

## The good, the true, and the beautiful: toward a unified account of great meaning in life

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**Abstract:** Three of the great sources of meaning in life are the good, the true, and the beautiful, and I aim to make headway on the grand Enlightenment project of ascertaining what, if anything, they have in common. Concretely, if we take a (stereotypical) Mother Teresa, Mandela, Darwin, Einstein, Dostoyevsky, and Picasso, what might they share that makes it apt to deem their lives to have truly mattered? I provide reason to doubt two influential answers, noting a common flaw that supernaturalism and consequentialism share. I instead develop their most plausible rival, a naturalist and non-consequentialist account of what enables moral achievement, intellectual reflection, and aesthetic creation to confer great meaning on a person's life, namely, the idea that they do so insofar as a person transcends an aspect of herself in some substantial way. I criticize several self-transcendence theories that contemporary philosophers have advanced, before presenting a new self-transcendence view and defending it as the most promising.

### **Introduction: questioning supernaturalism and consequentialism**

Three of the great sources of meaning in life are the good, the true, and the beautiful, and I aim to make headway on the grand Enlightenment project of ascertaining what, if anything, they have in common. The phrase 'the good, the true, and the beautiful' should be read figuratively, as a rough way of referring to certain kinds of moral achievement, intellectual reflection, and aesthetic creation. Hence, the reader is cautioned, for instance, not to use a plain sense of 'the good' that would be overly broad for connoting something more than the moral such as prudence. Insofar as 'the good' least controversially confers superlative meaning on life, it picks out ethical accomplishments such as maintaining integrity in the face of great temptation, going beyond the call of duty to help others, and pulling off a just political revolution. Similarly, the reader should

note that ‘the true’ refers to cognition that need not be literally the truth, probably Plato’s metaphysics.

Now, when I speak of ‘meaning in life’ I am talking about what is worthy of substantial pride or admiration, or what is most worth striving for apart from one’s own pleasure.<sup>1</sup> Putting these definitions together, my question is this: supposing, within at least the Western tradition, that moral achievement, intellectual reflection, and aesthetic creation can constitute extremely admirable and non-hedonistic choice-worthy ends, does this triad have a single property in virtue of which they do? Concretely, if we take people such as Mother Teresa, Nelson Mandela, Albert Einstein, Charles Darwin, Fyodor Dostoyevsky, and Pablo Picasso, what might they all share that makes it apt to deem them to have had great meaning in their lives?

Note that I am interested in developing neither a complete theory of meaning in life, which would capture what gives normal lives some significance, nor even a complete account of great meaning in life. I instead seek a theory of great meaning in life insofar as it comes from the good, the true, and the beautiful – the idea being to start with exemplars of substantial meaningfulness such as those who have merited a Nobel Prize, and then, in future research, to ‘work our way down’ to lives such as ours. Even within these parameters, the topic is enormous, and I cannot promise by the end of this article to have found what some would regard as the holy grail of Western normative philosophy. However, I do aim to make progress on the search for it. Even if one suspects that there is no unitary feature among the triad of the good, the true, and the beautiful, one could fairly conclude that only after having searched diligently, making the discussion here relevant even to sceptics.

In seeking a unification of moral achievement, intellectual reflection, and aesthetic creation, I must focus on a particular theoretical territory, leaving others aside. For existence, I do not explore the traditional, supernaturalist view that this triad is unified by virtue of being the object of God’s higher-order purposes or being more similar to God than other properties to be encountered in nature.<sup>2</sup> For another example, I do not consider influential consequentialist theories that certain ethical, epistemic, and artistic projects all belong under the general heading of ‘great meaning’ solely because they have particularly good long-term results in the physical world.<sup>3</sup> Although my aim is not to refute these approaches, I here point out that I believe they suffer from a common flaw: the evidence that a condition confers great meaning on life is much greater than that for the belief that the alleged unifying property obtains. Most of us are much more justified in thinking that rescuing thousands of Jewish children from the Warsaw Ghetto, explaining the fate of the physical universe, and writing the Great American Novel would confer great meaning than we are that God exists or that these actions will have extremely desirable consequences in the long run. Upon encountering this kind of discrepancy in the epistemic credentials for our beliefs, we cannot

coherently hold that great meaning in morality, enquiry, and creativity is at bottom a function of either God or consequences.<sup>4</sup>

The theoretical perspective that remains, and that I shall in any event focus on, is non-consequentialist naturalism, the view that the good, the true, and the beautiful confer great meaning on life (at least partly) insofar as they are physical properties that have a superlative final value obtaining independently of their long-term results. There is something about the actions of making a substantial ethical accomplishment, obtaining deep insight into the workings of nature, and creating a masterpiece that are significant ‘in themselves’, or so I suppose *per argumentum*.

Nearly all the philosophical literature that shares this orientation to great meaning in life conceives of it as a kind of *self-transcendence*. That is, insofar as ethical, epistemic, and aesthetic projects are highly estimable and worth engaging in, the dominant non-consequentialist naturalist explanation of why is that the agent, researcher, or artist goes from some facet of herself to something beyond it. Regardless of whether the reader accepts this general approach to the meaning of life, it is prima facie plausible and grounds a tractable way to address a notoriously unwieldy topic. Plus, even if one finds supernaturalism or consequentialism attractive as an account of superlative meaningfulness, it would be useful to know what the most promising competitor is, which I aim to specify here.

My four specific aims in this article are: to distinguish seven distinct non-consequentialist and naturalist, or self-transcendence, accounts of what makes moral achievement, intellectual reflection, and aesthetic creation great sources of meaning that are to be found in (or at least suggested by) the recent philosophical literature; to organize them so that they progress in a dialectical order, from weakest to strongest; to demonstrate that they are all implausible; and to develop a new theoretical account, one that avoids and explains all the objections facing rivals and that is most worthy of investigation.

I begin by criticizing existing self-transcendence theories, after which I articulate a new one, and then clarify it, defend it, and propose refinements of it in the course of responding to important objections. I conclude the paper by pointing out areas for future research, if the theory I have spelled out is indeed the most promising.

