴ Besides, he rejects several particular theories of the objectivist type, *e.g.*, the 'attractiveness' theory and the utilitarian theory, by claiming that each of them has some fault which had better be corrected.⁵ Finally, by arguing that his so-called "fundamentality theory," *i.e.*, an objectivist theory which supposes *a person's employing his rationality toward the positive enhancement and maintenance of fundamental conditions for human existence* to be relevant to his life's being meaningful, would accommodate all the desiderata for an adequate theory of meaning in life, he concludes that "the fundamentality theory is more justified than its closest rivals and that the theory warrants systematic attempts to make it less vague, more clearly defensible, and more wide-ranging in its application."⁶

Now, I am going to step into the more detailed points, as far as necessary for my consideration in the following sections. Anyone who just read the last paragraph, probably, should be interested in, *e.g.*, how Metz argues that someone's life can be meaningful without anything supernatural. This is one of the issues essentially relevant to the question of whether the author's concluding suggestion is adequately justified, because, quite roughly, the structure of his argumentation requires that, if the precedent rejection of supernaturalism fails, then the justificatory procedure toward the fundamentality theory breaks off halfway. I remark that there are at least three crucial steps for reaching the book's goal, *i.e.*, steps of (1) rejecting supernaturalism, (2) rejecting subjectivism, and (3) rejecting rival theories of the objectivist type. If we are theoretically concerned about if Metz has justifiably supported his view, we should – metaphorically speaking – check whether he has succeeded in running up all the steps (1) to (3) or fallen down at some of them.

³ Metz (2013), pp.142-146.

⁴ Metz (2013), pp.175, 183-184.

⁵ Metz (2013), ch.10 and ch.11.

⁶ Metz (2013), p.239.

I am going to introduce the way in which Metz rebuts subjectivism (or exactly some simple type of subjectivism), because to do so will enable us to conceive his *general method*, which he follows in constructing several important arguments in his book. I will, in the next section, critically consider how this method works and suggest that it doesn't contribute to any 'objective' judgment about whether a given theory is universally acceptable.

Metz's method may be named by the 'method of intuition', because it appeals to something called 'intuition' in the analytic philosophical literature.⁷ Let us see its application, to begin with.

According to the author, as already mentioned, any subjective factor in itself is neither a sufficient nor necessary condition for a life's being meaningful. For the insufficiency, Metz argues that we would otherwise have numerous problematic cases. In fact, if, *e.g.*, a person's fulfilling her desire of a certain kind was sufficient for her life's being meaningful, then the lives of persons who wholeheartedly desire to, and actually devote themselves to, harm others, maintain 3,732 hairs on her head, memorize the dictionary, try to make flowers sing, *etc...* could be meaningful. Metz says, however, that these consequences should be "seriously *counterintuitive* implications" of subjectivism.⁸ In other words, he takes it as unacceptable that one's life could be made meaningful, *e.g.*, just by fulfilling one's desire to harm others.

For the un-necessity of subjective factors also, by referring to something he calls 'intuition', Metz develops the following argument.

Consider as well the case of a Mother Teresa who is in stereotypical fashion, doing all she can to alleviate serious pain and heal grave injuries and illness. [...] Suppose that she loved neither the people she helped nor the activity of helping them, that she was not inspired by her work, but instead did it out of fear that she would face eternal damnation for not doing it, that for large period she wondered whether human beings were really worth all the trouble, etc. Even so, *my intuition* is that she would have acquired some meaning in her life simply by virtue of having substantially helped so many needy people.⁹

⁷ For the author's own explanation of his method, cf. Metz (2013), p.8.

⁸ Metz (2013), p.175, italics added.

⁹ Metz (2013), pp.183-184, italics added.

This Mother Teresa, *ex hypothesi*, does not hold any pro-attitude toward those activities which occupy her lifetime to a large amount. According to Metz, however, his intuition tells that her life would be nevertheless meaningful just in virtue of those assisting labors. *Ergo*, he concludes, subjectivism should have a counter-example in respect to its claim that a pro-attitude be necessary for life's meaning.

What I think we ought to note about these arguments is, abstractly, that the so-called intuitions have an important kind of *priority* over theories or principles. The author himself is aware of this point. In fact, he says that

[o]ften my premises include what I, with the field, call an 'intuition', that is, a judgment of a particular instance of what does or does not confer meaning on life, which judgment is purportedly less controversial than the general principle that is being evaluated in light of it.¹⁰

In other words, intuitions about particular cases come first, and then we search for a theory or general principle that accommodates them. I remark that many arguments in *Meaning in Life*, explicitly or implicitly, follow this methodological order. *E.g.*, as an argument against the supernaturalist theories, he develops the following discourse.

