

METZ'S QUEST FOR THE HOLY GRAIL

Abstract:

This paper is a critique of the new paradigm in analytic philosophy for investigating the meaning of life, focusing on *Meaning in Life* as the definitive example. Metz relies upon intuition, and reflection upon recent analytic literature, to guide him to his 'fundamentality theory'. He calls this a theory of 'the meaning of life', saying it may be 'the holy grail'. I argue that Metz's project is not addressed to the meaning of life, but a distinct issue about social meaning; and that by neglecting and sidelining alternative approaches, his results are rendered provisional. I then argue that there are a number of equally legitimate senses of a 'socially meaningful life'; that Metz's exclusive and unjustified focus on only one radically diminishes the scope of his project; and that what remains is undermined by cultural specificity. Finally, I argue that the Kripkean semantics Metz adopts runs counter to his interests.

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1. Metz's Project

Thaddeus Metz is the leading figure in contemporary analytic discussions associated with the phrase 'the meaning of life'. He leads a new paradigm for investigating an issue previously neglected within analytic philosophy, which he thinks offers the prospect of substantive progress being made on it for the first time. He says, 'it is only in the last 50 years or so that something approaching a distinct field on the meaning of life has been established in Anglo-American philosophy, and it is only in the last 30 years that debate with real depth has appeared' (Metz 2013a). In Metz's view, there is now a rigorous literature on this topic, which is both well-motivated and methodologically appropriate.

Meaning in Life provides a meticulous engagement with the literature in question, the insights and shortcomings of which lead Metz to his 'fundamentality theory'. At the end, he asks the reader,

Is the fundamentality theory the holy grail of Western normative philosophy, *the* respect in which the good, the true, and the beautiful genuinely constitute a unity, *the* principle that captures all and only the myriad factors that make up Meaning in Life? It would presumptuous to say that the search for an adequate theory of what makes a life meaningful is over, given how few philosophers have undertaken the enquiry in earnest. However, the fundamentality theory is now the one to beat. (Metz 2013b: 249)

Thus Metz encourages his readers to rise to the challenge, by trying to construct a counterexample to the fundamentality thesis.

I think there are probably two reasons for this reference to the Holy Grail; I am less sure about the second. The first is that Metz considers it an appropriate title for either his theory, or a superior one destined to supersede it; and that by calling it this, he will encourage others to get involved. Any hyperbole would be justified as a counterbalance to the neglect philosophy has, until recently, shown this issue. The second is that Metz may have wanted to issue a rebuttal to David Wiggins, who warned philosophers that they ‘bewitch’ themselves if they think they are ‘looking for some one thing like the Garden of the Hesperides, the Holy Grail’ (Wiggins 1976: 377). After all, when Metz first presents his fundamentality theory, he writes: ‘To all those who have asked me over the past ten years, “So, what *is* the meaning of life (wise guy)?”, there you have it!’ (Metz 2013b: 235)

However, this reference immediately brought to my mind Tennyson’s *Idylls of the King*, in which Sir Percivale inspires the Knights of the Round Table to embark on a doomed quest for the Holy Grail; one which ultimately brings about the demise of Camelot! Perhaps this is just because I had acquired so many misgivings about Metz’s project by this point, but for better or worse, my aim in this paper will not be to respond to the fundamentality theory within the framework of the new paradigm, but rather to raise questions about that paradigm.

I would not like anybody to assume that I am a sceptic about the question of the meaning of life, however. On the contrary, I consider it just as philosophically important as Metz does; perhaps more so, because I think its implications go beyond Western normative philosophy. However what I think is important is the *traditional* question. This has been unduly neglected. But the neglect has been the fault of analytic philosophy; right from its inception. For during most of 20th century philosophy, post-Nietzschean philosophers were more or less obsessed with the issues this question raises; while analytic philosophers were either ignoring

it (the vast majority), or else denigrating it (e.g. Ayer 1947). Analytic philosophy's recent resurgence of interest in 'meaningful lives', strikes me as part of the same trend. For this debate conflates distinct issues about socially built-up meaning with the traditional question; and thereby perpetrates continued neglect of the latter.¹

Metz's project is motivated by the following four claims:

- (1) Social meaning is the root concern expressed by the question 'what is the meaning of life?'
- (2) If you want a theory of social meaning, the best place to look is analytic philosophy.
- (3) *A priori* philosophical analysis can reveal a single formula for social meaning.
- (4) This formula would reveal an objective truth, because social meaning has a natural essence (it is a physical pattern).

(1), (2) and (3) are typically presupposed within the new paradigm; (4) is a more distinctively Metzian claim. I think that without at least the conjunction of (2), (3) and (4), the new paradigm is badly motivated. And without (1) – which I find the most implausible – its principal source of interest drops away. I will now examine each in turn.

¹ The reasons I consider the traditional question important are set out in [deleted]. They have nothing to do with a Holy Grail, because I think life is meaningless. This sounds bad in the context of contemporary debates (Metz equates nihilism to being in *hell*; Metz 2013b.: 152), but I think it is neither bad nor good.

