Transculturalism and the Meaning of Life

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Abstract: I begin by introducing the standoff between the transculturalist aim of moving beyond cultural inheritances, and the worry that this project is itself a product of cultural inheritances. I argue that this is rooted in concerns about the meaning of life, and in particular, the prospect of nihilism. I then distinguish two diametrically opposed humanistic responses to nihilism, post-Nietzschean rejections of objective truth, and the moral objectivism favoured by some analytic philosophers, claiming that both attempt, in different ways, to break down the distinction between description and evaluation. I argue that the evaluative sense of a "meaningful life" favoured by moral objectivists cannot track objective meaningfulness in human lives, and that there are manifest dangers to treating social meaning judgements as a secular substitute for the meaning of life. I then conclude that the problems of the post-Nietzscheans and moral objectivists can be avoided, and the transculturalist standoff alleviated, if we recognise that nihilism is descriptive, and maintain a principled distinction between description and evaluation.

Keywords: transculturalism; meaning of life; meaning in life; humanism; description and evaluation; moral objectivism; Nietzsche

1. The Transculturalist Standoff

Transculturalism is about looking for shared interests and beliefs, which extend across cultural, historically contingent boundaries [1]. To take a classic example, anyone likely to read this essay is unlikely to approve of the Samurai practice of "trying out one's new sword" on passing wayfarers [2]. If that seemed acceptable to the Samurai, we might say, then so much the worse for Samurai culture. If the aim of transculturalism is to transcend cultural baggage, which lands people with obnoxious practices such as these (and there are many contemporary examples, of course, such as female genital mutilation), then it might seem an uncontroversially good idea. But there is nothing uncontroversial about it, because from the perspective of historicist and relativist lines of thought, the natural response is that transculturalism is itself rooted in cultural baggage. In particular, it might be said, it is rooted in the European Enlightenment's ideal of universality, the paradigm of which is to be found in cultural practices such as natural science, mathematics and philosophy; but not all philosophy, because this objection itself comes out of a post-Nietzschean kind of philosophy that has been prominent since the 1960s. A strong conclusion you might draw from these lines of thought is that transculturalism is a project of cultural imperialism; an attempt to undermine the values of other cultures because we do not like them—and this because they do not cohere with our own. So perhaps transculturalism is not good after all, but rather bad. (Although the issue of which perspective this assessment is made from then naturally arises; I shall return to this).

This impasse starts to seem more tractable if we distinguish evaluations from descriptions. Judgements about morality or aesthetics are, on the face of it, evaluative; we evaluate a person's conduct or an artwork. Judgements about the circumference of our planet, what the square root of nine is, or whether the physical world is mind-independent, on the other hand, are, on the face of it,

descriptive; our judgement is aimed at accurately describing an independent state of affairs. For evaluative disagreements to get off the ground, we must presuppose a description. We must agree about what the person did (smashed the vase, said "it's your fault"), before we can disagree about how to morally evaluate it; and there should be no problem agreeing about what the artwork consists in (how the paint is arranged on the canvas), even if we disagree about how to aesthetically evaluate it. In the case of descriptive disagreements, however, the description is exactly what is in dispute.

Only for evaluative judgements does the basic dispute about transculturalism sketched above seem reasonable. The defender of transculturalism might reasonably think that people's evaluations are sometimes rooted in regrettable cultural traditions, which prevent them from rationally evaluating their own best interests and those of others, and thus that we need to move beyond the problematic elements of our particular cultural inheritances. This need not mean abandoning our cultural roots, of course, simply looking beyond them. The detractor of transculturalism, on the other hand, might reasonably think that since *all* values emerge from a culture, this is a sly attempt to give one set of evaluative judgements the upper hand.

If we turn to descriptive judgements, however, the dispute immediately looks more dubious. If your cultural background inclines you to disagree when those of another culture proclaim that an abstract expressionist painting is great art, or that an act of "ethnic cleansing" is a moral abomination, then trying to find any mutual ground on which the matter might be resolved does indeed seem problematic; appeals to a shared humanity are likely to fall on deaf ears when dealing with people who evaluate only from the perspective of their own ethnic group, for instance. You can tell them they should not do this, but that is just another evaluation. However if your cultural background inclines you to think the world is flat, or that your traditional medicines are more effective than contemporary medical science, then since this is at root a descriptive disagreement, the world can intervene to settle the matter. Those with such beliefs will find that no matter how hard they try, they cannot reach the edge of the world; and that if they take the right drugs they will get well.

