

Conceptualizing great meaning in life: Metz on the good, the true, and the beautiful

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Abstract: This article is a reply to Thaddeus Metz's 'The good, the true, and the beautiful' (2011). I suggest that Metz's theory is too broad since it entails that merely understanding Einstein's or Darwin's views can make a life highly meaningful. Furthermore, it is unclear whether 'fundamental conditions', toward which highly meaningful lives are oriented, may or may not be necessary conditions to 'non-fundamental conditions', how completely the former should explain the latter, and whether Metz's account is indeed non-consequentialist. While acknowledging the importance of Metz's contribution, I consider alternative directions that future research might take.

Introduction: Metz's new proposal

In a recent article in this journal, Thaddeus Metz proposes a principle that captures, under naturalist and non-consequentialist assumptions, the way in which the good, the true, and the beautiful are able to confer great meaning on life.¹ He demonstrates how previous attempts to do so (by Moritz Schlick, Iris Murdoch, Robert Nozick, Neil Levy, Alan Gewirth, and Richard Taylor) have failed: some are too broad, some too narrow, some beg the question, and some merely appeal to properties that co-vary with great meaning, but do not explain what constitutes meaning. (Some of the previous attempts suffer from more than one of these problems.) Metz shows how the theory he proposes is invulnerable to the disadvantages of the previous theories. Indeed, Metz's proposal is probably the best theory available today of the meaning of life as self-transcendence under naturalist and non-consequentialist assumptions, and there are good reasons to prefer his suggestion to others.

Yet Metz points out that, notwithstanding its many advantages, his theory requires further critical attention and work, as it is not 'so complete as to warrant

belief at this point. It is still vague in some central aspects . . . In addition, being a new theory, it has yet to survive a volley of counter-examples and other objections' (407; see also 403). The purpose of this article is to contribute to the discussion and improvement of Metz's theory by considering some of the features that future research will, I believe, have to address.

Metz does not specify whether he aims to discuss how people's self-transcendence confers great meaning on their own lives, or on life in general, or on both of these. The examples he presents, however – of Mother Teresa, Albert Einstein, Pablo Picasso, and other luminaries – suggest that he is focusing on the meaning of individual lives. Likewise, although Metz does not explicitly mention whether he is an objectivist or subjectivist as regards the meaning of life, his criticism of other theories and his replies to possible objections to his own, improved theory suggest that he is an objectivist. Of course, not all philosophers of the meaning of life accept objectivism. Richard Taylor and Brooke Alan Trisel, for example, have argued for subjectivist accounts of meaningfulness.² However, objectivism as regards the meaning of life has been powerfully argued for by a number of philosophers and is very widely accepted in the field.³ In my discussion of Metz's proposal I follow his presuppositions: I too focus on the way people confer meaning on their own lives and assume an objectivist understanding of meaningfulness. Likewise, I too discuss here only self-transcendence under naturalist and non-consequentialist presuppositions; focus only on the true, the good, and the beautiful; and consider only how they confer superlative meaningfulness.⁴ Thus I ignore, for example, ways in which other aspects of life, such as courage, may confer great meaning on life, or how the good, the true, and the beautiful may confer less-than-great meaning on life.

Metz proposes the following theory:

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. (401)

The theory has two main components, which might conveniently be called the *subjective component* and the *objective component*. The subjective component has to do with our attitude; the objective component has to do with the 'objects' toward which our attitude should be directed. In what follows I elaborate on the theory and present four principal challenges facing it. First, the subjective component of the theory may render it too broad since, contrary to Metz's intention, it allows not only the lives of people such as Einstein or Mother Teresa, but also much more 'ordinary' lives, such as yours or mine, to be considered highly meaningful. Second, Metz's point that the conditions of human existence towards which we should orient our rational nature are not necessary conditions renders the theory too narrow, since it thereby excludes many conditions that can

make lives meaningful. Third, it is unclear to what degree the conditions towards which we should orient our rational nature should be responsible for other conditions. And finally, Metz's examples of meaningful lives suggest that his account is more consequentialist than he would like.

The subjective component

The theory suggests that people achieve great meaning in life when they transcend their animal nature by orienting their rational nature, positively and substantially, towards certain issues or objects. Metz explains that the right attitude requires, among other things, intensity and effort (404), sometimes referring to it as contouring our rational nature (401, 402, 404).