2. The Root Concern

We routinely distinguish the meaning *in* a phenomenon, from the meaning *of* that phenomenon. Consider an early Western movie. If our interest is the meaning *in* the film, we might talk about what is motivating the characters, their personalities, trials and tribulations etc. We might say that *in the film*, the Indians are the baddies. If our interest is in the meaning *of* the film, however, then we would instead talk about its significance in a wider setting than that of the fictional scenario it depicts. We might say that the film reveals the negative stereotypes in early 20th century America towards Native Americans, and also perhaps the new-found confidence of a country creating an idealised version of its history. This, we might say, is the meaning *of the film*.

Thus *meaning in* concerns the contextual meaning created by a phenomenon (such as a film, novel, sport or musical composition), while *meaning of* concerns the meaning of the phenomenon in a wider context (a society, most typically). When we ask about the meaning of life, then, the form of words employed strongly suggests that we are not asking about the kind of meaning we build up within the context of social life. Rather, we are asking whether life itself has any meaning. Since *meaning of* questions require us to look outside the contextual meaning created by a phenomenon, this question is addressed to the possibility of a wider context in which life might have meaning. This wider context would stand to life and the meaning within it, as the wider context of society stands to a film and the meaning within it. The form of the question ‘what is the meaning of life?’ presupposes there *is* such a context, since it asks *what* meaning our lives are thus endowed with; endowed with by God, would be the standard presupposition. But as with all questions of this form, it leaves room for us to reject its presupposition by appropriately answering that there is no meaning of life.

Given that Metz entitled his book *Meaning in Life*, you would expect it to discuss social meaning, and not the meaning of life; or perhaps argue that social meaning provides the meaning of life. However, Metz claims that his question about social meaning is what the question of the meaning of life fundamentally amounts to. This issue is treated quickly (Metz 2013b: 3, 23-4), but strikes me as crucial to motivating a book which lays claim to ‘the holy grail’; referred to as ‘the meaning of life’ when the fundamentality theory first makes its appearance. Metz begins,

Most people, or at least philosophers, interested in topics readily placed under the rubric of ‘the meaning of life’ ultimately want to know what, if anything, would confer meaning on their own lives and the lives of those people for whom they care. (ibid.: 3)

The emphasis on the questioner’s own life indicates that something is about to go wrong. For if you ask about the meaning of life, the answer will apply to everybody; even if its implications for you and your loved ones are your primary concern. Metz goes on,

Of course, some, perhaps even a substantial minority, might also or instead be interested in considerations of whether the universe has a meaning or of whether the human species does. However, I do not address these ‘holist’ or ‘cosmic’ questions in this book.

Now something has gone wrong, because Metz clearly thinks that whether the human species has a meaning, has little or nothing to do with the question he began with. But to ask whether

the human species has a meaning *is* to ask the question of the meaning of life; ‘life’ in this context means ‘human life’. If there is a wider context beyond life which confers a meaning on it, then that would of course confer meaning on our own lives and those of our loved ones. But this is just because the meaning of life would have implications for these lives. Our special concern for them may motivate us to ask the question in a particularised form, i.e. ‘what implications does the meaning of life have for me and my loved ones?’ But to answer this, you must answer the general question. Metz’s view of the motivation for asking has, I think, led him to misconstrue the particularised form of the question as conceptually isolated from the question itself. Then this particularised question is reinterpreted as one about social meaning, and subsequently identified as the question of the meaning of life.

Consider Metz’s mention of ‘whether the universe has a meaning’. Why would this be brought up, when the question is about the meaning of *life*, not the universe? The reason is that the issues are closely connected. The connection is that if you ask about the meaning of life, this will lead you to look beyond the social context of life in order to place it within a wider context. The first relevant context you will reach is that of the physical universe. This context is relevant because human life is part of the universe; so if we discover why the universe exists, we may discover why *we* exist, and hence (possibly) the meaning of our existence. But it is not a context of meaning, akin to that of human society. So recognising this, it will start to look as if life does *not* have a meaning – unless we then move to an even wider context, by supposing God created the universe, and thereby endowed phenomena within it with meaning.

Rather than there being three topics ‘readily placed under the rubric of “the meaning of life”’, then –i.e. the meanings of my life, the species, and the universe – it seems to me that the

situation is as follows. There is one question of the meaning of life (i.e. the human species). A concern about the meaning of my life may motivate me to ask this question. And once I do, I will immediately be led to inquire about the meaning of the universe.

Metz goes on to say that the reason he does not address ‘holist’ or ‘cosmic’ questions, is that the literature on the ‘individualist’ question is larger. Then he adds:

often asking ‘What is the point of it all?’ or ‘How did we get here?’ is a function of a deeper concern to know how, if at all, the existence of individual human beings can be significant.