To think culture has any relevance to this, I think, is to confuse the fact that the views came out of a culture, as well as the cultural significance they have, with what the views actually *are*, and hence what they tell us about the world. If you start talking about how flat-Earth belief might serve the cultural purpose of maintaining a theological perspective best suited to a certain group's way of life, or how a traditional medicine, however "ineffectual" by Western standards, nevertheless serves other, more important cultural purposes, then you are in the grip of that very confusion. The flat-Earth people may never *try* to reach the edge, and may be better off because of that; and you might even argue that it is better, from their perspective, to stick to their own medicinal practices, even if this leads to avoidable death. However, if they did look for the edge, they would not find it; and if they took the drugs, they would survive. A reality indifferent to our cultures upholds these conditionals. We may not want to evaluate more accurate descriptions as better descriptions. However, you cannot evaluate without describing, and to evaluate inaccurate descriptions as better, perhaps because they are more useful to us, is to implicitly describe them as not describing how the world actually is (and then commend the useful consequences of this). Either way, our non-evaluative, descriptive notion of description remains. Evaluation does not go all the way down because it rests upon description; but description bottoms out.

Now the "post-Nietzschean" philosophers, as I have labelled them, would not accept this distinction. Rorty, the clearest writer from this tradition, vehemently rejected the idea that there is a "way the world is" which can validate our descriptions, for he held that aesthetic, moral, political, scientific and mathematic statements are all on a par ([3], pp. 315–56). To think that when evaluations are accepted, this is simply due to their fit with a contingent social consensus, whereas descriptions can be made true by the objective facts, irrespective of what any society thinks about it, is in his view to confuse the greater consensus found in some areas of culture (natural science; maths) with the dictates of an independent world. Politics and art could achieve just as much consensus, he thinks, and have done at certain periods in history ([3], pp. 321–22). The notion of an objectively spherical Earth which falsifies flat-Earth theory is, for Rorty, a pernicious,

quasi-religious idea that infantilises us; it stems from a desire to have our beliefs pressed upon us by a greater power, so that we do not have to take responsibility for what we think. For the world cannot *justify* our beliefs; it can *cause* us to hold beliefs, but only once cultural evolution has embedded an interpretation of the world within us, through collective negotiation, extended discussion, and no little happenstance. Additionally, since the driver of this cultural evolution is the pragmatic one of meeting the needs of the community, such interpretations are always, in effect, evaluations. So there is no pure description, any more than there is an independent, objective "way the world is" to describe.[1]

"Post-Nietzschean" is an apt label for this kind of view, because it originates in Nietzsche's conception of truth as "the last form of nihilism" ([6], p. 13). Nietzsche's nihilist is someone who condemns the world from the perspective of historically inculcated values, which place all worth in another world beyond this one; such as the Christian heaven. By the time the nihilist's understanding has ascended to this "last form", they realise that this supposedly better world was simply a product of human psychological needs, such as the need to be vindicated and to overcome fear of death. As such they deny the existence of the other world—they declare that religious beliefs are *not true*—but still retaining values formed in accordance with its concept, they find themselves condemning the real world; it does not live up to their otherworldly ideals, so they evaluate it negatively. For Nietzsche, this renders the notion of truth a life-denying fabrication, which leaves us reaching for "nothingness" (which is all the nihilist finds when looking for a God to vindicate us) in order to condemn "*this* state of being" ([6], p. 253). The nihilist realises that human life will never be vindicated by a meaning of life, since there is none, so because they conceive life's potential for value as residing solely with the supernatural, they consequently regard the meaninglessness of life which they have now discovered as a truth which condemns life; the only pertinent truth as regards the value of human life seems to them that of our contingent and arbitrary existence within an indifferent physical universe. The deepest root of this nihilism, which Nietzsche thinks we must learn to overcome, is our notion of truth; the objective kind, indifferent to human interests, which I endorsed above in my commonsensical distinction between evaluation and description.[2]

I think that this worry about the meaning of life remains at the basis of post-Nietzschean rejections of the notion of objective truth; rejections which are, on the face of it, as implausible as anything to be found in the history of philosophy. I also think that the worry is unfounded. For the claim that reality is meaningless, and consequently that there is no meaning of life (which is what I call "nihilism", in contrast to Nietzsche's more loaded usage), is not an evaluation; and hence it is not a negative (or indeed, positive) evaluation. It is a description. I shall not make this case here (but see [8]); although the basic idea is that human life as a whole could only be meaningful if it existed within a context that transcends the physical universe, and whether or not there is such a context is a factual matter.[3] Neither will I evaluate the positive arguments behind denials of objective truth (but see [5]). My concern in this paper is rather to reveal common ground between this post-Nietzschean reaction to nihilism, and the very different reaction of analytic, naturalist philosophers; and to bring this to bear on the transculturalist standoff.