### **Existing self-transcendence theories and their problems**

In this section, I organize and critically explore views that the good, the true, and the beautiful confer great meaning on life in virtue of physical properties that are valuable intrinsically, not only in the sense that they are good for their own sake, apart from their usefulness, but also in the sense that they are good in themselves, apart from any relationship to God or the long-term future.

As I have said, friends of a non-consequentialist and naturalist standpoint tend to capture the nature of great meaning in terms of 'self-transcendence'. Moral achievement, intellectual reflection, and aesthetic creation are typically thought to confer superlative significance because they are substantial ways of reaching a certain condition beyond a certain part of oneself in a certain manner. I argue that all such accounts in the literature are vulnerable to criticism and hence that a new self-transcendence theory needs to be developed.

More specifically, I present a principle, object to it, consider another principle that avoids the objection, present a new objection to it, address yet another principle that avoids the previous objections, raise yet another objection, and so on. Progressing in this manner reveals a developmental logic (though not chronological order) in the reflection that has taken place, and will point the way toward a new, more adequate theory that not only avoids, but also explains, all objections facing the existing ones.

Although I will associate a given principle with the remarks of a certain philosopher, my aim is not to provide a thorough analysis of any person's views. I am most concerned to present a logical order of ideas, and hence use a philosopher's words to illustrate a principle, not to capture the intricacies of her metaphysical, epistemological, and linguistic *Weltanschauung*. So, when I criticize a principle, the reader should consider whether my criticism is fair to it, not to the thinker whose remarks I associate with it.

Here is the first, and weakest, self-transcendence account of great meaning in life:

*Captivation by an object:* The good, the true, and the beautiful confer great meaning on life insofar as we attend not to ourselves, but rather are intensely focused on interacting with something else.

When spelling out the sort of self-transcendence inherent to great meaning, it is natural to think of people forgetting themselves and living in the moment. Moritz Schlick expresses this kind of view when he says:

It is the joy in sheer creation, the dedication to the activity, the absorption in the movement, which transforms work into play ... It was earlier the custom to group human values around three great centres: the beautiful, the good and the true. The three faculties of feeling, willing and thinking, and the three cultural areas of art, society and enquiry, were held to correspond to them. In all these triads the connection with the value of youth can easily be pointed out, by showing how at their highest level the exercise of these different faculties becomes play.<sup>5</sup>

The idea is that, when superlative significance is at hand, agents do not think of the good that may be expected to redound to them as compensation for sacrifice; scientists get wrapped up by the data and do not consider technical spin-offs or corporate contracts; and artists are focused on making real what is in their imagination, not what might do well at a gallery.

However, it is clear that this state of mind cannot be the whole story about why morality, enquiry, and creativity are great sources of meaning. It does not appear to be necessary, for it is hard to suppose that Mother Teresa was fully absorbed, let alone being playful, when changing bedpans and comforting lepers. Furthermore, being captivated does not appear to be sufficient for superlative significance, for then it could come from fantasizing about a celebrity, watching a soap opera, or playing a video game. Although these activities may be pleasant, they are not intuitively sources of great meaning. Part of the reason they are not might be that they are activities engaged with merely imaginary or virtual conditions. The following principle avoids this problem:

*Close attention to the real:* The good, the true, and the beautiful confer great meaning on life insofar as we set aside our own satisfaction, and rather perceive the details of a natural object.

The right way to transcend oneself, on the present account, is not to lose oneself in something merely imaginary or virtual, but instead to concentrate on something real, which many (but of course not all) would identify with the natural or physical. Iris Murdoch sets forth this kind of perspective on meaning when she says,

Goodness and beauty are not to be contrasted, but are largely part of the same structure ... . Virtue is *au fond* the same in the artist as in the good man in that it is a selfless attention to nature ... . [G]reat art teaches us how real things can be looked at and loved without being seized and used, without being appropriated into the greedy organism of the self ... . Beauty is that which attracts this particular sort of unselfish attention. It is obvious here what is the role, for the artist or spectator, of exactness and good vision: unsentimental, detached, unselfish, objective attention. It is also clear that in moral situations a similar exactness is called for.<sup>6</sup>

Similar remarks apply to scientists and philosophers; they, too, when at the height of their work, exhibit ‘a selfless attention to nature’ or to what exists more generally. Disinterested or impartial apprehension of the real appears to be at the heart of the good, the true, and the beautiful.

However, it is doubtful that great meaning in this triad is entirely constituted by paying close attention to something real. For a counter-example, consider scrutinizing another person’s belly button, which is, of course, a real and not merely imaginary or virtual object.<sup>7</sup> Literal navel gazing could exhibit the same, attentive state of mind as conditions that are intuitively much more meaning-conferring.

In reply, one may suggest that paying *truly* close attention to a navel would involve investigating, say, its molecular structure, which might appear to be a very meaningful condition or at least approximate one. However, the best explanation of what would confer the meaning in this case would not be the attention paid to the molecular structure *of the navel*, but rather the apprehension

of deep chemical laws or causal mechanisms. At best, then, paying truly close attention to a belly button would have instrumental value, i.e. would be a means to the realization of ends that are extremely choice-worthy for their own sake and for reasons other than pleasure, which are alone my interest in this article. Let us therefore consider a principle that prescribes a connection not with any real object such as a navel, but only with valuable ones, where valuable entities are specified in a rich and attractive way.

*Connection with organic unity:* The good, the true, and the beautiful confer great meaning on life insofar as we have a positive relationship to an intrinsic value, namely, a whole that integrates a high degree of differentiated elements, that is beyond ourselves.

This is the view articulated with most care by Robert Nozick,<sup>8</sup> who is known for arguing that talk of ‘meaning’ typically denotes relationships between different things. For a word to have meaning is for it to stand in certain relationships with other words or things in the world; for a thing to mean something, as in ‘smoke means fire’, is for it to be contiguous with another thing; and for a life to be meaningful is for it to be positively related to things that have intrinsic value.

The particular things or causes people find make their life feel meaningful all take them beyond their own narrow limits and connect them up with something else.