This strikes me as a curious sense of ‘deeper’. The question of the meaning of life digs below social meaning to inquire whether it is *grounded*, and indeed whether it needs to be; it is a paradigmatically philosophical concern that takes us directly into the heart of metaphysics and epistemology. The new paradigm question about social meaning, however, could occur to anyone trying to figure out what to do with their life. Only in a tenuous sense could the essentially practical question of ‘how to get more meaning in my life’ be construed as philosophical; and most people ask this question without getting into philosophical analysis.

Metz concludes his initial remarks by saying that he will always treat the bearer of meaning as ‘a human person’s life’; and that this includes ‘the phrase “the meaning of life”, which several in the literature, unlike me, use to connote ideas about human life as such, not a given human’s life’ (ibid.: 3). However it is far from clear that Metz does exclude the question of the meaning of ‘human life as such’ from his book, since he spends a large proportion of it discussing religious accounts of meaning; ‘supernaturalist’ accounts (ibid.: 23-31; 75-160).

But any philosopher who thinks God endows our lives with meaning is talking about the traditional question. If the supernaturalist follows Metz in trying to work out which kinds of social meaning are the most positive ones – as many do – this is because they think God’s chosen meaning favours certain kinds of social meaning; they see this as an implication of their answer to the traditional question. Neither, I think, does Metz argue against these philosophers from an individualist stance. Rather, he mounts a general philosophical argument to the effect that supernaturalist conceptions of meaning are incoherent. If right, this would show that wider meaning cannot endow the human species with social meaning; it would have consequences for individuals, but the target of the argument is general. Moreover his final chapter on nihilism seems to me squarely addressed to the traditional question throughout; Metz argues that nihilism is incoherent too.² I find it hard to avoid the conclusion that the individualist question is sometimes conflated with the traditional question; moreover I think this kind of conflation is widespread within the new paradigm.³

When Metz returns to the issue (*ibid.*: 23-4), he says that the question of the meaning of life ‘cannot itself be understood in theistic, or even more broadly supernaturalist, terms’, because that would fail to account for the fact that naturalists and supernaturalists debate a common subject-matter. But the reason naturalists and supernaturalists can debate is because they disagree about whether a wider context of meaning exists. Nihilists are typically naturalists,

² Metz thinks supernaturalism is incoherent because we know there is social meaning but do not know there is wider meaning (*ibid.*: 158). But any sensible supernaturalist will say only that they *believe* in a wider meaning that grounds their judgements about social meaning; though it might instead undermine these judgements, and there might not be any wider meaning. Metz thinks nihilism is incoherent because it both rejects wider meaning and uses it to judge that life is meaningless (*ibid.*: 242-4). But the nihilist does not reject the *concept* of wider meaning; they think reality does not satisfy it. I elaborate on these responses in [deleted].

³ For a wider analysis of this situation, see [deleted]

after all, and there is no conceptual reason why a naturalist should not hold that life is made meaningful by a wider context than social life.

All in all, I do not think Metz makes a strong case for thinking *Meaning in Life* is a book about the meaning of life, or that ‘cosmic’ concerns are tangential to this issue; and neither do I think he succeeds in excluding these concerns. Now you might think I am simply arguing for my interpretation of the question ‘what is the meaning of life?’ over Metz’s. However I think this reaction would only be justified if the question were an enigma in need of deciphering, about which various interpretations might be reasonably debated. Granted, the idea that it is ambiguous has popular currency – Metz quotes John Updike to this effect (*ibid.*: 17) – but I do not think this is credible.⁴ This is because I think it is one of the most ubiquitous philosophical questions in human history. As such, I do not think Metz can be considered to be offering a reasonable interpretation of *that* question.

The phenomenon of religion provides the clearest manifestation of its cultural ubiquity. Religions typically provide their followers with a belief about the meaning of life, by holding that life exists within a wider context of meaning determined by deities. Literature provides another reminder. Thus the earliest substantially extant work of human literature, the Epic of Gilgamesh, is essentially the story of one man’s quest for the meaning of life; it began a literary preoccupation which has continued unabated through Dante and Shakespeare to David Foster Wallace. The best-known discussion of this question in modern times comes from Tolstoy (1880). Tolstoy begins from the premise that his life has accrued exceptional levels of social meaning; but despite his prodigious achievements, Tolstoy starts to wonder if life has a meaning. Tolstoy clearly distinguishes social meaning from the traditional question,

⁴ The reasons I think this idea has acquired currency are set out in [deleted]

so given how widely reprinted his reflections are in philosophical anthologies, it is surprising that philosophers in the new paradigm do not.