Imagine that only the physical universe, at best known by the scientific method, exists. Now consider whether certain lives could be on balance meaningful, say, those repeatedly invoked here, such as Einstein, Darwin, Dostoyevsky, Picasso, Mandela, and Mother Teresa. Many will respond that they would find these lives to be meaningful in the absence of anything perfect or supernatural.¹¹

I suggest that the author here implicitly appeals to the thing he calls 'intuition'. It's a given premise, *e.g.*, that the actual Mandela's life is meaningful in virtue of his moral activities, independently of any external extra-conditions. Therefore – Metz concludes – supernaturalism, which doesn't accommodate this premise, would be insufficient for an adequate theory of meaningfulness.

¹⁰ Metz (2013), p.8.

¹¹ Metz (2013), p.114.

2.2

By having grasped Metz's general method in *Meaning in Life*, we are now in position to understand the motivational profile of his inquiry in that book. As we have seen, Metz searches for an adequate theory of meaningfulness, which best covers our intuitive judgments about whether given particular lives are meaningful or not. If I cite his own words, Metz searches for "a general principle that entails, and provides a convincing explanation of, the many particular ways in which life can be meaningful."¹² Why, however, does he do so? Why does he suppose it significant to search for such a *theory* about meaningfulness?

Though there is no direct answer to this question found in the book in question, there are relevant words. Noting that "[o]ne could seek to answer the question of what constitute meaning in life by presenting a list of specific ways to do so," Metz says that

[t]he philosophical mind, or at least one major sort of it, seeks more than a list because it seeks order, roughly explanatory unity, amongst diversity. It naturally asks this of a list of meaningful conditions: is there something that all the elements on the list have in common? An answer to this question is what I often call a 'theory' or 'principle' of meaning in life.¹³

This means that, in order to understand the conditions of life's meaning at the philosophical level, one ought not to be content with a list of miscellaneous cases but ought to search for a/the explanation unifying them. I suggest that we should agree with Metz about the point that just enumeration of specific cases never contributes to deepening our understanding of the matter. In short, a list cannot reach philosophical understanding. Therefore, we philosophers need something more than a list. And, according to Metz, what we need is a theory which unifies the particular items.

I note that this motivational profile of Metz's inquiry carries with it a presupposition orienting it toward a certain direction. In fact – as the last two

¹² Metz (2013), p.7.

¹³ Metz (2013), pp.6-7.

citations suggest too – his investigation starts from the factual judgment that there *actually* exist many ways in which lives can be meaningful. Concretely, Metz repeatedly takes several actual human lives, *i.e.*, Mandela’s, Mother Teresa’s, Einstein’s, Darwin’s, Picasso’s and Dostoyevsky’s, for typical instances of lives with great meaning.¹⁴ In brief, according to Metz, we would already have a certain list enumerating particular items (while this does not mean that we have known exactly what is recorded in it). What Metz aims at in that book, thus, would be to find an inclusive principle which would accommodate all the (or sufficiently many) items mentioned in that list he think we have.

Motivated by the wish for attaining such unifying explication, Metz considers which type of a theory, among those three rivals, *i.e.*, supernaturalism, subjectivism, and objectivism, would inclusively explain the particular cases of meaningful lives. He thereby specifies several “desiderata for an attractive theory” of meaningfulness.¹⁵ If I cite some of them, *e.g.*, Desideratum #1 claims that “an attractive theory of meaning in life ought to account for the respect in which supernatural conditions could add meaning, even if they are not necessary for it,” and #5 that that theory “ought to account for the intuition that certain kinds of particularly degrading behaviour undercut the meaning-conferring power of the good consequences that they bring about.” Metz then argues that the fundamentality theory, *i.e.*, the theory which has the following statement (FT1) as its core idea, satisfies all the desiderata he specifies.

(FT1) A human person’s life is more meaningful, the more that she employs her reason and in ways that positively orient rationality towards fundamental conditions of human existence.¹⁶

Since this paper is not meant to consider whether the fundamentality theory is true or not (it is rather going to focus on the author’s way of consideration), we do not need to step into the detailed points, *e.g.*, whether it really satisfies each desideratum. I just quickly explain Metz’s own understanding about how the theory in question works.

Metz says, “intuitively, great meaning was conferred on Mandela’s life by

¹⁴ Metz (2013), pp.4-5.

¹⁵ Metz (2013), pp.220-222.

¹⁶ Metz (2013), p.222.

virtue of having sacrificed so much to overcome apartheid and on Mother Teresa's life by virtue of having acted so compassionately with respect to large number of people in wretched conditions" and the fundamentality theory, he suggests, appropriately explains why it's the case. The point is that both Mandela's political activities and Mother Teresa's medical assistances would be of the moral form of using one's rationality for obtaining and maintaining the condition under which human beings can live as human. Metz's idea is, in brief, that devoting oneself to this kind of use of rationality or akin makes one's life meaningful. In addition, quite roughly, the fundamental conditions under which we can live as human beings, in contrast to mere animals, have an essential relationship not only with the moral, but also with the alethic or epistemic and with the esthetic. Therefore – while I omit detailed explanations – the fundamentality theory would nicely explain why Einstein's, Darwin's, Picasso's and Dostoyevsky's lives are each meaningful.