Children, relationships with other persons, helping others, advancing justice, continuing and transmitting a tradition, pursuing truth, beauty, world betterment – these and the rest link you to something wider than yourself ... [M]eaning is a transcending of the limits of your own value, a transcending of your own limited value. Meaning is a connection with an external value ... [where] intrinsic value is degree of organic unity.<sup>9</sup>

When Nozick says that intrinsic value is ‘organic unity’, he is claiming that a thing is good in itself in virtue of being a whole that brings together a diverse array of parts, roughly, because it is complex. So, Nozick points out that a person is valuable insofar as it is a unification of a wide array of different experiences, beliefs, desires, emotions, and other mental states into a single self,<sup>10</sup> which would account well for the intuitive meaning of having children, developing intimate relationships, helping others, promoting justice, and exhibiting other constructive connections with people. Furthermore, Nozick reminds us that important works of art are often construed as unifications of form, content, technique, tone, and so on into a single object,<sup>11</sup> which would mean that his view successfully entails that the production of artworks can be very meaningful.

Nozick seems to have captured the good and the beautiful, but an apparent stumbling block is the true. The view that great meaning comes from positive relationships with organic unities beyond oneself can account well for the importance of making certain intellectual contributions to the social sciences, which are about people. However, it cannot do so for the importance of metaphysics and the non-biological natural sciences of chemistry and physics.

Knowledge of quarks and time is important, but not because it is about intrinsically valuable objects *qua* organic unities. Nor are certain metaphysical theories about, say, causation or necessity, significant for this reason.

The most promising way to reply on behalf of Nozick would be to grant that metaphysical and natural scientific enquiry is often not *about* any organic unity, but to contend that such enquiry can in fact *constitute* an organic unity itself. Nozick maintains that a theoretical belief just is an organic unity in that it synthesizes a diverse array of data into a single principle.<sup>12</sup> If so, then developing a theory about quarks and causation could confer great meaning on a person's life.

An apparent problem with this interesting suggestion is that it follows that a theory about anything at all would confer great meaning on life. Developing the theory of quantum mechanics confers more importance on a person's life than a theory of, say, which personal ads generate the most responses (which, by the way, has been done), but since they are both theories, they both confer meaning, by the present hypothesis. Nozick may of course reply that the theory of quantum mechanics unifies much more data than any theory of personal ads could, making the former a good candidate for great meaning, unlike the latter. Indeed, the search for a grand unified theory in physics appears to be very important since it would be a theory of all physical phenomena and therefore the most comprehensive organic unity possible for a theory (supposing only the physical exists).

However, this rejoinder oddly entails that just about *any* theoretical knowledge of physics and chemistry is *always* more important than any theoretical knowledge of human beings, since the former sort will invariably unify more data than the latter, which will obviously be limited to the planet earth. But surely the lives of Darwin, Sigmund Freud, or Max Weber were extremely significant in virtue of the knowledge they discovered, despite its limited scope when compared with the natural sciences or metaphysics.

Before turning to another principle, it is worth pointing out that counter-examples to Nozick arise not merely with regard to the true, but also the good and the beautiful. Connecting with complexity beyond oneself seems to capture the meaningfulness neither of maintaining integrity in the face of difficult circumstances à la Rosa Parks and Steve Biko, nor of producing a minimalist work of art, e.g. Mark Rothko in painting and Steve Reich in music. It might be that the problem with Nozick's hypothesis is the narrow reduction of intrinsic value to organic unity, not the proposal that meaning is a function of relating positively to intrinsic value. The next principle I address does not restrict the valuable conditions constitutive of meaning to entities that unify diversity.<sup>13</sup>

*Advancement of valuable open-ended goals:* The good, the true, and the beautiful confer great meaning on life insofar as we make progress toward highly worthwhile states of affairs that cannot conceivably be

realized because our knowledge of them changes as we strive to meet them.

Neil Levy proposes this principle in the most recent non-consequentialist and naturalist attempt in the literature to capture what the good, the true, and the beautiful have in common.<sup>14</sup> Levy argues that superlative meaning does not come from personal relationships, but instead from certain kinds of work. Specifically, the greatest significance is a function of productive activity that involves transcending oneself in the sense of striving to realize extremely desirable ends that cannot be fully achieved, and cannot be fully achieved for the particular reason that we can have no stable conception of what it would be like to do so.

The practice of artistic creativity, when it is carried out at the very highest level, is paradigmatic of such an open-ended activity. We have only to think of how the avant-garde movements of the Twentieth century would have been perceived by earlier generations of artists to see at once how the ends of art themselves evolve along with the activities which aim to achieve them. Like the pursuit of the good and right, and the pursuit of truth, it is an inherently open-ended activity insofar as its ends are at stake within the activity itself. The ends of superlatively meaningful activities cannot be achieved, because as the activities evolve, so the ends at which they aim alter and are refined.<sup>15</sup>

So, in the realm of the true, Levy suggests that we have no clear and distinct conception of what it would be to have complete knowledge of nature. Levy's claim is not merely that such a conception is 'too big', but that any apprehension we have of it changes as we obtain more knowledge. And when it comes to the good, Levy maintains that we cannot achieve a perfectly just world because we have no detailed conception of what it would be to live in one. As humanity makes progress toward a just world, e.g. by accepting universalist conceptions of moral status, our interpretation of the ethically ideal goalpost shifts.

Although one could question whether moral achievement, intellectual reflection, and aesthetic creation that ground great meaning share the feature of open-ended activity, I grant it here. I suppose for the sake of argument that Levy is correct that *whenever* the good, the true, and the beautiful confer great meaning on a person's life, the person has striven toward an end that we cannot conceivably realize because our understanding of it changes as we make progress toward it. What I reject is the claim that this common feature is what explains *why* the good, the true, and beautiful can confer great meaning. A theory of superlative meaning aims to provide not merely its supervening conditions, i.e. the properties that co-vary with superlative meaning, but rather the factors that *constitute* it, which are of much greater interest. And my first objection is that Levy has at best indicated certain features that accompany great meaning; he has not given an account of in virtue of what great meaning obtains.