Popular culture is another place philosophers can look if puzzled by the words ‘what is the meaning of life?’ – where they will find that it has been regularly poked fun at. If the question were about social meaning, it would be hard to see the joke. But with the traditional question the jokes fall readily into place. Douglas Adam’s famous punchline that the meaning of life is 42, for instance, follows the standard humourist’s strategy of disappointing expectations; we were waiting to hear the reason why we exist, but are disappointed by an answer we cannot understand.⁵

The best place for philosophers to look, however, is philosophy. In Plato, the transcendent forms provide the wider context; and the philosopher-kings guide our lives by reflecting on them. The metaphysical systems that followed, right through to Kant and Hegel, are designed to meet the same concern, typically by providing an understanding of the world with God at its centre.⁶ When doubt about whether there is a meaning of life set in during the 19th century, the issue remained just as central, culminating in Nietzsche’s warnings about the threat of nihilism. And this set the scene for the 20th century; in which analytic philosophy shelved it, while continental philosophy tried to get to grips with life without meaning. This thumbnail sketch of the history of philosophy is surely enough to remind us that the meaning of life has been one of its abiding concerns; you do not need the words ‘meaning of life’ to recognise this. But I do not think the same could be said about the new paradigm question about social

⁵ For a philosopher who takes Adam’s joke very seriously, see Waghorn 2014.

⁶ For discussion of the transition which took place in 19th century philosophy which I think ultimately led to the side-lining of the traditional question in analytic philosophy, see Beiser 2014, esp. 211ff.

meaning, especially if we follow Metz in distinguishing it from the question of what constitutes a morally good life (ibid.: 5-6).

It seems to me that anything deserving to be called the Holy Grail in this area would be a positive answer to the traditional question. Nevertheless, Metz's interest in a formula for social meaning does – after a fashion – fall under the rubric of 'the meaning of life', because many people think the meaning of life is something like love, happiness, knowledge, art, etc.; a quick internet search reveals hundreds of such answers. However the clear oversight in the case of this kind of answer is that if there is a meaning of life (or if there is not one), then this might undermine the value we place in love, happiness, etc.

For all that has been said so far, the project of trying to find a formula for social meaning might be legitimate and feasible. On the face of it, it seems an interesting issue. However philosophers in the new paradigm should clearly demarcate their project from the question of the meaning of life. For not doing so might be misconstrued as misleading advertising – an attempt to attract interest in their project by associating it with such an evocative question. And they certainly should not dismiss the traditional question, or claim they are in fact addressing it.

3. Analytic Philosophy Dominates the Field

To the best of my knowledge, the most systematic attempt to develop an acceptable *theory* of meaning in life has been undertaken by contemporary Anglo-American analytic philosophers. (ibid.: 9)

Given that Metz is only interested in social meaning, is he right? The emphasis on ‘*theory*’ reveals a strategy for making this plausible; he says that philosophers from other traditions take ‘more particularist, phenomenological, or hermeneutic approaches’ (ibid: 9). I am not sure how a ‘particularist’ approach differs from Metz’s ‘individualist’ one. But leaving that aside, the suggestion seems to be that you cannot have a phenomenological or hermeneutic theory; or at least a sufficiently systematic one.

However the question of the meaning of life – *and* meaning in life – is most closely associated with major philosophers from the continental tradition, such as Nietzsche, Heidegger, Sartre and Camus. The restriction to social meaning does not help make the statement plausible, because this was their principal concern; they did not think there was a meaning of life, and hence sought to investigate how people can build up positive social meaning in a world without God. That is what the 20th century discourse of ‘authenticity’ concerned. And neither does the insistence on *theory* help, because all these philosophers developed theories; massive and incredibly complex ones in the cases of Sartre and Heidegger – both phenomenological, and in Heidegger’s case, hermeneutic too.

Nietzsche had a theory of nihilism which motivated his account of social meaning. Nihilism, as he saw it, resulted from essentially religious values which project meaning into another, fictional world, such that when people retain these values after ceasing to believe in the other world, they find themselves condemning the real one. And although Nietzsche did not complete the revaluation of values he thought the onset of nihilism called for, he said enough for commentators to develop rich Nietzschean theories of social meaning (e.g. Reginster 2006). Camus later gave Nietzsche’s nihilism a more positive spin, with his concept of the

‘absurd man’ living in defiance of life’s lack of meaning; and living all the better for it (Camus 1942: 98).

Heidegger was a more systematic philosopher than Nietzsche and Camus, of course; about as systematic as they get at certain points of his career. Heidegger argues that our sporadic withdrawal from everyday dealings with objects and other people, is at the root of Cartesian ontology and epistemology; and the traditional problems attendant upon it. His critique of the prioritising and grounding of this ‘present-at-hand’ attitude, is part of a strategy to draw philosophy’s attention to the social meaning of human life. Thus he argues that ‘the less we just stare at the [Thing], and the more we seize hold of it and use it, the more primordial does our relationship to it become’; and that this relationship is one of ‘circumspection’, according to which things are seen within the context of our projects (Heidegger 1927: 98). This analysis is designed to remind us of the nature of our absorption in projects, and reveal that people typically fail to determine this, instead letting it be determined by anonymous public opinion. Heidegger’s aim is to persuade us to wrest control of our lives by choosing and possessing our projects. He means to show us how to live *authentically*, by choosing in light of ‘heritage’; since man’s deepest values are to be found within what Gadamer called ‘the historical reality of his being’ (ibid.: 435; Gadamer 1960: 277).