I would like to suggest that Metz's idea, *i.e.*, the idea that the lives promoting the fundamental human condition are typically meaningful, is very understandable, because we sometimes think that Mandela, Mother Teresa, Einstein, Picasso, or other great women and men, lived more meaningful lives (in some sense) than ordinary persons.¹⁷ I'd like to say that Metz's fundamentality theory would adequately explain and accommodate this type of thought.

3. Critical Scrutiny of Meaning in Life

In this section, I will consider whether Metz's work is successful at the *theoretical* level, so to speak. More concretely, I will scrutinize whether the author has successfully reached his theoretical goal of finding a/the adequate theory which would inclusively explain the particular cases of meaningful lives.

In what follows, I firstly suggest that, if what Metz seeks is a *universally acceptable theory* of meaningfulness in the sense that it describes an exception-free law which holds for everyone's life (at least in Western culture), then he isn't on the right track to hit it, because, as I will argue, what I called 'method of intuition' in the last section does not fit that aim at all. I secondly

¹⁷ I remark, at the same time, that we also sometimes think that the ordinary persons live meaningful lives as well as Mandela, Mother Teresa, Einstein, Picasso, or other great women and men. A related issue I will touch in Section 3 and 4.

claim that, if we take Metz's book for a work of the purely theoretical kind, we will find more faults in it than merits. I would thereby suggest that, if we want to appreciate the 'real worth' of Metz's inquiry, we ought not to regard it as a detached study of the theoretical type.

3.1

What, to begin with, does Metz mean by the term 'theory'? As mentioned above, his 'theory' means the thing that would answer the question "Is there something that all the elements on the list have in common?" (where the list here enumerates the particular ways in which lives can be meaningful). If we rigidly interpret the quantifier 'all' in this interrogative sentence, the theory Metz intends to seek should be of the *universal* kind in the sense that it would explain every case of a life's being meaningful without any exception. Or, even if we take the word 'all' for exaggerated, the theory intended there should accommodate at least sufficiently many cases of them.

How, then, can we attain such a universal theory in respect to the issue of meaningfulness? What I am going to consider is whether Metz is on the right track to seek it. My answer is negative, because his way of inquiry which relies on something called 'intuition' would, I argue, not reach any universal theory.

Let us return to Metz's argument against subjectivism. To reject this view, he argues that a certain theory of the subjectivist kind would have a counter-intuitive implication that several types of lives, *i.e.*, lives of persons devoting themselves just to harming others, maintaining 3,732 hairs on their head, memorizing the dictionary, trying to make flowers sing, *etc...* could be meaningful under a certain condition. I remark that, in developing this way of argument, Metz has committed to the intuitive judgment that such types of lives, *e.g.*, lives just harming others, cannot be meaningful in virtue of any subjective factor. Now, I should ask how this kind of judgment could work as a warrant for finding a universal theory of meaningfulness.

I would firstly say, abstractly, that anyone who relies on an intuition in her argumentation would finally shoot at her own foot. Less abstractly, if someone takes a certain kind of intuitive judgments for the foothold of his argumentation, then his discourse will inevitably suffer from criticisms based on other intuitive judgments of the same kind. How, in fact, does Metz respond to an opponent who says it's intuitively true that lives of persons just harming others can be

meaningful if they feel fulfilled about that way of living? Clearly, he cannot turn down this opposition by saying that it be counter-intuitive, because he then would fall into begging the question about which judgment is intuitive. Generally speaking, any argument grounded on some intuitive judgments finally backfires in the sense that its alleged adequacy will be rejected by another argument of the same type. Therefore, Metz's anti-subjectivist argument, which relies on several intuitive judgments in an important respect, fails to achieve its goal.

My suggestion is, in short, that there is an essential tension between relying on intuitive judgments and seeking a universal theory. The reason why I suggest this is because the typical usage of the term 'intuition' pragmatically presupposes a relevant kind of diversity and conflict (in contrast to universal agreement or unanimity). As a matter of fact, in the context where we have no conflict of opinions, we need not use the words 'intuition', 'intuitive' and 'intuitively' (*e.g.*, in the context of axiomatizing elementary arithmetic, nobody needs to say that $1 + 1 = 2$ is intuitively true, because all the participants have agreed about which mathematical statements are to be taken for true). Contrarily, it is typically in a context where a debater cannot find any firm ground to argue for his view that he would desperately allege that it be intuitively undeniable. Thus, I argue, the fact that Metz uses the word 'counterintuitive' in considering whether a given life is meaningful can be diagnosed as a symptom of his implicit commitment to the supposition that there exists a conflict of opinions about which particular lives are meaningful. Above all, Metz's intuitive judgment that the lives just harming others cannot be meaningful in terms of any subjective factor should entail his implicit concession that someone would differently judge this matter.

Now, if I am right about this point, I should say that Metz's way of seeking a universal theory is significantly incoherent. Why, however, can I say so? It's because it will emerge that his 'universal theory' is neither universal nor a theory in an important sense. What, then, is this sense?