To see this, consider why Mandela's life is important for having ended apartheid and done so in a way that minimized the use of unjust means. The natural



explanation of why this accomplishment has conferred great meaning on Mandela's life does not appeal to the idea that he made progress toward an end that we cannot conceivably realize since our understanding of it alters as we advance toward its realization. Mandela himself was unlikely to be thinking that what he was doing was important for the reason that he was progressing toward a perfectly just world that he could never in principle achieve, and we need not think of him as doing so in order to apprehend the great significance of what he did. It is implausible to capture Mandela's greatness by saying, 'He brought South Africa closer to perfect justice, although we have no clue as to what that might be.' Instead, achieving the 'closed-ended' goal of ending apartheid seems to carry within it the ground of superlative meaning. Similar remarks apply to the true and the beautiful, e.g. Darwin's account of the origin of species and Picasso's painting, *Guernica*. Their significance is not best explained by the fact (supposing it is one) that they progressed toward the realization of ends that we cannot conceive of reaching because, as we approach them, our conception of them changes; something else is doing the work.

There is a second problem with Levy's theory, namely, that a crucial part of it begs the question. The question I am seeking to answer in this article is, 'In virtue of what basic condition are the good, the true, and the beautiful able to confer great meaning on a life?'. Answering that the members of this triad all involve progress toward 'valuable',<sup>16</sup> or even 'supremely valuable',<sup>17</sup> goals does not adequately answer the question, and instead naturally begs the question, 'What is the basic thing that makes moral achievement, intellectual reflection, and aesthetic creation (supremely) valuable whenever they are?'.

Here is another way to see the present objection. Claiming that something confers meaning on life is probably *analytically* a matter of saying (among other things) that the life is desirable for its own sake in a certain respect. Talk of a life being 'meaningful', for a very large majority of philosophers who address the topic, is by definition to speak of something (supremely) valuable. Hence, if we answer the question of what makes something meaningful by indicating that it is highly valuable, we have not advanced beyond the question.

I do not wish to make this objection entirely hang on whether I have accurately captured the sense of the phrase 'meaning in life'. Even if there were a synthetic relationship between the two concepts of meaning and value, I presume that most readers would be like me in wanting to know more about what it is about moral action, intellectual reflection, and aesthetic creation that constitutes their substantial meaning-conferring power besides the bare fact that they are all highly valuable. Again, is there any common denominator as to their high value? It would be revealing if we could find a fairly specific answer to this question.

One might be tempted to suggest on Levy's behalf that an end is highly valuable just insofar as it is open-ended in the way he describes. However, that will clearly not do. The promotion of injustice has exactly the same structure as the

promotion of justice. The former involves progress toward ends that cannot conceivably be achieved since our understanding of them changes as we progress toward them – if indeed the latter involves this. Hence, Levy's principle needs the conjunction of value and open-endedness, but I conclude that the idea of value is underdeveloped and the idea of open-endedness is irrelevant. Let us consider, then, a different principle, one that does not appeal to the bare category of 'value', but instead is more specific.

*Using reason to meet standards of excellence:* The good, the true, and the beautiful confer great meaning on life insofar as we transcend our animal nature by using our rational nature to meet objective criteria of distinction.

Often when philosophers think of finally valuable activities, they think of them as involving rationality. So, we might try to specify what counts as 'highly valuable' in the context of self-transcendence by appealing to Aristotelian and Kantian appreciation of the exercise of reason. In the literature, Alan Gewirth has made comments supportive of this view:

[S]piritual values consist in ideals of moral, intellectual and aesthetic excellence. They involve that one goes beyond one's narrow personal concerns of self-aggrandizement, that one in effect surrenders oneself to the pursuit of goodness, truth and beauty... The ground for calling such pursuits 'spiritual' is precisely that one goes beyond oneself, i.e., beyond concerns focused solely on oneself; one recognizes the demands of a broader moral, intellectual, and aesthetic culture. These demands are experienced as objective because they embody criteria of excellence that one does not make or invent but rather discovers.<sup>18</sup>

It of course will not suffice merely to say that one must exercise reason in order to obtain superlative meaning (or 'spirituality', in Gewirth's terms). Instead, one must use reason in exemplary ways in order to obtain it.

However, the obvious problem is that it is of urgent interest to know what these exemplary ways are and whether they have a common thread to them. In short, the present theory also begs the question in the way that the previous does, albeit to a lesser degree. The natural questions to ask of Gewirth are: 'What do the objective criteria of excellence have in common?'; 'Which kinds of activities involving the exercise of reason satisfy these criteria?'; 'Well-planned murder and retyping *The Brothers Karamazov* would not count, but why not?'.<sup>19</sup> The following principle provides a substantive answer to such questions:

*Using reason in creative ways:* The good, the true, and the beautiful confer great meaning on life insofar as we transcend our animal nature by using our rational nature in extremely creative ways.

Richard Taylor has been the foremost proponent of this theory, although he is not often recognized as such. Taylor is best known for having advocated

a subjective account of meaning in life, such that great meaning could come merely from the satisfaction of one's strongest desires.<sup>20</sup> However, Taylor eventually opted for this contrasting objective account:

A meaningful life is a creative one, and what falls short of this lacks meaning, to whatever extent. What redeems humanity is not its kings, military generals and builders of personal wealth, however much these may be celebrated and envied. It is instead the painters, composers, poets, philosophers, writers – all who, by their creative power alone, bring about things of great value, things which, but for them, would never have existed at all ...<sup>21</sup>

On this view, the reason retyping *The Brothers Karamazov* would not confer great meaning is that it is adaptive, a matter of copying as opposed to originating, and murder would not confer meaning on life since it is destructive rather than creative. Of course, a critic might maintain that murder can be creative; serial killing à la the film *Seven* might be a case in point. I presume, though, that the friend of Taylor's theory could either specify a sense of 'creativity' that would include artworks and theories but exclude the unjustified killing of persons, or simply integrate a moral constraint into the principle, such that great meaning is deemed to come from creativity that does not violate people's rights.

