INTRODUCTION: LIFE'S MEANING

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We have chosen the subtitle of this introduction with some care—as a term to cover both meaning *in* life and the meaning *of* life.

For some of the essays in this issue focus primarily on meaning *in* life—that is to say, they are focussed upon the question ‘how do I make my life worth living?’ Others are focussed primarily upon the meaning *of* life—that is to say, they are focussed upon the question ‘what are we here to do?’ Within a discussion of life’s meaning it is helpful to distinguish these different foci. They involve different meanings of ‘meaning’. In our keynote essay Joshua Seachris provides a survey of these different meanings. This is not only an important new essay in its own right, we think, but it also provides helpful orientation for the essays that follow.

In Seachris’ view, the most fundamental sense of meaning in any discussion of life’s meaning is that which attempts to make a phenomenon intelligible by pointing to its larger context. A request for meaning might also equate to a request for a phenomenon’s purpose or significance but these senses of meaning are less fundamental than that which asks for the larger context. It is the latter that prevails in discussions of the meaning *of* life.

Metz disagrees. While welcoming all kinds of different approaches in this area, he nevertheless argues that when we are asked about life’s meaning our primary focus should be upon meaning *in* life. Several other contributors also explicitly raise the question of the relationship between the two questions and between different meanings of meaning, for example, Jacob Fox, John Shand and Brooke Alan Trisel.

This difference in focus is interesting, but perhaps not surprising in that some philosophers seem naturally more drawn to the question of ‘how do I make my life worth living?’ whereas others are naturally more drawn to the question of ‘what are we here to do?’—philosophers come with different temperaments, as William James emphasised—but the relationship between meaning *in* life and the meaning *of* life remains contentious nonetheless. Our hope is that this issue goes some way to make clear their difference—including the different concepts of meaning that each of them involves—and thereby helps in the process of coming to some kind of rational consensus about their relationship.

1. As mentioned, we begin this issue with our lead article, by **Joshua Seachris**. This is an exploration of the question ‘what is the meaning of life?’ partly in response to those who argue that it is a misguided or nonsensical question and partly in response who argue that it is a catch-all for several different requests, none of which is more fundamental than any other.

Seachris argues that the request for meaning can equate to (1) a request for intelligibility, ie. what is the larger context? He terms this I^{MEANING} , for example: ‘what is the meaning of Christ’s empty tomb?’ It can equate to (2) a request for purpose, eg. ‘what is the meaning of that face you just made?’ He terms this P^{MEANING} . It can equate to significance or value, S^{MEANING} , eg. ‘that song means something to me.’ Often these three components of meaning overlap but nonetheless, in asking for the meaning of life I^{MEANING} is fundamental. This is the meaning that Macbeth and Camus complain of lacking—and their complaint is not obviously misguided nor nonsensical.

2. In the second article **Iddo Landau** argues, against Viktor Frankl, that not everyone is free to make their lives meaningful. Whilst he was not himself, strictly speaking, a philosopher, Frankl’s writings are often cited in meaning of life debates. Having lived through the Nazi Holocaust, Frankl argued that in his experience although people may find themselves in conditions beyond their control, nonetheless they are always free to choose their *attitude* towards these conditions.

Landau finds this over-optimistic. He presents the counterexample of those who suffer from severe clinical depression; and he points out that, in fact, Frankl observed that only *some* people seemed to exercise choice in their attitudes. There is an invalid inference from this observation to the conclusion that *all* lives are meaningful. Even if we reinterpret this as the claim that all lives are potentially meaningful, there remains the counterexample of those who suffer from severe depression.

Nonetheless, despite empirical and logical problems, Viktor Frankl’s writings remain of great interest.

3. **Jacob Fox** argues that life is absurd in that there is rightly perceived to be a conflict between (1) our belief that there exist intrinsically meaningful contingent everyday things and activities and (2) our belief that to be meaningful these things and activities must ultimately be grounded in something that is necessarily meaningful. The conflict is constituted of two different conceptions of meaning.

Fox draws on the work of Camus and Nagel but it might be also be added that there is a link to be drawn here between Fox’s article and the lead article by Seachris, I^{MEANING} playing a dominant role in (2) but not in (1).

4. **Alan Malachowski** notes that analytic philosophers have not taken much interest in the meaning of life. They tend to assume that the question is the product of linguistic confusion or that it results from failing to understand that we are the meaning-makers, and as such are responsible not to the cosmos but only to our fellow meaning-makers.

By contrast Thomas Nagel is a philosopher who does take the question seriously—he believes that where meaningfulness is concerned we are, in some way, answerable to the cosmos. Malachowski approves of Nagel taking the question seriously but cautions that we should not fall into the trap of thinking that, in the form of our own questions, the universe

has somehow ‘come to consciousness’. This gets things the wrong way round. Our ability to ask questions is rather a manifestation of our ongoing adaptation to the world.