However, the term 'orienting' suggests that not only people such as Einstein, Darwin, and Picasso, but also more 'ordinary' people, who just study or understand Einstein's or Darwin's theories or Picasso's art, lead highly meaningful lives. Understanding Einstein, Darwin, or Picasso also requires people to transcend their animal nature and to contour their rational nature by orienting it, positively and substantially, through intensity and effort, towards those scientific and artistic objects. Depending on their abilities and education, some people may need to transcend their animal selves, contour their minds, invest effort, and experience intensity to an even greater extent than did Einstein, Darwin, or Picasso when they created their theories or art. But that seems to render the theory too broad. We may well think that although studying physics or appreciating art does endow life with meaning, these activities do not endow life with *superlative* meaning.

Supporters of Metz's theory may reply in more than one way. First, following Metz, they may add to the theory an element 'requiring some kind of *advancement* relative to the past' (404; Metz's emphasis). However, the addition may narrow the theory too much, since some achievements that most of us would take to endow lives with meaningfulness do not have to do with advancement but with preventing decline. Take Metz's example of the asteroid that is about to crash into Earth and wipe out humanity (402). Suppose that a scientist had found a way, after much work, to destroy the asteroid or divert it from its course, thus saving Earth and thereby humanity. This scientist's life would probably be seen as highly meaningful. But her effort would have led not to advancement but, rather, to the prevention of decline. The same would be true for a person who had found a way to prevent the AIDS epidemic when it was about to spread, or a person who, today, found a way to stop global warming or further ecological destruction: thanks to their efforts the world would not improve, it would 'only' not become worse. But the latter, of course, is highly meaningful as well.

Alternatively, supporters of the theory may narrow it by stating that it is not sufficient merely to contour or orient one's rational nature towards the 'objects'

one has in mind; one must *create* or *discover* them. However, this option, too, has some difficulties to it; it is unclear how this amendment could be justified. The theory at issue is supposed to be a specification of the notion that meaning is achieved by self-transcendence; but it is unclear why it should be the case that when one creates, invents, or discovers, one transcends one's animal nature or contours one's rational self more than when one learns or understands. If our animal natures, or our selves, are seen as having a higher propensity to study or appreciate than to create or discover, then the latter will indeed involve more self-transcendence than the former. But not all will accept that we have a higher propensity to study than to create.

The objective component

Metz's theory, however, also has an important objective component. In order for people to have highly meaningful lives, their rational natures cannot just be intensely, positively, etc. oriented towards any 'object' whatsoever. They must be oriented towards a certain type of object. Which objects, then, render life highly meaningful? The intuitive reply is that people have highly meaningful lives when their rationality is oriented towards highly worthy, valuable objects; this is why (to use Metz's own examples again) we take Mother Teresa, Nelson Mandela, Einstein, Freud, and Picasso to have led highly meaningful lives, while we take the person who only clips toenails not to have led such a life. While the former have done great, important, highly valuable things, the latter has done more trivial ones. Metz, however, cannot accept this reply, because he takes it to beg the question: it explains what meaningfulness consists in by employing what are no more than synonyms of meaningfulness, such as worth, value, importance, greatness, or depth (401, 403). It is because of this circularity that Metz rejects some earlier accounts of self-transcendence, such as those of Levy (397) and Gewirth (398).

Instead of relying on such synonyms, Metz distinguishes between two types of objects. He calls the first type 'fundamental objects' or 'fundamental conditions' ('objects' and 'conditions' will be used interchangeably henceforth). He does not name the second type of objects, but they might be called 'non-fundamental objects' or 'non-fundamental conditions'. Metz argues that fundamental objects are responsible for or account for non-fundamental objects (402). Metaphysically, fundamental objects cause non-fundamental objects. Epistemically, fundamental objects explain non-fundamental objects. Examples of fundamental objects are Darwin's and Einstein's theories, Picasso's paintings, Dostoevsky's novels, Freud's psychoanalytic theory, and the lives that Mother Teresa saved from death by hunger or disease. Metz does not explicitly present examples of non-fundamental objects, but it appears that he would take examples of non-fundamental objects to be various specific cases of natural selection or evolutionary changes that Darwin's

theory discusses; individual physical changes which Einstein's theory explains; various personal insights into, or cases of, love, war, or tragedy of the type Picasso's paintings explore; particular cases of faith, pain, sin, crime or salvation of the type that Dostoevsky's novels discuss; specific cases of neurosis, sublimation, or repression analysed in Freud's writings; and various choices or actions taken by people whom Mother Teresa saved.