Let us return again to Metz's intuitive judgments of meaningless lives. Metz suggests that, intuitively, the lives of persons devoting themselves just to harming others, maintaining 3,732 hairs on her head, memorizing the dictionary, *etc...* cannot be meaningful in terms of anything subjective. But, Metz has thereby admitted that there is someone who disagrees with him about this point, as explained in the last paragraph. What, then, follows? We are now in a position

to say that Metz's theory, *i.e.*, that objectivist theory which he has reached through his long-term consideration, would explain *at most* the particular cases of lives *he* (not everyone!) judges to be meaningful. Metz's theory, shortly, only explains his special intuition. This, I claim, is a fatal limitation to his theoretical inquiry, because, if the *explicanda* of an investigation was restricted to a particular person's intuitive judgments (and at most their derivatives), then the *explicans* would not deserve the name of 'theory', however inclusively it explicated the matter in question. In short, a 'theory' which only explains an individual's intuition should be short of genuine theory.

Let me summarize. I'd like to say that, so far as Metz relies on intuitive judgments about what types of lives are meaningful, he can never reach a universal theory of meaningfulness which would be ideally accepted by everyone. He should, therefore, have found some firm ground other than the thing called 'intuition'. His method of intuition is, in short, inadequate for his aim.

3.2

Are there, then, any *other* grounds (*i.e.*, other than intuition) for determining whether the lives of persons, *e.g.*, just harming others can be meaningful in virtue of something subjective? To consider this point will enable us to understand what is wrong with seeking a theory in respect to the issue of meaningfulness, as explained in the next section. In this subsection, I will show that Metz's concern guiding his thinking in the book in question is distorted in an important sense. I will finally suggest that, at the theoretical level, his work suffers from a crucial defect.

Now, do we have any ground other than intuition for determining whether a given life be meaningful? We have no objective ground, I respond, in the sense that it would determine the matter in question *independently of anyone's concern* (the italicized proviso is important). In fact, whether a given life is meaningful is a matter just so far as we are concerned about the matter.¹⁸ This means that the conflict between our judgments about whether a certain life is meaningful is hardly resolved. Let us consider the following example. Suppose that, according to his deep concern, some person judges the lives of those who aim at making

¹⁸ The pronoun 'we' here refers to the persons who actually or possibly care about meaningfulness.

their society better and devote themselves to certain public activities live to be more meaningful than of those who aim at fulfilling their own desire and pursue certain private interests. Suppose, in addition, that, according to her equally deep concern, another person judges quite conversely. In this case, we cannot decide which judgment is objectively right, because there is no firm criterion to determine it outside our concerns.

To enlarge this point, recall Metz's consideration about the reluctant Mother Teresa, who does not hold any pro-attitude toward her activities when she devotes herself to helping others. Metz says that, according to his intuition, this Mother Teresa "would have acquired some meaning in her life simply by virtue of having substantially helped so many needy people."¹⁹ Now I'm going to argue that, if we take his proper concern into consideration, then we will clearly understand why he would say so. My suggestion will be, in short, that the author's judgment about whether the reluctant Mother Teresa's life be meaningful is essentially determined by his own concern. Another person who has a different concern could, therefore, judge in the opposite way.

What is, then, Metz's ultimate concern in *Meaning in Life*? I suggest that it is the concern for developing a theory according to which a person's life would gain its meaning in virtue of using her rationality for obtaining and maintaining the condition under which human beings can live as human beings.²⁰ This is why he positively judges that the reluctant Mother Teresa's life is meaningful, because her medical activities really promote some of the human fundamental conditions. I should claim, however, that some person with a different concern, e.g., a social activist who has a concern for making a society where anyone can do what she really wants, would say that, so far as that Mother Teresa is reluctantly engaged in her activities, her life has not gained its real meaning. In this sense, I suggest, a person's judgment about a certain life's meaning is significantly relative to his particular concern.

What has turned out through this consideration? What I think we ought to note is that we could reasonably wish to attain a 'universal' theory of meaningfulness which would be accepted by everyone, only if we were optimists about whether our concerns ultimately coincide with each other. As a matter of fact, however, we have a variety of concerns. Our philosophical

¹⁹ Metz (2013), p.184.

²⁰ My suggestion can be warranted by the fact that Metz has taken, so repeatedly in his book, Mandela, Mother Teresa, Einstein, Picasso, etc... for exemplary figures who meaningfully lived.

consideration on the issue of life's meaning, therefore, ought to start by admitting a hardly reconcilable diversity of our judgment about meaningfulness. In other words, when one talks and thinks about life's meaning, it's reasonable to suppose that, in respect to the question whether a given life (*e.g.*, the reluctant Mother Teresa's life) is meaningful or not, there exist a variety of equally understandable answers. These answers won't converge into the unique solution so far as our concerns are various.