However, even if one can find a way to exclude serial murder as conferring great meaning on life, Taylor's theory will have trouble including patent sources of great meaning in the moral realm. Consider, for instance, tending to the sick by changing bandages, cleaning bedpans, and alleviating pain in the manner of Mother Teresa. She (or the stereotypical view of her) engaged in no particularly original or sophisticated behaviour, but rather seems to have obtained great meaning in her life by virtue of her compassion toward, care for, and devotion to others. So, while I am inclined to retain the idea that the exercise of reason is relevant to making one's life significant, we must broaden the way it could be done, perhaps as follows:

*Using reason according to a universal perspective:* The good, the true, and the beautiful confer great meaning on life insofar as we transcend our animal nature by using our rational nature to realize states of affairs that would be the object of a human (rather than personal) point of view.

Instead of the idea that one can transcend oneself so as to obtain great meaning merely by creating something original, the present proposal is that one can do so by using one's reason in ways that would be appreciated from a general rather than individual standpoint. From a universal perspective, making art-objects and developing plausible theories would be approved of, as would other works such as morally sacrificial deeds. Some of Gewirth's other remarks occasion awareness of this principle.

[T]here are criteria of control of nature, explanatory and predictive power, and generality that enable us to differentiate degrees of cognitive excellence and thereby to transcend the limits sets by the restrictive purview of ordinary sense experience ... . The arts provide comparable vehicles of self-transcendence ... they enable us to move outside our narrow sphere of direct experience through compelling modes of artistic disclosure ... . An especially eminent area of self-transcendence is found in the universalist moral saints and heroes who risk their lives in times of mortal danger to rescue innocent persons ... .<sup>22</sup>

The passage suggests that the good, the true, and the beautiful are united in virtue of transcending the animal self by exercising reason in ways that would satisfy an impersonal perspective. Instead of focusing on one's pleasure or desires, in the moral realm great meaning comes from doing something that all persons would strongly recommend or that takes the interests of everyone into consideration. Instead of merely perceiving objects from one's own standpoint, in science an important contribution is a function of discovering laws of nature, principles that are true for all beings and at all times or that would be the object of consensus among ideal enquirers. And instead of expressing facets of oneself that are idiosyncratic, when it comes to significant artwork, one creates objects that address in revealing ways 'universal themes', i.e. themes that would be appreciated by all, regardless of their culture.

This is the most promising self-transcendence theory of great meaning to be found in the extant literature. My reason for rejecting it is that there are conditions that would be approved from an impartial standpoint but that are not conditions of superlative significance. For all that has yet been said, the following could also be the object of an impersonal pro-attitude: distributing resources so as to enable people to get their toenails trimmed (universal interests); apprehending non-causal correlations between events, that is, mere coincidences (universal facts); writing a novella about breathing or dust (universal themes).

The natural reply to make on behalf of Gewirth is that these kinds of actions would not be *strongly* approved from a standpoint that includes all selves or is that of humanity as such. However, the question is: 'Why not?'. We need to know much more about the beliefs, desires, and emotions of those who comprise the impersonal standpoint, before being able to ascertain which actions would receive very positive responses.

One way to advance the discussion, therefore, would be to flesh out the attitudes of those who make up the impartial perspective. However, I do not proceed in this way, because my hunch is that a response-dependent account of meaning cannot avoid the following dilemma. On the one hand, one could seek to posit real-world human beings as those who inhabit the impersonal standpoint. But I submit that all actual human beings would come to no determinate agreement or uniform response about anything. Even upon full epistemic acquaintance with

various conditions, human beings vary too much for us reasonably to think that they would all have the same reactive dispositions to them, or, at the very least, the same ones strongly. On the other hand, one could seek to idealize the inhabitants of an impartial perspective. Then, however, what will be doing the explanatory work at bottom is not the positive response of hypothetical agents, but rather the features of what they positively respond to. In short, certain responses of a collection of idealized agents might well supervene on great meaning, but they are unlikely to constitute it, at least in the face of a plausible response-independent account of why the good, the true, and the beautiful confer great meaning on life – a theory I aim to develop in the next section.

### **Toward a more promising self-transcendence theory**

In the previous section, I canvassed the existing naturalist and non-consequentialist attempts to capture in a single principle the means in which the good, the true, and the beautiful are able to confer great meaning on life. All are variants of the general view that great meaning comes from self-transcendence, and I argued that they are all implausible. In some cases, the principles are too broad, entailing that great meaning could come from something that it cannot come from (Schlick, Murdoch, Gewirth). In other cases, the principles are too narrow, entailing that great meaning could not come from something that it can (Nozick, Taylor). And in still other cases, the principles might be able to generate the right kinds of entailments but they provide poor explanations, either because they beg the question, or because they appeal to properties that might co-vary with great meaning but do not constitute it (Levy, Gewirth).

Rather than reject the broad idea of self-transcendence as central to meaning, however, in this section, I aim to develop a better specification of it. I sketch a new principle that avoids the above problems, or at least has a greater chance of doing so, and hence is worthy of more exploration. I first lay out the principle, and then spell it out in the three contexts of moral achievement, intellectual reflection, and aesthetic creation. If one finds non-consequentialist naturalism, or the idea of self-transcendence in a purely physical world, a promising approach to the question of what makes life very meaningful, then, I argue, one should find the following theory more attractive than the others currently in the literature:

*Contouring reason to fundamental objects:* The good, the true, and the beautiful confer great meaning on life insofar as we transcend our animal nature by positively orienting our rational nature in a substantial way toward conditions of human existence that are largely responsible for many of its other conditions.

The basic idea of this theory is that, at the core, great meaning is a function of intelligent behaviour robustly contoured toward depth, i.e. conditions that

account for much else in a given domain. Speaking of ‘conditions’ or ‘objects’ that ‘account for’ or are ‘responsible for’ other conditions is vague, admitting of two different interpretations. In metaphysical terms, the relation would be primarily a causal one between events (or maybe powers), such that a fundamental object is one that brings about many other objects. Metaphysically basic objects would be instrumental for many other objects in a certain realm. In epistemological terms, however, the relation would be primarily an explanatory one between judgements, such that a fundamental condition is one that explains many other conditions in a given context. Often (but probably not always) the metaphysical and epistemological relations will co-vary, and I am not yet sure which sense of ‘fundamental’ is the most promising to focus on; for now, therefore, I gloss the distinction.