It seems that, for Metz, fundamental conditions may both explain and cause, but may also either explain or cause, non-fundamental conditions. For example, Darwin's theory of natural selection explains individual cases of species dominance but, of course, is hardly a cause of this dominance. Metz emphasizes that this part of his theory requires further work and points out that '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' (402).

The distinction between fundamental and non-fundamental conditions could be understood as either a relative or an absolute distinction. A relative distinction would allow a certain condition C to cause or explain another condition D (and, thus, to be fundamental to D) but, in turn, also to be caused or explained by a prior condition B (and, thus, to be 'non-fundamental' to B). An absolute distinction would simply take some conditions to be the fundamental ones, and others to be the non-fundamental ones. Although Metz does not explicitly mention this, he seems to have an absolute distinction in mind, since the examples he presents of fundamental conditions are among the most important achievements in human history. This suggests that, in his view, to achieve highly meaningful lives people should orient themselves towards conditions that explain or cause other conditions in basic and comprehensive ways.

Metz also points out that fundamental conditions, towards which highly meaningful lives are oriented, should be distinguished from necessary conditions. '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' (402; my emphasis). Thus, not every necessary condition is a fundamental condition. A fundamental condition is not merely that without which other conditions would not be; it is that which causes or explains other conditions or objects.

But that makes Metz's suggestion too narrow, since many achievements that seem to make life highly meaningful are closer to being necessary conditions than fundamental conditions. Take Metz's example of Mother Teresa. We take Mother Teresa to have had a highly meaningful life because she saved the lives of so many other people. But that means that her rational nature was oriented towards providing *necessary* conditions for anything else that happened in the lives of the people she saved. She saved them from dying of starvation or sickness, thus

enabling them to love, learn, yearn, think, or enjoy the beauty of nature. But saving someone's life does not explain or cause one's loving, learning, etc. It rather merely *allows* these other conditions to take place by providing 'that without which' the other conditions could not take place, that is, by providing the necessary condition for the other, non-fundamental conditions. Perhaps Mother Teresa could be seen as having, through her work, allowed other people not only to live, but also to choose what they do with their lives; but this ability to choose is again only the *sine qua non*, the 'that without which' specific good or bad choices of all possible types, in all possible directions, could not take place. It is a necessary condition rather than a cause or an explanation for this or that choice.

The same is true of the person who, after years of learning and sacrifice, finds a cure for cancer. His life will have been highly meaningful, but his rational self will have been oriented towards what would usually be seen as a necessary condition for all or most other conditions. This is also the case for lives such as those of Louis Pasteur, who developed the idea of immunization, or of Alexander Fleming, who discovered penicillin. Likewise, the hypothetical scientist who, after hard work, found a way to divert the asteroid that was about to destroy Earth from its course oriented herself to a necessary condition.

Thus, as it stands now, the theory seems too narrow, since it excludes lives that we would take to be highly meaningful. Should we, then, broaden it to include lives oriented towards necessary conditions? Doing this would make the theory too broad. For example, a small technical improvement made by a certain technician might have been a necessary condition for conducting many experiments in physics; without this small technical improvement, the experiments would not have taken place, the theories based on the experiments would not have appeared, and we would not now have everything that relies on those theories. But although this small technical improvement was a necessary condition for all that ensued, we do not normally take lives oriented towards such small technical improvements to be of the same calibre as lives oriented towards great theories; we do not normally see the life of the technician as *highly* meaningful. Moreover, it is not only the technician who provides necessary conditions for all that ensues; the electric company workers who manage the current that allows the experiments to take place also provide a necessary condition. Similarly, not only Mother Teresa's philanthropic work but also the general spirit of law and order maintained by the Calcutta chief of police were necessary conditions for many people's ability to live, choose, think, love, etc. But we do not normally take the life of the Calcutta chief of police to be highly meaningful. Likewise, Picasso's pictures would not have been painted if some early dabblers in chemistry had not found, decades or centuries earlier, relatively efficient and inexpensive methods of producing colour.