Another point we ought to note is that any discourse on meaningfulness is guided by a certain particular concern. This point would entail that Metz's concern for constructing a *theory* in respect of the issue of meaningfulness is distorted in an important sense. If, in fact, someone intends to construct a theory which would explain the condition for a life's being meaningful, she ought to prohibit her personal interest from giving any special orientation to her discourse. Metz's consideration in *Meaning in Life* is, however, essentially guided by his special interest according to which he judges, *e.g.*, Mandela's life to be more meaningful than an exclusively self-interested person's. Note that this interest is not universal, because someone can understandably have a concern for claiming that any self-interested person, or even any harmfully malicious person, lives a sufficiently meaningful life.²¹ I thus suggest that Metz, who aims at constructing a theory but does not hinder his particular interest from intervening in his argumentation, falls into the distortion of concern, as it were. His thinking, which depends on the special guidance of his concern, would never reach any universal theory of the intended kind.

I would finally say that, at the theoretical level, we should find more faults in Metz's work than merits. In the last section, I remarked that his argumentation had at least three crucial steps for reaching its goal, *i.e.*, those steps of (1) rejecting supernaturalism, (2) rejecting subjectivism, and (3) rejecting rival theories of the objectivist type. As to each step, however, there exists some opposition to which the author cannot adequately respond. Suppose, *e.g.*, that someone says to Metz, "I really understand your interest for constructing a theory like the fundamentality theory, because it would nicely accommodate the fact that we sometimes find Mandela's life more meaningful than many ordinary people's; but I equally sometimes become sure of my life having a certain meaning when I have an ineffable feeling of association with something

²¹ I suggest that anyone should be able to understand this concern as well as Metz's.

supernatural; and I think that, without such feeling, my life would appear completely bland; so I'm rather interested in constructing a supernaturalist theory of meaningfulness which would accommodate such mystical experiences."

How does Metz respond to this opinion? What we should remark is that this person's concern is understandable as well as the author's. I do not, in fact, find any relevant priority of Metz's concern over the supernaturalist one. But, this means that Metz's work would theoretically fail, because its theoretical success essentially depends on rejecting any supernaturalist theory. I conclude that, as work of the purely theoretical sort, Metz's book would not be successful at all.

Is his work, then, without value in all respects? I negatively answer this question, because there is a way of reading by which we can appreciate certain virtues of Metz's investigation, as we will see in the next section. I would, therefore, conclude this section by saying that, if we want to specify the 'real worth' of his inquiry, we should not take it for a study of the purely theoretical kind. For what, then, should we take it?

4. The 'Real Worth' of *Meaning in Life*

In the last section, I critically considered whether Metz has successfully reached his theoretical goal. My answer was negative, because his argumentation suffers from a crucial defect at the theoretical level. In this section, I explain in what respect I think his work is nevertheless appealing. One of the purposes of the following consideration is to show that we can appreciate the real worth of Metz's book if, and just if, we read it as the product of his existential struggle in our endless quest for life's meaning.

In what follows, I firstly point out that Metz's inquiry is piloted, not only by the theoretical concern so far considered, but also by another type of concern, which rather gives the essential depth to his work. And, I secondly explain how this non-theoretical type of concern is different from the theoretical one. I will finally suggest that, generally speaking, we should go beyond our narrow theoretical concerns when we tackle the philosophical problems about meaningfulness.

4.1

I suggested, in the last section, that if we take Metz's book for a work of the purely theoretical kind, we should attribute more faults to it than merits. This would apparently imply that his inquiry ended in failure, because his investigation seems to be essentially theoretical in the sense that we necessarily estimate it in the theoretical manner as studies in mathematics or natural sciences. There are, in fact, some passages in his writings which actually lead us to think that it's the case²². What I am going to suggest is, however, that Metz's book contains other passages which would make us to think differently. What are, then, those passages? And, what would they make us think?

In the introductory part of the book in question, Metz says

I confess that what has largely motivated me to devote a substantial portion of my research time over the past decade to issues of meaningfulness has been an unarticulated sense that doing so would itself be a meaningful enterprise [...].²³

What we ought to remake is, I suggest, that this passage has a different tone which was not perceived in the analytic-philosophical part of his book so far considered in this paper. The point is that the author's concern, confessed in the citation in question, is not the same as his theoretical concern for seeking the best theory about meaningfulness. In writing that passage, in fact, he cares, not about development of our studies on life's meaning itself, but rather about whether he can engage in some meaningful enterprise in his life. He cares, in short, about meaning of *his own* life.

What does this mean, however? It means, I suggest, that Metz's inquiry into the issue of life's meaning is piloted, not only by his *theoretical* concern for seeking the best theory of meaningfulness, but also by his so-called *existential* concern for living a meaningful life. In this respect, his book should be said to resemble Tolstoy's *Confession* or Camus's *Myth of Sisyphus* rather than studies in mathematics or the natural sciences. The point is that Metz, as well as Tolstoy and Camus, aims to save his life from the pitfall of meaninglessness by devoting himself to significant writings. In this sense, *Meaning in Life* is a trace of his

²² Cf. Metz (2013), pp. 8-9. Metz says there that "this book is addressed in the first instance to the professional scholar, and is principally devoted to organizing, clarifying, and surpassing the theories of life's meaning prominent in the philosophical literature."