5. **Thaddeus Metz** argues that we should understand ‘life’s meaning’ as being about a kind of value that is to be found in the lives of human beings. He argues that there are strong reasons to reject the idea that non-human nature might exhibit meaningfulness. He doubts that animal lives and inanimate objects can be considered meaningful in the same sense as that typically applied to human lives. On this point he engages with recent work by Joshua Lewis Thomas and with the article by Joshua Seachris in the present volume. He argues that meaningfulness is not fundamentally about the overall existential context of our lives, rather it primarily resides in human lives and, in particular, in the choices made in them.

6. **Sami Pihlström** considers the problem of meaningless suffering. Primo Levi’s work is analysed and found to implicitly develop an ethical argument against theodicies that attempt to render suffering meaningful. Levi found that although a transcendent point of view, from which all suffering is meaningful, is conceivable it is not *ethically* imaginable. In Pihlström’s words: “Goodness subordinated to external meaningfulness self-destructs.”

Yet, that is not to argue against ethical reflection. It is, for example, worth reflecting upon how antitheodicism should be taught. We must continue “to search for meaningfulness while (or even by) acknowledging meaninglessness.”

7. **Elena Popa** locates Simone de Beauvoir’s view in relation to current debates about life’s meaning. In particular she locates Beauvoir’s view in relation to those of Susan Wolf. For Wolf morality is neither necessary nor sufficient for meaning in life, whereas for Beauvoir it is a necessary condition.

The competitive environment of contemporary academia is analysed in the light of Beauvoir’s view of life’s meaning and is found to be, to an extent, unethical and absurd. For in an environment of excessive competition we no longer treat human agency as objectively valuable; instead we treat other agents only as obstacles to be overcome. When this happens, academic work can start to seem like a meaningless and unjustifiable activity.

8. **John Shand** argues that it makes no sense to talk of life’s meaning in the abstract, in isolation from an individual’s experience of life’s meaning. In other words, there is no transcendent viewpoint. However, we can at least note that it is the contingencies of limited existence that give rise to values and significances and it is these that give rise to meanings. Furthermore, we can say something about the form of a meaningful life—though not its content. A meaningful life involves “a combination of sense and alignment.” Sense is the way that life is understood as intelligible and alignment is our orientation towards other people and the life we desire.

9. **Joshua Lewis Thomas** outlines Susan Wolf’s highly influential position in which a meaningful life is defined as one that is somewhat successfully engaged in a project, or projects, of positive value, and in which it is argued that a desire for meaningfulness is derived from an awareness of the indifferent universe. Wolf argues that the latter thought motivates us to promote goodness outside of the boundaries of our own lives.

Thomas argues that Wolf does not explain why we should desire that it should be *our* lives that are meaningful. He argues that this can be explained by the fact that the desire for a meaningful life is in fact self-interested.

10. **Brooke Alan Trisel** argues that there is no justification for being concerned that the universe is indifferent to us. If the universe were not indifferent (meaning ‘lacking concern’ or ‘lacking in preference’) this would not make our lives any more meaningful. We would still not know what it wanted us to do. Moreover, regardless of the indifference of the universe, we are still able to accomplish ‘transcending achievements’, such as the theory of relativity.

11. **Vincenzo Politi**, like Joshua Lewis Thomas, also has criticisms of Susan Wolf’s position. Wolf argues that meaningfulness arises when someone acts upon the subjective desire to do something objectively valuable. But, Politi wonders, can we really draw such a clear distinction between subjective and objective? After all, Wolf admits that there are no transcendent criteria for that which is objectively valuable.

12. **Amy E. Wendling** asks whether the meaning of life is to get rich quick? Many people seem to think it is. The fantasy is that wealth is not worked for. It simply appears. Drawing on Lacan’s ‘Discourse of the Capitalist’, Wendling explores how the fantasy of instant wealth relates to addiction, especially addiction to shopping. She outlines Marx’s idea that there is a wealth that is not the fantasy of instant wealth.

13. **John Meechan** provides an exposition of Bergson’s views of the meaning of life. Unusually among philosophers of his day, Bergson had no hesitation in making explicit reference to the meaning of life. Unusually, in comparison to contemporary philosophers, Bergson’s primary focus is on ‘life’. He believes that greater insight into the nature of life provides clues to meaning.

14. **Giovanna Caruso** is inspired by Heidegger to argue that the meaning of life resides in Dasein’s infinite process of self-realisation and self-understanding, rather than in any achievements. The question as to the meaning of life arises from the process of self-realisation—from a normative but non-moral assumption of responsibility towards oneself—and does not escape from this context.

15. **Olli Petteri Pitkänen** argues that the esoteric elements of Schelling’s thought deserve serious consideration. Influenced by Jacob Boehme, Schelling draws a distinction between God’s existence and God’s ground. For Schelling “will is primordial Being”, not God—and it is impossible to think of will without meaning. It may therefore be possible to think of life as meaningful in a cosmic sense without invoking God.

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