Heidegger is not mentioned in *Meaning in Life*. Nietzsche, Sartre and Camus are not discussed, but are occasionally mentioned as representatives of certain positions. Thus Nietzsche is mentioned as an objectivist about social meaning; but I do not think this is a tenable interpretation.⁷ And Camus is mentioned as someone who combined supernaturalism

⁷ Some have detected commitment to a form of objectivism within Nietzsche’s perspectivism (e.g. Schacht 1983: 8-10, 104). However, even on this kind of interpretation, Nietzsche’s view that ‘all evaluation is made

with nihilism; I agree with this, but it occurs at the beginning of a discussion squarely addressed to the traditional question (Metz op. cit.: 242). Sartre is the continental philosopher who comes up most; as an example of a subjectivist about social meaning. However the summary which is provided of Sartre's argument from *Existentialism is a Humanism* (ibid.: 99) strikes me as embodying a serious misunderstanding; and I think this raises big questions about this interpretation generally.⁸

In short, there is no serious engagement with continental philosophy in *Meaning in Life*. But that is fair enough, because Metz did not promise any. However, he justifies this omission by sidelining the continental literature, in exactly the same way that he sidelines the traditional question. In both cases, the impression I took – and which I think any impartial reader would take – is that both the continental literature and traditional question are somewhat tangential, and can be safely ignored by those who are really serious about the 'meaning of life'.

In order to focus my misgivings about this message, let me turn to the analytic literature in question. It was not clear to me that *all* the literature Metz discusses concerns his issue (sometimes the authors are talking about a 'good and worthwhile life' or the 'value of a life'

from a definite perspective: that of the preservation of the individual, a community, a race, a state, a church, a faith, a culture' (Nietzsche 1883-8: 149), could not be squared with objectivism as Metz understands it (physicalist moral realism).

⁸ The summary is 'since there is no God, since only God could ground objective values, and since there are values, all values are subjective'. In the last paragraph of the essay, Sartre says of his existentialism that, 'even if God existed that would make no difference from its point of view' (Sartre 1946: 369). The humanism Sartre was defending largely consisted in the claim that authenticity is objectively valuable; see, e.g., Webber 2009: chapter 10.

(*ibid.*: 150, 187)). But most of it does, and Metz has investigated it thoroughly.⁹ So what does it amount to?

Thomas Nagel (1971; 1986) and Robert Nozick (1981; 1989) produced the best-known analytic discussions of the meaning of life, and Metz discusses them both. However, both are interested in the meaning of life, and I think only Nozick can be legitimately counted within Metz's literature, since he answered his inquiry with an account of social meaning; and thus moved into the territory of the new paradigm.¹⁰ Philosophers who approach the problem from a religious perspective (e.g. Cottingham 2003) also typically have things to say about social meaning within this context. In addition, the literature can lay claim to well-known articles by Richard Taylor (1970), Paul Edwards (1967), and John Kekes (1986), which all moved towards the new paradigm by trying to show that the traditional question can be put aside, so long as we are subjectively engaged by social meaning. And there is also Wiggins's article; although the overall message of this piece seems to be a warning about the new paradigm that was to come (Wiggins 1976: 378).

The new paradigm first emerges in recognisable form in the late 1990s, with the work of Susan Wolf. Metz has adopted Wolf's approach exactly, namely that of stating paradigm-cases of meaningful lives (e.g. Mandela, Picasso, Einstein) and then applying intuition to various test-scenarios in an attempt to isolate the meaningful factors. These intuitions can be highly specific; Wolf does not think that aerobics adds meaning to life, for instance (Wolf 1997: 233). The other major influence on Metz, which appeared around the same time, is

⁹ That said, highly pertinent books by Hubert Dreyfus and Sean Kelly (2011) and Paul Thagard (2010) are omitted; the latter poses a very direct challenge to the methodology of the new paradigm.

¹⁰ I argue in [deleted] that Nozick's argument for making this transition involves a logical error.

Alan Gewirth's *Self-Fulfillment* (1998), which provides the basis of his fundamentality theory. However Metz distances himself from Gewirth on the basis of two intuitions. Firstly, that contra Gewirth, 'basic natural sciences' are not *significantly* more meaningful than biological and social ones (Metz agrees they are more meaningful). And secondly, that universal activities could be as trivial as cutting toenails (Metz op. cit.: 217-8).

Since then, a number of articles have been written in the Wolf / Metz vein, and *Meaning in Life* usefully brings them together within a systematic framework. However, in terms of sheer quantity, which is a factor Metz often mentions, I do not think this literature bears much comparison with the continental one; just going on the four figures I mentioned, and the vast secondary literature on them, I think the continental literature would win hands down. But if quality is the issue, then whether philosophers interested in social meaning should exclusively focus on the analytic literature depends on the credibility of the new paradigm approach, which is an issue I turn to in the next section. However, it also depends on the credibility of continental approaches; and this is not addressed in *Meaning in Life*.