²³ Metz (2013), p.1.

existential struggle for making his own life meaningful.

To enlarge what I want to suggest, I will cite another passage. Metz says

[...] it is not as though I have felt that knowledge of what makes a life meaningful is a necessary tool without which I could not acquire meaning in light of it. Instead, my view has been that finding full-blown *knowledge* of what makes a life meaningful would be meaningful *for its own sake*, and, furthermore, that *searching* for knowledge of meaning would be meaningful for its own sake, regardless of whether it successfully lands me with knowledge [...].²⁴

I'd like to say that the last 'that'-clause in this citation would give a twist to our way of reading the book in question, as explained in more detail in the next subsection. The author supposes, shortly, that *searching* for the knowledge about what confers meaning on a life is itself meaningful. By taking this supposition into consideration, we would naturally step back from the narrow perspective of just considering whether Metz has successfully reached the knowledge in question, and get into a broader perspective, *e.g.*, of appreciating what his search itself has added to our situation around the philosophy of life's meaning.

4.2

What turns out if we distinguish two types of concern, *i.e.*, theoretical and existential as it were? For one thing, if Metz's inquiry in *Meaning in Life* is guided by the concern for making his own life meaningful, we are not obliged to read this book in the theoretical manner as I applied in Section 3. We can rather estimate it by considering how his discourse developed in it would serve his interest about his own life. What I'm going to suggest is that, while Metz's investigation suffers from crucial defects at the theoretical level as I argued in the last section, it has a significant virtue at the 'existential' level, so to speak.

The first thing we should remark is that, if we pay attention to the fact that Metz cares about meaning of *his own* life in writing the book in question, we thereby get in position to say that the success of his inquiry does not require any discovery of some truth about the *universal* condition, if any, of a life's being

²⁴ Metz (2013), p.2, italics added.

meaningful. We can rather say that it would be a more significant matter to consider whether his investigation on that issue confers a meaning on his own life. In other words, if we keep our eyes on the fact that his aim in *Meaning in Life* is to engage in a meaningful activity in virtue of searching for the knowledge about meaningfulness, it turns out that what fundamentally matters is not whether he has reached the objective theory which would best explain all possible ways of meaningful life, but rather whether he has successfully engaged in some meaningful activity in virtue of his study.

One of the points in this consideration is that, generally speaking, how we should read a book would significantly vary dependently on how we understand its ultimate concern. A question then arises so far as there exist some passages in Metz's book which explicitly refer to his personal, existential concern about meaning of his own life. How should we read Metz's book if we take this type of concern seriously?

I'm going to present a schematical answer to this question, to begin with, and then enlarge it.

Schematically speaking, if we exclusively focus on Metz's *theoretical* concern for the universal theory of meaningfulness when we read his book, then we cannot but take him for a detached theoretician who would just try to describe the objective condition of life's meaning from the purely impersonal viewpoint. In this case, we cannot but read his book in a quasi-scientific manner (and will find many defects in it as explained in the last section). If we, however, turn our eyes to the author's *existential* concern so far considered in this section, we will regard him, not as a spectator, but a participant in our inescapable quest for life's meaning (where, by the phrase "our inescapable quest," I mean that each of us inevitably cares about her or his own life's meaning, at least at some level). In this way of reading, we will view his book as a report of the autobiographical kind written by one of our fellows, who is worried about meaning of his own life as well as each of us. This way of reading would, I will argue, enable us to find more excellences in Metz's work than the former, theoretical way does.

To illustrate the difference between the two ways of reading, I cite an impressive passage from the epilogue of *Meaning in Life*.

At a psychological level, I pretty much *have to* think that the search for life's meaning has itself been a source of meaning in my life, and a

substantial one at that. However, it would be all the better for me if there were a philosophical justification for my judgment; indeed, one grounded on the very theory of meaning in life that I have argued is the most justified relative to existing rivals in the literature. I conclude by briefly pointing out how the fundamentality theory entails that the search for the most justified theory of meaning in life is itself a source of meaning.²⁵

We could, on one hand, *theoretically* interpret this passage as saying that everyone should think a search for life's meaning to be itself a source of meaning and Metz's fundamentality theory would explain this universal belief about meaningfulness. I would suggest, however, that this way of interpretation would attribute a serious fault to the author, because there might be someone who has a strong faith that any intellectual investigation on meaningfulness is irrelevant to his or her own life's meaning.

We can, on the other hand, read the passage above cited in an analogous way as we read someone's autobiography. In other words, we can interpret it as reporting the author's more or less personal fact that, for his proper life, "the search for life's meaning has itself been a source of meaning." In this way of interpretation, we should not necessarily find any defects in what Metz says in the passage cited above. We can, rather, receive it as an honest confession of his undeniable reality concerning meaningfulness. Note that, in this case, we have no reason to argue against what the last citation says, even if possibly we would not be persons who think the search for life's meaning to be a source of meaning.