Suppose, then, that we grant my distinction between evaluation and description, and put the post-Nietzscheans to one side for now. In that case, we can dismiss the standoff about transculturalism as applied to descriptions. If cultural inheritance ever gets in the way of accepting non-evaluative, purportedly (and we hope, actually) objective descriptions of the world, then we do indeed need to look beyond that cultural inheritance, *if*—and the "if" is important—we want our descriptions to

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[1]   For a full account of Rorty's story, see [4]; for a shorter account with more critical intent, see [5].

[2]   My interpretation of Nietzsche broadly follows Reginster [7].

[3]   If this is right, then there is no prospect of collapsing the distinction between evaluation and description by arguing, as was suggested by a reviewer of this paper, that the meaning of life is to perpetuate life: that the physical universe has hard-wired into us a desire to survive, such that an "ought" is a disguised biological "is". For if the physical universe has no intrinsic meaning or purpose, which explains why it exists, then there can be no intrinsic meaning or purpose to human beings surviving within that context; so this cannot be the meaning of life (see [8], esp. p. 48ff.).

match up with the world. We might not want this, because we might consider the maintenance of other descriptions of greater cultural importance. But this would of course be an evaluation. It would not be cultural imperialism for another culture to point out that our descriptions are, in fact, false; but it would be if they insisted that we ought not, in an absolute sense, endorse them. We ought not to if we want to endorse the truth, but the hypothesis is that we are prioritising other needs.

So that just leaves the evaluative standoff. On the one hand, it seems like a good idea to look beyond cultural baggage that leads people to endorse practices like "trying out one's new sword". But on the other, it seems as if condemnation of such practices itself reflects cultural baggage, and hence that recommending another culture to change, on the basis of principles we can purportedly all agree on, smacks of cultural imperialism.

It is not clear to me that this standoff needs to be resolved in order for recognisably transculturalist results to be achieved. If we think there are universal principles, or at least principles wide enough to apply both to us and the other culture, then there is no cultural imperialism involved in recommending them; because we do not think the principles we are recommending *are* simply our own cultural baggage. Moreover, it is only a recommendation, which the other culture is free to consider, while perhaps suggesting their own take on what the universal principles are. We may of course want to undermine some of their values; but then, they may well want to undermine some of ours too, and starting a conversation is a far cry from imposing our values by means of force, which is what "imperialism" suggests. Perhaps those at the receiving end of the practice (the innocent wayfarers) have no freedom to appeal to transcultural principles to those in power (the Samurai), but this is not a theoretical difficulty with transculturalism; only its political practicality. On the other hand, if we do not think there are any such principles, then we could adopt Rorty's "ethnocentric" proposal of advertising the benefits of our way of doing things, in the hope that our culture is attractive enough to inspire others to join it; or at least adopt some of its features [9]. The hope is that the values of the others are such that these benefits can be recognised; or that new generations will discover the new options we have presented when developing their values. Again, we can assume it will work both ways, so the result is more readily conceived as free conversation than forced imposition.

On either approach, the anticipated results are recognisably transculturalist, in that we are not reconciling ourselves and others to the cultural practices history delivered, just because they were so delivered, but are rather looking beyond them in the hope of finding—or in Rorty's case, trying to create—mutual ground. Thus, we do not need to resolve the standoff in order to endorse the manifest benefits of transculturalism, then, since we can approach its aims from the basis of either theoretical commitment; in reality, both kinds of approach will probably take place when we strongly disapprove of a practice.[4] It only becomes important if we hold that cultural practices should only be evaluated from the perspective of their own culture, and hence that we should keep our evaluations to ourselves. However, the problem with this line, alluded to in parenthesis when I originally set things up, is that the evaluative "should"s then immediately come into question. For either they refer to a universal stance the evaluation itself rules out, or else they refer to the standards of the culture from which they emerge. It must be the latter, on pain of incoherence; but since most people would not share this evaluation when confronted with an abhorrent practice, it can at most amount to a recommendation for cultural change. One which is very unlikely to be adopted in our rapidly shrinking world, and, by its own standards, is unable to provide stronger grounds for its adoption than that such an evaluative practice is possible. Strong relativist positions have faced this kind of intractable self-referential difficulty ever since Protagoras.