Regardless of whether a fundamental condition is best construed as a feature of properties or of propositions, it should be distinguished from a necessary condition. A necessary condition of X is something that is required in order for X to obtain, whereas a fundamental condition of X is something that is responsible for the obtaining of X. Not every necessary condition is a fundamental condition. For instance, the fact that no asteroid has wiped out the human race is a necessary condition for a wide array of aspects of human existence, but it is not a fundamental condition as it does not account for a wide array of them, roughly, neither causes nor explains them. Intuitively, being aware of this merely necessary condition for human life would not confer great meaning on a knower, while below I suggest that fundamental ones are key.

The theory says that one’s rational nature should be ‘contoured’ or ‘positively oriented’ toward fundamental conditions. Positive reactions are pro-attitudes such as decision and volition that are supportive or constructive. Key examples are producing, protecting, revealing, and respecting.<sup>23</sup>

Let me now examine the way that contouring one’s intelligence toward fundamentality plays a central role in the ability of the good, the true, and the beautiful to confer great meaning in life. First off, what is the difference between executing a well-planned murder and trimming people’s toenails, on the one hand, and giving people urgently needed medical attention and freeing them from tyranny, on the other? Why are the latter plausible candidates for conferring substantial significance on a life, while the former are not? The latter actions are, roughly, positively oriented toward people’s agency, the disposition to engage in autonomous decision-making, which is largely responsible for much about the course of people’s lives. Murder is a negative response to end-pursuit, while trimming people’s toenails has little, if any, bearing on it. In contrast, maintaining health and promoting democracy and liberty are constructive responses to people’s voluntary choosing. The more intensely one supports people’s decision-making, the more meaning that will accrue to one’s life; such is a plausible explanation of the moral achievements of Mandela and Mother Teresa.

Think now about the role of fundamentality in intellectual reflection. Cognition that confers great importance on a life ascertains (or does what is likely to ascertain) facts that are largely responsible for a wide array of other facts.<sup>24</sup> More specifically, it seems that there are two domains in which apprehending basic conditions would be significant, roughly, humanity and reality. First off, contemplation is very important (for non-consequentialist considerations) when and because it is about those facets of human nature that are largely responsible for much else about humans. Knowledge of ourselves can be very important insofar as it discloses those features that account for many other aspects of us, e.g. DNA, evolution, rationality, socialization, neurosis, communication, friendship, power, wealth, and other concepts central to the human and social sciences. Second, contemplation is very important (for reasons other than its results) when and because it reveals facets of our world that are largely responsible for much else about it, e.g., space-time, energy, gravity, atomic structure, and other concepts central to the natural sciences, as well as causation, necessity, and other core notions of metaphysics. The appeal to fundamentality well explains why great meaning would not come from developing a theory about successful personal ads or discovering mere coincidences. It also promises to capture the kind of knowledge that a university should strive to discover and impart, viz. the ideas of Darwin and Einstein.

Finally, consider fundamentality in the context of aesthetic creation. It is a commonplace to say that great art, whether it is literature, painting, or music, addresses ‘universal themes’,<sup>25</sup> but, as I noted above, a novel about breathing or dust on the face of it would address something that fits under this rubric. A great artwork cannot be about just any facet of human life that all of us experience, but, instead, I submit, is about those facets of the human experience responsible for much else about the human experience. Such a qualification would enable us to distinguish between a novel about breathing or dust, on the one hand, and one about topics such as morality, war, death, love, family, and the like, on the other. To be sure, breathing is necessary for much else about what it is like to live a human life, but it is instrumental for and explains little of it, i.e. is not fundamental. A central part of why Dostoyevsky’s *Crime and Punishment* and Picasso’s *Guernica* are great is that they convey an intimate awareness of deep themes.

I am aware of the extent to which this attempt to unify the good, the true, and the beautiful is merely suggestive or provocative and is far from being conclusive or convincing. What I can say is that it is a sketch worth more attention, in light of the following two considerations. First, as it stands, this theory not only avoids, but also plausibly explains, all the objections facing the existing theories raised in the previous section. It is not vulnerable to any of the counter-examples, while providing a principled account of their force; and it also does not seem to beg the question or posit a merely supervening condition in the way many of the other

principles do. Second, the fundamentality theory has the resources to avoid many of the initial objections that readers will be inclined to make, which I now demonstrate.

### **Objections, clarifications, reformulations, and promissory notes**

One criticism that naturally arises is to doubt whether orientation toward fundamental objects is sufficient for great meaning. After all, a critic might point out, great meaning would not come from any of the following: promoting people's agency merely by donating money that one can easily forgo; apprehending that  $2+2=4$ ; or reading trashy romantic fiction or crime thrillers. All these actions involve rationality (for lower animals cannot do these things), and in every case they are arguably oriented toward a fundamental condition.

In reply, note that the fundamentality theory requires more than the bare fact of rationality directed toward a fundamental object; it also requires the *substantial* contouring of one's intelligence toward such an object. So, in the realm of moral achievement, it would require some kind of intense connection between one's own agency and that of others, e.g. hard work, single-minded devotion, or sophisticated planning, which are all lacking when a person who has inherited massive wealth donates a cheque to Oxfam. Regarding intellectual reflection, the theory demands the rigorous exercise of one's theoretical capacities, which is missing in the case of  $2+2=4$ . Furthermore, substantially contouring one's theoretical reflection toward a fundamental condition involves not merely knowing a proposition that is fundamental or even *that* a proposition is fundamental, but also *why* it is fundamental; one ought to be in a position to understand how a piece of theoretical knowledge explains a diverse array of data, a key difference between a professional physicist and an amateur who has memorized 'E=MC<sup>2</sup>'. And in respect of aesthetic creation, the content of one's artwork, or the thought that went into it, ought not to be merely something fundamental to human experience, but also revealing with regard to it. It is a banality in aesthetic theory to note that clichés, stereotypes, formulaic plots, and hackneyed techniques – let alone the act of retyping *The Brothers Karamazov* – indicate a lack of sensitivity to the subject matter. Such essentially plagiaristic material means that the interpretation of the fundamental object is not illuminating.