Metz has a good reason for distinguishing between fundamental and necessary conditions: for any occurrence or achievement there are many, many necessary

conditions, the lack of any of which would have prevented that occurrence from taking place. We would not want to credit a life oriented towards each of these necessary conditions with high meaningfulness. But this renders the principle problematic. Excluding necessary conditions renders the theory too narrow, and including them renders it too broad. It seems that we need a distinction between the necessary conditions we want to include in the theory and those we want to exclude from it. At present it is not clear what this distinction might consist of, but future work on the topic may well aim to make progress in this direction.

Another difficulty has to do with the degree to which the fundamental condition should cause, explain, account for, or be responsible for non-fundamental conditions. It is clear that Metz does not see fundamental conditions as sufficient conditions, that is, conditions that cause, explain, etc., non-fundamental conditions *fully*, since this will narrow the theory too much. It is very difficult to find sufficient conditions for moral, intellectual, or aesthetic events, that is, conditions that are sufficient by themselves, without any dependence on other conditions, to bring such events about. Almost all events depend on a plethora of conditions. Thus, if we read 'fundamental conditions' as 'sufficient conditions', no-one could be characterized as having a highly meaningful life. But how completely, then, should the fundamental condition explain, cause, etc. the non-fundamental conditions? Take the Higgs boson, aka the 'God particle', so recently discovered. In some sense it explains why objects in the universe have mass (or even causes them to have mass); in some sense, it even causes galaxies, planets, animals, humans, books, and plays to exist, or explains why they exist. Thus, in some sense the 'God particle' deserves to be seen as a fundamental condition. But in another sense, it causes or explains daffodils, global warming, Napoleon, or *Othello* only in a very incomplete way. It does not explain why daffodils are white and yellow (or cause them to be so); it does not explain why global warming is only now occurring (or cause global warming to occur); it does not explain why Napoleon's life was the way it was (or cause it to have been so), etc. But if it causes what it causes, or explains what it explains, in such an incomplete way, it is not clear that it should be seen as a fundamental condition at all.

Yet another problem concerns Metz's characterization of his account as non-consequentialist. All the examples he presents are of successful efforts: Darwin, Mother Teresa, Mozart, Einstein, Picasso, Dostoevsky, and Mandela are all people who succeeded in achieving a great deal. They may all have wanted to achieve even more: Mother Teresa may have wanted to save even more people, Mozart to compose even more symphonies, etc. However, we take them to have had highly meaningful lives not only because they transcended their natures in trying very hard to achieve something great, but also because they succeeded in achieving it. Consider Einstein*, whose life was similar to that of the real Einstein in almost all ways except that Einstein* failed where the real Einstein succeeded. Thus, just like Einstein, Einstein* transcended his animal nature by positively orienting his

rational nature in a substantial way towards the fundamental conditions that concerned Einstein. However, unlike Einstein, Einstein* failed in his endeavours (say, because another scientist thought of the theory of relativity and published it two months, or two days, before Einstein* did). If that were the case, we would probably not consider Einstein*'s life to have been highly meaningful. Likewise, if Mother Teresa, notwithstanding her enormous effort and dedication, had not succeeded in saving even one person (say, because of a very unlucky series of epidemics and violent riots), so that all her work turned out to have no results, we would probably not take her life to have been highly meaningful. But this suggests that success is an important factor in our evaluation, an implication which is in tension with Metz's characterization of his theory as non-consequentialist.

Conclusion

Metz's theory is much more attractive than others currently in the literature. It is notably stronger than preceding ones, as it is invulnerable to the difficulties besetting those others, and is thus a significant contribution to the philosophical literature on the meaning of life. As Metz himself has predicted, however, his theory, too, requires more work, and I have tried in this article to point out some of the directions that such future work might need to take. It seems that there are now various courses of action that it would be useful to follow. The most obvious is to continue to work on this version of the self-transcendence theory either by addressing some of the issues presented above, thus showing why the present version is, in fact, immune to them, or else by improving it into a more advanced version, invulnerable to these criticisms, and thereby developing an even stronger theory of self-transcendence.