What I should remark is that, if we understand what the last citation says in the second way, *i.e.*, the autobiographical way, then we can interestingly suggest that Metz's fundamentality theory is his all-things-considered response to his personal but firm belief that an intellectual inquiry into life's meaning confers a meaning on the inquirer's life. This suggestion is very interesting, because, by considering it, we can find an important kind of *consistency* in Metz's inquiry. I would like to say that his investigation starts from the belief or faith that "searching for knowledge of meaning would be meaningful for its own sake" and then reaches a theory which would explain (or, more exactly, respond to)

²⁵ Metz (2013), p.249, italics added.

this thought of the starting point. In this respect, Metz is consistently faithful to his personal ultimate position as it were. In other words, his book as a whole is dedicated to the explication of this ultimate view, which he can never escape from when he considers on life's meaning.

What I want to suggest in this subsection is, repeatedly, that, if we interpret the book in question as a report of the autobiographical kind explaining what the author has attained through his effort to engage himself in a meaningful enterprise, then we have no reason to criticize him for alleging his essentially personal position on meaningfulness to be the universal theory. Metz believes that the intellectual inquiry into life's meaning, or more generally the intellectual activities in general and the enterprises for promoting the fundamental conditions under which we can live as human beings, would confer a meaning on the agent's life. He expresses, or self-expresses, this personally firm belief through his writings. I feel great sympathy for such self-expression. I have no necessity to be antipathetic to what he says, though I disagree with him on some particular judgments about meaningfulness.²⁶

There arises a problem. Someone might oppose my suggestion in the last paragraph by arguing that, if the book in question was merely a personal report, then it would lack any philosophical value. I should say that this is a reasonable doubt. I agree with this opponent that any *philosophical* investigation must not be identified with something like a person's self-portrait for private amusement of which value is completely estimated by his or her personal taste. For this reason, I ought to show that my suggestion developed in this subsection wouldn't put our philosophical consideration on meaningfulness into the pitfall of relativism of the vicious kind. In other words, I should say something to warrant that my suggestion wouldn't entail that our judgments about meaningfulness are completely matters of taste. What, then, can I say?

4.3

What I am going to say is, abstractly, that, while Metz seems to locate our philosophical conversation on the issue of life's meaning in the *space of agreement and disagreement* as it were, we should rather locate it in the *space of sympathy and antipathy*. I will argue, less abstractly, for the following. If, on one

²⁶ E.g., I believe that it's important in some contexts to say that a dirty villain's life is meaningful as well as those of Mandela and Mother Teresa.

hand, we give up the hope that we would find the universal condition for a life's being meaningful, then we would seemingly submit to the vicious kind of relativism, under which anyone would be content to be silent about any other's judgment about meaningfulness. I suggest that it is not the case. Even if there were no objective criteria of life's meaning which should be universally accepted, our conversation on the issue in question will be never governed by the relativistic rule of taste. As a matter of fact – this is a quite important point – any decent adult will oppose those others who have an obviously malicious opinion about meaningfulness, even though she or he has never obtained any universally accepted theory of the condition for a life's being meaningful.²⁷ This means that we would not fall into the pitfall of vicious relativism even without any knowledge of the universal theory in question.

In what follows, I enlarge the point roughly presented in the last paragraph. I will thereby explain how the way of reading which focuses on Metz's existential concern would enable us to find excellences in his book.

I'd like to ask, to begin with, how important it is for us to agree with each other on our judgments about whether a given life is meaningful or not. Suppose, *e.g.*, that there is a countryman who has spent his whole time in farm work in his rural area after he graduated a local junior high school in the same area. Suppose, in addition, that he has a firm belief about the meaning of his life. He confidently says, *e.g.*, "to cultivate this field and broaden our farmland, as my parents and grandparents did, it's the meaning of my life." It can turn out that this man's ultimate conception of meaningfulness is essentially different from Metz's (*e.g.*, in the case that the man thinks, not his agricultural contribution to promoting the human fundamental conditions, but rather his playing a role destined by his position in the tradition in which he positively engages, to be the source of meaning). I can, however, sympathize with this man's thought as well as with Metz's. The difference between them does not, I claim, require any solution to remove it. I suggest, therefore, that Metz has no necessity to visit that countryman and to object him that the adequate conception of meaningfulness be rather of the kind proposed in *Meaning in Life*. It would be desirable for us to regard our space of conversation on the issue of life's meaning as one in which the variety of the ultimate conceptions of meaningfulness does not seriously

²⁷ *E.g.*, there could a boy who bullies a neighbor girl with freckles by saying that any ugly freckled girl meaninglessly lives. I claim that this is an obviously malicious opinion about meaningfulness. Any adult ought to scold him.

matter in itself. There should be, in short, no demand for universal agreement on how we conceive the concept of meaningfulness.