Metz mentions that there is also relevant literature in empirical psychology (ibid.: 9). There is a well-established scientific research programme stemming from the work of Viktor Frankl (1946). Given this, it seems to me that philosophers do not need to speculate about what people mean by a socially meaningful life. Moreover, psychology, quite unlike the new paradigm, takes cultural specificity into account; it is alive to the possibility that people in Japan and the USA, for instance, might have different things in mind by a 'meaningful life' (Steger et. al. 2008; see also Mason 2013). So, if your interest is in the actual concept, its importance to people, and in helping those who feel their lives are meaningless – which does seem to be the primary concern of many philosophers (Kekes 1986, 2000; Levy 2005, Heyd

and Miller 2010, Oakley 2010, Brogaard and Smith 2005) – then this area of psychology should not be neglected. Even if you think philosophical analysis can penetrate ordinary usage to discover a single formula for a socially meaningful life, it still seems clear that such analyses should begin from real data; especially when it exists.

Let me be clear about what I have and have not been arguing. I have not been arguing that the traditional question is the only legitimate concern for philosophers. And neither have I been arguing that the continental approach to social meaning is better. Rather, my opposition has been to side-lining the traditional issue and continental literature, by suggesting that social meaning is the real, central issue about the meaning of life, and that the recent analytic literature provides the best, most serious attempt to address it. Philosophers are of course free to disregard the traditional issue in favour of social meaning, but they need to be clear that this is what they are doing, and should do so consistently. However, I do not think they are free to disregard the continental literature and then make great claims for their results, for this literature might undermine what they are saying, or at least contain neglected, supplementary insights. That was the mistake Casaubon made in Eliot's *Middlemarch*; he claimed to have the ultimate answer ('The Key to All Mythologies'), but it turned out that he had not engaged with vast swathes of pertinent literature – because he could not read German.

Of course, it is good for philosophers to try out new approaches, and there is already plenty of excellent analytic work on continental philosophers. However, the new paradigm proceeds as if it were the only approach analytic philosophers need concern themselves with. What I am suggesting, then, is that philosophers who are really serious about social meaning should also investigate the continental literature, empirical psychology, and the contributions of analytic philosophers before the Wolf / Metz agenda became entrenched. If they find that the

new paradigm usurps all else, then so be it – but this would need to be justified. Without such a justification, its results will be provisional, to the effect that *if* we take this approach and ignore others, then we will alight upon *this* result. It might still be interesting, but it should not be held up as the Holy Grail.

4. A Single Formula

On the face of it, the concept of a socially meaningful life looks highly culturally specific. It is not the kind of thing you would expect a Greek warrior, medieval hermit, and contemporary hedge fund manager to agree about. It also looks situationally specific, in that our inclinations to describe a life as socially meaningful might be different at the funeral of a loved one, than in a history lesson about an influential despot. At a funeral, it would be offensive to point out that just like the deceased, Hitler had a very meaningful life; but in a history lesson, it would be silly to deny that he did. This strongly suggests that this attribution has different senses. On the face of it, then, the prospects for finding a single formula for socially ‘meaningful’ seem about as good as for socially ‘cool’.

Here are four things you might mean by a socially meaningful life:

- (1) The social meaning of life is determined by social impact. As Metz says, ‘meaningful’ and ‘significant’ are synonyms (op. cit.: 21).
- (2) The social meaning of life is determined by *good* social impact.
- (3) The social meaning of life is determined by what we value. So the telly-addict whose life has negligible impact, still has a meaningful life because of their love of TV.

(4) The social meaning of life is determined by what we do. So the telly-addict has the meaning of their life determined by TV even if they hate it.

We use the notion of a ‘meaningful life’ in all of these ways. At a funeral, (2) and (3) would be apposite; in a historical or sociological discussion, (1) and (4) would be more likely to come up. Now Metz and others in the new paradigm think that only (2) is worthy of consideration; they think it best captures what we mean by a ‘meaningful life’. It is this notion which fuels all the intuitions which lead Metz to his fundamentality formula. However, this produces a clash with the other side of Metz’s methodology, namely accommodating the analytic literature. For many philosophers evidently have (3) in mind. (1) and (4) have been neglected, and the reason for this, I suspect, is that philosophers have wanted to discuss the notion of a socially meaningful life within the realms of value-theory, which only (2) and (3) allow for. But this is not a good reason, given their aim of analysing what we mean by a meaningful life *simpliciter*.