Another way to avoid many of the above putative counter-examples would be to integrate another element into the fundamentality theory, one requiring some kind of *advancement* relative to the past. With regard to great meaning in the realm of morality, we might require not merely outcomes that are likely to be supportive of agency, but those that actually are, e.g. that have successfully brought about substantial changes in people's decision-making in the form of newly democratic relationships or recovery from severe illness. With respect to great meaning in enquiry, we might require discovering a new, well-supported



theory about us or the cosmos, not merely coming to apprehend an existing one. And in terms of artistry, we might require a style or technique that breaks with the past, as opposed to one that is original but still fairly continuous with tradition.

At this point, a critic might accept that if one's intelligence must be *substantially* contoured toward a fundamental object, and if it must make an *advancement*, then the fundamentality theory would not be overly broad as to what would count as sources of 'great meaning'. However, she might nonetheless contend that the theory would be too narrow for being overly intellectualist. Great meaning does not come from the exercise of reason alone, one might object, but from the passionate side of our nature as well. It is not merely decision and volition that count, but also conation, affection, and emotion. Those with lives of great meaning usually satisfy strong desires, take much pleasure in what they do, and love their work.

The point is fair, but it is not clear that it constitutes an objection to the fundamentality theory. Desires, feelings, and emotions can be responsive to reason, or, in T. M. Scanlon's useful phrase, can be 'judgment-sensitive attitudes'.<sup>26</sup> Insofar as wants, experiences, and sentiments are under our (indirect) control, by being able to track cognitive appraisals of value to a greater or lesser degree, they can be considered part of our 'rational' nature that help to accrue great meaning when they are substantially contoured toward fundamental objects. I would add, however, that rational *action* is particularly central to great meaning, and could not be replaced by the other responses. That is, it would not be enough for great meaning, say, to wish that others be helped and to be pleased upon seeing them helped; one must of course do a lot of helping.

So far, the criticisms have addressed the fundamentality theory in general, but I now want to raise problems facing its ability to account for a given aspect of the triad. For example, in the realm of the good, it is not clear that the fundamentality theory avoids an objection I made to Taylor's creativity theory as being unable to account for the moral achievement of helping the sick, which seems not to involve sophisticated intelligence. Although it is true that helping the sick might not require sophisticated intelligence, to obtain great meaning from doing so, viz. of the sort that would warrant a Nobel Prize, one must nonetheless robustly exercise rational decision and volition. For instance, one would have to help many people, and to do so in consistent and thorough ways. Consider the strength of will required to overcome constant boredom, stench, screaming, and the presence of death.

In addition, a critic might argue that moral achievement confers great meaning not merely insofar as it protects, develops, or otherwise respects people's end-pursuit, but also insofar as it enhances people's quality of life. Relieving people's pain, say, could make one's life very important, and arguably explains part of Mother Teresa's importance.

However, often judgements about when someone's life is going poorly are a function of more basic judgements that her decision-making is frustrated in some way, which better capture the significance involved. When people lack food, healthcare, and education, and when they are in pain, their voluntary choosing is thereby stunted. Furthermore, making competent adults well-off against their considered judgement, viz. in strongly paternalist fashion, is arguably not something capable of conferring great meaning on a person's life, which suggests that what really matters is helping people achieve their highly ranked goals, one of which is often to be well-off. In short, some standard Kantian resources are available to help the fundamentality theory, here.

In the realm of intellectual reflection, some might suggest that discovering many piecemeal facts could be important, something not captured by the appeal to propositions that are 'fundamental' in the sense of explaining lots of disparate data. Consider, for instance, taxonomic work in botany. It is true that the fundamentality theory would not deem such work to be a source of superlative significance. However, one may draw a final/instrumental distinction between two types of significance, and plausibly account for this kind of knowledge as being instrumentally meaningful, even if not finally so. That is, recording and organizing bits of initially unrelated information could be extremely useful for the realization of deep knowledge that is very meaningful for its own sake. It could be meaningful as a means, but not as an end.

Finally, in the realm of the beautiful, one might point out that my account of it applies only to contentful artworks, but that great meaning can come from non-representational pieces. Minimalist painting and music, for instance, appear to be excluded altogether by the fundamentality theory, for they do not seem to be about anything. In short, the present theory appears no better off than Nozick's in this respect.

This concern raises complex issues in aesthetic theory, and the easiest way to reply would be to narrow the theory down to something intended to account merely for contentful artworks. However, consider the following more robust replies. First, there are some who argue that 'non-representational' artworks are about themselves *qua* artworks or about the possibilities open to art.<sup>27</sup> Insofar as the aesthetic itself is responsible for much else about human experience, producing an artwork that is about art could be important, by the fundamentality theory. Second, others point out that non-representational artworks are often intentional presentations of pattern and abstractions,<sup>28</sup> which conditions are largely responsible for a wide array of other facts of what it is like to live a human life. In drawing attention (even her own) to the artwork, an artist is in effect saying 'Look at this!', or 'Listen to this!' and, when the 'this' picks out (perhaps via synecdoche) purposiveness without a purpose, it is about a condition that is basic to our experience. Finally, and of most appeal to the friend of the fundamentality theory, there are those who suggest that ostensibly

non-representational works can be understood ‘as touching, in some fashion or other, on the most fundamental and pressing aspects of human existence – e.g. death, fate, the inexorability of time, the space between aspiration and attainment’.<sup>29</sup> How artworks can do this without literal representation is, of course, a notoriously difficult question, but the point is that resources are available within the philosophy of art for taking the fundamentality theory seriously.

### Conclusion

I have sought to articulate and defend a particular unified account of why great meaning in a person’s life can come from the good, the true, and the beautiful, working within a general naturalist and non-consequentialist approach. I noted that such an approach is typically cashed out in terms of a kind of self-transcendence, a matter of going beyond some part of oneself in some way. I organized and criticized seven different accounts of self-transcendence from the literature, maintaining that they either entail absurdities or do not have the explanatory power desired from a theory. Then I presented a new conception of what it would be to transcend oneself in the good, the true, and the beautiful so as to obtain great meaning, namely, by substantially orienting one’s rational nature in a positive way toward fundamental objects and perhaps thereby making an advancement. I also brought out some of the resources of this theory by pointing out ways that it could be defended from putative counter-examples.