I should hastily add that this is not any seduction to relativism of the vicious type, because what I intend to suggest is *not* that one should be content to be silent about any other's judgment about meaningfulness. In fact, I oppose to some views on life's meaning when I feel a strong antipathy to them. If, *e.g.*, someone says that anyone who has no ability to work lives meaninglessly, I would in most cases object her or him by saying that there is a source of meaning other than work or business. What I want to suggest is, to sum up, the following. The disagreement about the views on life's meaning between Metz and that countryman in the last paragraph doesn't seriously matter, but this doesn't mean that any view will go without criticism. As a matter of fact, we can feel antipathy against someone's opinion about life's meaning, and such possibility of feeling keeps us away from the rule of vicious relativism under which any differences of views on meaningfulness be matters of taste.

My suggestion is, repeatedly, that *agreement* or *disagreement* about our views does not in itself matter when we talk about the issue of meaningfulness. By suggesting this, I criticize Metz's theoretical concern for taking an insignificant matter seriously. Nothing matters, I suggest, in the fact itself that we have a variety of the ultimate conceptions of meaningfulness which are not in agreement at all.

What, then, fundamentally matters when we engage in our philosophical, reflective conversation on the issue of life's meaning? My answer is that whether all the participants in this conversation mutually help each other in living in hope for a meaningful life would be at least a more significant matter than whether they agree with each other on the theory of meaningfulness. This suggestion is, as we will see just below, essentially related to the point of the above consideration of how we read philosophical writings on the issue of meaningfulness. I will close my paper with explicating this point.

What happens, to begin with, if we read Metz's book as a report of the autobiographical kind written by one of our fellows who is worried about the meaning of his own life as well as each of us? I'd like to answer that, since it's evident to us the readers that the author sincerely tackles the problem of life's meaning to develop his own understanding of meaningfulness, we will sympathize with him in the respect in which he seriously seeks his own words to express the meaning of his life. And, as a result of this sympathy, each of us will

feel like searching for his or her own words (not the same as Metz's!) to illuminate his or her own understanding of meaningfulness. The point is that Metz's sincerity and seriousness, which is clearly noticed in the passages cited in subsection 4.1 of this paper, inspire us as his fellow-seekers for the meaning of life so to speak and encourage us to engage in an intellectual, or more accurately philosophical-reflective, inquiry into life's meaning. In this respect, I should assure, *Meaning in Life* succeeds in making us realize the significance of the 'intellectual' search for the meaning of life and introducing us to philosophical consideration on the issue of meaningfulness. Here is the excellence which the book in question has.

What I think we should remark here is, abstractly, that the real worth of Metz's book consists, not in establishing our agreement about the view on meaningfulness, but in obtaining our sympathy with his proper way of participating in our inescapable quest for life's meaning. In other words, his intellectual inquiry into life's meaning carries with it an excellence in the sense that it succeeds in encouraging us as his fellows to engage in the same type of inquiry in our ways in turn. I'd like to contend that such encouragement is more valuable in our conversation about meaningfulness than establishing some universal agreement of the view on the condition for a life's being meaningful. Summing up, the reason why Metz's inquiry has not ended in vain though his theoretical attempt suffers from a fatal defect as I argued is that we as fellow-seekers for the meaning of life would sympathize with his sincere effort to approach the life's meaning in his way and thereby be encouraged to devote ourselves to some kind of philosophical consideration on the issue in question.

What I want to stress through my whole consideration of this paper is that our perennial pursuit for the meaning of life would not call for the universal agreement about our understanding of what makes our lives meaningful. So it would be, I suggest, significant for us to reflect on how meaningful it is for us to agree with each other about our conception of meaningfulness. Certainly, we should be cautious about vicious relativism creeping in when we talk about meaningfulness, since the 'anything-goes' stance is obviously inappropriate in our thinking or caring about life's meaning. But, the non-existence of the universal agreement in question does not collapse into the situation in which any understanding of meaningfulness would equally go. As a matter of fact, we feel a strong antipathy to a malicious opinion about the meaning of life. How do you feel when you hear someone say, "That disabled person, who cannot do anything

without the aid of many people, lives meaninglessly”)? To oppose this, it is not necessary for us to have a universally agreed upon view on what confers meaning on a life. What is needed is just our decision to resolutely fight against such view.

My concluding words are about sympathy. I suggest, more or less metaphorically, that we should regard the space of our conversation on life’s meaning as one in which the dimension of sympathy and antipathy, not of agreement and disagreement, plays the essential role. The reason why I suggest so is that I think that, while the possibility of our feeling antipathy prevents our talk on life’s meaning from running on the rock of relativism as already explained, the feeling of sympathy, as fellow-emotion so to speak, enables us to get along together despite of our disagreement about the ultimate conception of meaningfulness. The sympathetic emotion in the context of our seeking life’s meaning, in addition, encourages us to aid each other with living in hope for a meaningful life, because, *e.g.*, we will cherish a hope for making our own lives more meaningful by undertaking the philosophical search for life’s meaning *if, and just if*, we see some fellow not to be in despair of meaningfulness of such search and to engage herself or himself in that attempt. Metz doesn’t despair of the significance of our philosophical investigation on the meaning of life. It is this fact that moved me to write this philosophical paper.

Reference

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