The clear conflict between basic judgements of meaningfulness between these senses, it seems to me, conclusively demonstrates the untenability of the new paradigm project. For if you have (1), (3) or (4) in mind, then Hitler had a meaningful life (Kekes 2000: 30; Frankfurt 2002: 246-8); while if you have (2) in mind, then Hitler had a meaningless life (Kauppinen 2012: 361; Metz op. cit.: 5) – or in Metz’s view, a less-than-meaningless life (ibid.: 234). If philosophers cannot agree on whether *Hitler* had a meaningful life, however, then I see no prospect of a nuanced debate in which careful analysis leads us to a single formula. I am happy to rest my entire case on the Hitler question, in fact. If new paradigm philosophers cannot provide a principled, non-question-begging reason why we should consider Hitler’s life meaningless, then I think their research programme falls at the first hurdle. And I do not

think they will be able to, because these are all perfectly legitimate notions of a ‘meaningful life’. I imagine that all around the world at the moment, senses (1) to (4) are being employed, and I see no prospect of arguing that any of these uses are confused.¹¹

The new paradigm could retreat to the ambition of analysing one particular sense of a ‘meaningful life’. But given that the question of the meaning of life has already been excluded, this would raise doubts about the motivation for such a project. Moreover, given that of all the senses, (2) looks the most culturally specific, since different activities are valued within different societies – and the evidence from empirical psychology backs this up – it seems that (2) is the least likely to yield to the methods of the new paradigm.

Let us turn to Metz’s justification for focusing exclusively on (2). He says he will ‘ascertain whether there is something common to, and unique to, the conceptions of life’s meaning to be found in at least the Anglo-American philosophical literature’ (ibid.: 18). That does not strike me as methodologically sound, because the literature in question might have neglected some perfectly valid (non-contradictory, widespread) conceptions of life’s meaning. Moreover it is an approach that cannot succeed even on its own terms, because some in that literature have focused on (3) rather than (2) (hence the disagreement about Hitler).

In any case, Metz finds three promising themes: purposiveness, transcendence, and esteem. He then proceeds to argue that they are each individually unsatisfactory. However it seems to me that Metz makes his case by relying on intuitions based on sense (2), and hence begging the interesting question. Thus he argues that not just any purpose will make life meaningful, because not all are ‘*prima facie* candidates for conferring meaning’ (ibid.: 25). But that just

¹¹ Wolf’s combined subjective and objective criterion for social meaning is an attempt to unify senses (2) and (3). However, I have argued in [deleted] that the result is incoherent.

means they are not all *good* in the sense Metz thinks (2) requires. Transcendence will not do either, because it ‘wrongly entails’ that naturalist accounts are ‘not theories of meaning at all’ (ibid.: 29). But philosophers invoke transcendence to address the traditional question, as we have seen; and if there were a meaning of life, it might provide its own account of meaning in sense (2). The esteem criterion is trickier for Metz to extricate himself from, since it is at home in sense (2). But he makes the attempt by appealing to the intuition that living in a natural ecosystem might make your life more meaningful, without being something you can take pride in (ibid.: 34). As far as I can see, this simply shows that Metz’s idea of ‘good’ does not necessarily require personal achievement.

Metz concludes that one single property will not do the trick. But by tying his three themes in with sense (2) – which in the case of transcendence, requires him to completely reconstrue it as ‘transcending one’s animal nature’ (ibid.: 35) – he is able to see overlap between them. He then presses on with his project of looking for a single formula for social meaning (ibid.: 35-6). But I think Metz has failed to see that purposiveness has just as much application to sense (3), that transcendence concerns a different issue, and that his passing denial that sense (1) can be conceptually ruled out (ibid.: 26) undermines his project; for if sense (1) cannot be ruled out – remember that on sense (1), Hitler had a paradigmatically meaningful life – then the fundamentality formula cannot be the correct analysis of the concept of a socially meaningful life. Metz thinks he can accommodate the sense that social impact makes lives meaningful, by restricting this to *good* social impact; but without an argument for why we should do this, he cannot claim to be analysing the concept of a socially meaningful life *simpliciter*. At best he could be right about sense (2); but the natural worries I have been raising about cultural specificity put this into serious doubt.

5. Physical Patterns

Metz thinks that his intuitions about how meaningful people's lives are detect physical patterns in the world. If this were right, it might put to rest my worries about cultural specificity, and hence show that the new paradigm project of finding a single analysis for social meaning in sense (2) is still viable.

His reasoning begins from an acceptance of Kripke's account of *a posteriori* necessary identities for natural kind terms, according to which the term 'water' has its reference causally fixed upon a natural essence, thus allowing us to empirically discover the necessary truth 'water = H₂O'. Metz thinks this account can be extended to cover claims about meaningfulness. He realises that the kind of claims he wants to defend are normative, and hence, on the face of it, radically unlike natural kind terms. But he nevertheless thinks that claims such as 'you ought to do X' denote physical patterns in the world, such that it could be an objective fact that if you do X, your life will *ceteris paribus* become more meaningful (ibid.: 92-3). Metz thinks these patterns could in principle be measured with precision and recorded by a meaningfulness calculus, akin to Bentham's hedonistic calculus; he supposes that 'the desirable is well-represented with a positive number, and the undesirable with a negative one' (ibid.: 234).¹²

This is an original and substantive position, but unfortunately Metz offers very little in way of justification for it. He is encouraged by the fact that some philosophers have applied a Kripkean account to moral realism, but notes that nobody has extended this to normative claims before (ibid.: 92). However, he does not say why he thinks that such an extension is

¹² Nozick once toyed with this idea in passing (Nozick 1974: 50) but did not pursue it.

possible; he simply says there is ‘nothing stopping’ it. As such, I have no justification to critically engage with, and so shall just say why I think a moral realist would be ill-advised to extend their account in this way.