I do not suppose that the fundamentality theory is so complete as to warrant belief at this point. It is still vague in some central respects, e.g. with respect to whether fundamentality is a metaphysical or epistemic relation. In addition, being a new theory, it has yet to survive a volley of counter-examples and other objections, either from those who deny that the theory fits one of the classic triad or from those who deny that it fits all three. Furthermore, it is unclear how one might extend the theory to account not merely for great meaning, but the degree of meaning most of us are likely to achieve. However, I submit that there is enough evidence reasonably to think 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.<sup>30</sup>

### Notes

1. For a critical exploration of the definition of the phrase ‘meaningful life’, see Thaddeus Metz ‘The concept of a meaningful life’, *American Philosophical Quarterly*, 38 (2001), 137–153.
2. A recent sophisticated proponent is John Cottingham *The Spiritual Dimension* (New York NY: Cambridge University Press, 2005).

3. E.g. Peter Railton 'Alienation, consequentialism, and the demands of morality', *Philosophy and Public Affairs*, 13 (1984), 134–171, 164–171; and Peter Singer *How Are We to Live?* (Amherst MA: Prometheus Books, 1995), chs 10–11.
4. For a more careful and elaborate articulation of this argument, see Thaddeus Metz 'God, morality and the meaning of life', in N. Athanassoulis and S. Vice (eds) *The Moral Life* (New York NY: Palgrave Macmillan, 2008), 201–227.
5. Moritz Schlick 'On the meaning of life', repr. in O. Hanfling (ed.) *Life and Meaning* (Cambridge MA: Basic Blackwell Inc., 1987), 65, 69–70. Sometimes Schlick discusses *creative* play as being central to meaning (64–65), but his motivation for focusing on creativity appears to be that it, at its best, involves play. For similar ideas, see Harry Frankfurt 'The importance of what we care about', repr. in *idem The Importance of What We Care About* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1988), 80–94, 89.
6. Iris Murdoch *The Sovereignty of Good* (London: ARK, 1970), 41, 65–66. See also Bertrand Russell, *The Problems of Philosophy* (New York NY: Oxford University Press, 1959), 159–161.
7. Murdoch appears willing to bite the bullet here, when she discusses what is involved in looking at a blade of grass in *The Sovereignty of Good*, 70.
8. Robert Nozick *Philosophical Explanations* (Cambridge MA: Harvard University Press, 1981), ch. 6, and *idem The Examined Life* (New York NY: Simon & Schuster, 1989), chs 15–16.
9. Nozick *Philosophical Explanations*, 595, 610, 611.
10. *Ibid.*, 417, 445, 460–469, 517–522, 594.
11. *Ibid.*, 415–416.
12. *Ibid.*, 417–418, 619–627.
13. Nozick ultimately broadened the range of things with which one could connect to obtain meaning, suggesting that connecting with things of *worth* confers meaning; Nozick *The Examined Life*, esp. 168. However, the category of worth is overly broad, denoting nearly anything desirable, and hence is lacking the specificity I am seeking.
14. Neil Levy 'Downshifting and meaning in life', *Ratio*, 18 (2005), 176–189.
15. *Ibid.*, 186.
16. *Ibid.*, 182, 184.
17. *Ibid.*, 185, 186.
18. Alan Gewirth *Self-Fulfillment* (Princeton NJ: Princeton University Press, 1998), 177. A former self expressed a similar view in Thaddeus Metz 'Utilitarianism and the meaning of life', *Utilitas*, 15 (2003), 50–70, 67.
19. Gewirth does provide resources for answering these questions, which I take up below but set aside for now, for the sake of ordering the logically distinct principles from the literature in a progressive way.
20. Richard Taylor *Good and Evil* (New York NY: Macmillan Publishing Co., 1970), ch. 18.
21. *Idem* 'The meaning of life', *Philosophy Now*, 24 (1999), 13–14, 14.
22. Gewirth *Self-Fulfillment*, 178. See also Stephen Darwall *Impartial Reason* (Ithaca NY: Cornell University Press, 1983), 130–167, 165.
23. For more on the notion of contouring, see Nozick *Philosophical Explanations*, 462–473.
24. Consider W. D. Ross's remark that 'our states of knowledge and opinion seem to derive some of their value from the nature of the fact apprehended, or believed to exist. The only rule I have to suggest here is that the more general the principle – the more facts it is capable of explaining – the better the knowledge.' See W. D. Ross *The Right and the Good* (repr. Indianapolis IN: Hackett, 1988), 147. See also Nozick *Philosophical Explanations*, 417–418, 625–626.
25. For some philosophers who appeal to universal interest or perennial theme as a way to distinguish literature from mere fiction, see Peter Lamarque & Stein Haugom Olsen *Truth, Fiction, and Literature* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1994), ch. 17.
26. T. M. Scanlon *What We Owe to Each Other* (Cambridge MA: Harvard University Press, 1998), 18–22.
27. Peter Kivy *Music Alone* (Ithaca NY: Cornell University Press, 1990), ch. 10.
28. E.g. David White 'Toward a theory of profundity in music', *Journal of Aesthetics and Art Criticism*, 50 (1992), 23–34.
29. Jerrold Levinson 'Musical profundity misplaced', *Journal of Aesthetics and Art Criticism*, 50 (1992), 58–60.

30. For helpful input on previous drafts, I am grateful for written comments from Lucy Allais, Larry James, Stephen Kershner, Jimmy Lenman, Mark Leon, Frank Snyckers, Johan Snyman, and Frans Svensson. This work has also benefited as a result of comments received from audiences at: a workshop on meaning in life organized by Laurance Kuper, a University of Missouri-St Louis Philosophy Department seminar, a Rhodes University Philosophy Department seminar, and the Conference on Happiness and the Meaning of Life sponsored by the University of Birmingham Philosophy Department and by the Royal Institute of Philosophy.