Those who will still find the present theory, or an improved version of it, to be problematic may opt for other alternatives. Metz points out, for example, that his theory presupposes naturalist, non-consequentialist understandings of meaningfulness. For some, difficulties in the theory, especially if they persist, will indicate that these presuppositions should be re-evaluated, and that we should perhaps opt for a non-naturalist or for a consequentialist understanding of meaningfulness.

Yet another option is to question the standards of precision adopted in the discussion. The problems noted above arose when an effort was made to determine more precisely what a 'fundamental condition' is, when we should employ necessary conditions and when not, and the degree to which the fundamental condition should cause or explain non-fundamental conditions. Metz, too, presupposes high standards of precision, employing them when he criticizes some former efforts to explain self-transcendence, such as those of Nozick (395), Levy (396–97), Gewirth (398, 400–401), and Taylor (399). However, it

might be suggested that the topic of the meaning of life is not susceptible to such high degrees of precision. Of course, Metz is an analytic philosopher, and as such is committed to a high level of exactitude. But analytic philosophers, too, vary in the degree of precision they employ to discuss different topics and themes. One analytic philosopher, David Schmidtz, starts his article on the meaning of life by stating that he will not try to apply to the topic the same degrees of rigour and precision he usually employs in analytic discussions since, in his view, they are not appropriate for this subject.⁵ Another analytic philosopher, Moritz Schlick, does discuss meaningfulness in an analytic manner, but less rigorously and precisely than he discusses issues in epistemology, philosophy of science, and philosophy of language.⁶ Metz himself occasionally employs the adjective 'roughly' in his article, implying, perhaps, that he too believes that in some cases an approximate characterization is the suitable and useful one.⁷ Following Aristotle, most of us believe that the optimal degree of precision for dealing with any subject is not always the maximal one, and that different fields of research call for different standards of precision.⁸ If the efforts to understand meaningfulness in highly precise terms do not turn out to be successful, perhaps we should – even as analytic philosophers – opt for less stringent standards of precision. (Giving up very high standards of precision need not, of course, send us to the other extreme of accepting just any suggestive vagary.)

Should future versions of the theory not solve, in a satisfactory manner, problems such as those pointed at here, perhaps we should also consider seeing cases of superlative meaningfulness as united only in virtue of family resemblances. In two important articles, Metz accepts such an understanding of meaningfulness at large.⁹ In his recent article, discussed here, he examines a specific type of meaningfulness – superlative meaningfulness, understood as self-transcendence, under naturalist and non-consequentialist assumptions, as regards the good, the true, and the beautiful – and tries to see whether, for this specific type of meaningfulness, a set of necessary and sufficient conditions, or an exhaustive and exclusive definition, could be found. But it may be that even this narrower type of meaningfulness is highly diffuse, and that it too admits only the family-resemblance kind of understanding.

Which of these options is the most promising? At these early stages of the discussion it is difficult to tell. I think that at this point it would be wrong to choose between these (and perhaps some other) alternatives. We should, instead, continue to work in the direction Metz points to in this article as well as in other directions. Thus, we should follow his theory and continue to refine it further. Moreover, we should attempt to define in greater precision other specific types of meaningfulness. At the same time, we should also continue to explore alternative directions such as those mentioned above, experimenting with different degrees of precision and with different theories based on family resemblances. Much more work awaits this young and evolving field.¹⁰

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Notes

1. Metz (2011). All page numbers in parentheses refer to this paper.
2. See Taylor (1970); Trisel (2004).
3. For some influential criticisms of subjectivism see Nozick (1974), 42–45; Taylor (1992), 36; and Wolf (2010), 15–18.
4. However, I consider later whether Metz's theory is indeed wholly non-consequentialist.
5. Schmitz (2001), 170–171.
6. Schlick (1987).
7. As in, for example, 'the phrase . . . should be read figuratively, as a rough way of referring to certain kinds of moral achievement, intellectual reflection, and aesthetic creation' (389); 'the latter actions are, roughly, positively oriented toward people's agency' (402); 'there are two domains in which apprehending basic conditions would be significant, roughly, humanity and reality' (403).
8. Aristotle (2002), bk I, ch. 3.
9. See Metz (2001), 150–151; (2002), 802–803.
10. I am grateful to Thaddeus Metz, Robin Le Poidevin, Saul Smilansky, and an anonymous referee for very helpful comments on earlier drafts of this article.