Any physical pattern for social meaning must have been created through our behavioural interactions. Metz accepts this, saying ‘a world without human beings would be devoid of value, or at least would have much less than it does now’ (ibid.: 172). This immediately creates two major problems for his proposal, as I see it. The first concerns his methodology. For if the project is to detect the physical patterns people have created – and people did not create water, after all – then we need to know as much as possible about the linguistic and other behaviour that has created them. An empirical study of what people in different contemporary cultures say when they use ‘a meaningful life’ as a term of approbation would be a good start; but Metz, in line with the standard practice within the new paradigm, does not take empirical psychology into account.¹³ However if the study was to be really serious, I think you would also have to look into the history. With all that data at hand, you might conceivably be in a position to draw conclusions about a physical essence. But Metz simply uses his intuitions; together with those of some recent analytic philosophers, who sometimes radically disagree with him.

The second problem is that if our behavioural interactions create physical patterns which dictate what we ought to do to make our lives meaningful, then these patterns might conflict. Perhaps Samurai culture created a pattern revolving around honour, according to which your life is made more meaningful if you show dishonourable enemies no mercy. Metz could not rule out the possibility of such cases, given that it is physically possible for humans to behave

¹³ The sole exception to this rule I have come across is Kauppinen 2013.

in this manner, and thus create the patterns in question. But then, which norms govern us? Metz cannot say that Samurai norms only governed their culture, because that would be to abandon his quest for a universal formula. He cannot say such norms are impossible, if norms are just physical patterns. And he cannot say that such norms are simply not actual, because that would require him to abandon his methodology and engage with historical and otherwise empirical evidence.

Metz's physical norms commit him to either moral scepticism or relativism, both of which are anathema to his philosophical outlook. For if our behaviour creates the patterns constitutive of a socially meaningful life, then if we change behaviour, there will be new patterns. So if people stop valuing the positive orientation of rationality towards the fundamental conditions of human existence, the fundamentality formula will no longer apply. If the physical patterns of the old and new norms both govern human behaviour ahistorically, they will conflict. We would have to say that according to the old pattern, we ought to X, and according to the new pattern, we ought to not-X; so the physical world would not tell us whether we ought to X. But if we instead say that the physical patterns govern only the cultures that produced them, then we are relativists; in which case we must give up on the Holy Grail, and start paying attention to the specifics of different cultures.

These are the daunting problems that would face a Kripkean account of normative claims about social meaning. But I think any such account is a non-starter in any case, because in the case of social meaning, there is nothing asocial for our concepts to latch onto. When concepts are built around natural phenomena such as our perceptual capacities, or biological pain and our natural aversion to it, then an appeal to natural essence may have some plausibility. But norms about positive social meaning have nothing of the kind; and so given that social

practices vary widely and continually change, I think we can assume there is no unified natural pattern. A minimal evidential starting point for hypothesising such patterns, it seems to me, would be a strong case for believing that there is a substantive, pancultural, conceptual unity supervening on the physical world. Given that Metz actively disavows the latter (ibid.: 36), then, it seems to me that not only does he lack reason for believing in unified physical patterns; he endorses a good reason for thinking there are not any.

6. Conclusion

The new paradigm makes me instinctively uneasy. This is because it *ranks people's lives*; ordinary people find their lives condemned as relatively meaningless by formulas like Metz's – while philosophy always seems to turn out to be a particularly meaningful pursuit. I suspect that any armchair attempt by philosophers to analyse social meaning in sense (2) is likely to have this outcome, because their intuitions will be guided by the kind of lives they admire. However although a comparative tendency is built into (2), I see absolutely no reason to think the judgements it produces should be capable of being analysed with precision, any more than judgements based on (1) should be. Perhaps some have the vague intuition that Gandhi had a more meaningful life than Mother Teresa in sense (2), and that Hitler had a more meaningful life than Gandhi in sense (1) – but it seems eminently sensible to leave the matter at that. Then these senses would remain as refreshingly anodyne as (3), in which we might say that a man's hobby gave his life meaning, or (4), in which we might say that the meaning of a medieval peasant's life was determined by his farming activities. But so much for my instinctive unease; for I think I have done more than enough to raise serious doubts about the foundations of this project, which need to be addressed before anybody starts thinking about devising an imaginative counterexample to the fundamentality formula. Until that happens,

philosophers interested in either the meaning of life or social meaning should remain in Camelot.

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