My primary concern in this paper lies with a philosophical issue which I think lies at the root of the standoff: Namely the meaning of life. In particular, my concern is with the interest recently taken in it by philosophers at the opposite end of the spectrum from the post-Nietzscheans. For these

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4   As I think they are in the current debate about attitudes to sexuality between different cultures within the Christian faith.

philosophers, operating within the analytic tradition, and with at least a presumption of naturalism—though sometimes explicit commitment to metaphysical physicalism—hold that there can be objective truths even in evaluative matters.[5] This statement requires qualification, because not all the philosophers within the "meaning in life" paradigm I have in mind are open about this. Some are; Thaddeus Metz, the most prolific writer in the area, is a physicalist who believes there are objective moral truths ([10], pp. 91–2 & 171–2).[6] However, the majority show little or no concern for the metaphysical foundations of their position.

It seems to me, however, that the paradigm requires objective truths of this kind in order to make sense. For the aim is to discover the criteria human beings must fulfil in order to live an objectively meaningful life; without appealing to God, or anything else beyond the physical universe. If there are such criteria—which are supposed to be objective and universal rather than relative to any particular culture—then they must at the very least supervene upon the facts about the physical world. Cultural relativity never comes into these debates, so I can only assume that when these philosophers focus their attention exclusively on intuitions about which kind of lives count as meaningful, in order to generate a formula for a "meaningful life", most are either unaware of the naturalistic, objective backdrop presupposed by their work, or else are simply too focused on the matter in hand to find the metaphysics worth mentioning; thus leaving it as a matter for others. Analytic philosophy is typically conceived as a piece-meal, collaborative effort, so perhaps such a division of labour makes sense.

I do not think so, however, because according to the argument I shall present in the next section, reflection on the naturalistic metaphysical backdrop of this debate puts it into a whole new light; and not a good one. Moreover, I think that the problem I will bring out bears fruitful comparison with that averred in connection with the post-Nietzscheans, namely that they make the mistake of thinking that nihilism is a negative evaluation. Now of course, to hold that there are objective moral facts is not necessarily to reject the distinction between evaluation and description. For you could accept the distinction while still holding that both evaluative and descriptive judgements are ultimately settled by objective facts. These could just be different kinds of facts; for instance, physical facts in descriptive cases, and moral facts, which supervene on the physical facts, in the evaluative cases. However although the distinction is not explicitly rejected simply in virtue of commitment to moral objectivism, it is still significantly diluted, such that evaluation and description turn out to be much more similar than they first seemed.

2. An Objectively Meaningful Life

There is a natural, important, but apparently very easy-to-miss distinction to be made between the meaning *of* life and meaning *in* life. The meaning *of* life would be the reason we are here, which could make all our lives intrinsically meaningful. It could, but might not, because human beings may have no essential role in the cosmic plan; or maybe just some do. However, nevertheless, this is the meaning issue that has vexed religions, philosophies and innumerable ordinary people since time immemorial; it is a dominant theme in the earliest substantially extant work of Western literature, to take just one evocative example [11]. However, whether or not there is a meaning of life, we sometimes make judgements about the social meaning of each other's lives; we might judge that Gandhi had a particularly meaningful life, for instance. Judgements about social meaning concern the meaning individual lives build up within the context of human society, and take a number of different forms, as will be discussed below. Clarifying such judgements is the meaning *in* life issue, which has preoccupied analytic philosophers in recent times. Its origins are far more recent

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[5]   I understand naturalism as the view that the nature of reality is best investigated through the methods of natural science, and physicalism as the view that fundamental physics provides our best answer to the metaphysical question of what exists.

[6]   Although Metz uses "naturalist" rather than "physicalist" to describe himself, these cited passages (among many others) leave little doubt as to his metaphysical intent; and he describes himself as defending a "realist metaphysic" ([10], p. 7).

than those of the meaning *of* life question; they lie predominantly, in so far as I am able to ascertain, in 19th century reactions to atheism [8].

The distinction is natural because we often distinguish between the meaning *in* and *of* a phenomenon. For instance, we distinguish the meaning in an artwork, such as the classical themes it alludes to or the emotions it portrays, from the meaning of the artwork, such as the significance it was invested with in the cultural milieu of its times. Additionally, the distinction is philosophically important, because the meaning of life and judgements about social meaningfulness may or may not be connected. If there is a meaning of life, there may be a strong connection, because the meaning of life may dictate that we must live in certain ways; which is of course what innumerable religious believers have supposed. To live meaningful lives, in that case, we must aim to make our judgements about social meaning track the meaning of life; we must live in accordance with the reason for which we were put here. However, there may not be any such connection, because what we do with our lives may be irrelevant to the intrinsic meaning they possess. In addition, if we do not know the meaning of life, we are not in a position to try to align our lives with it anyway.[7] Nevertheless, if there is a meaning of life, it *might* have important connections to our judgements about social meaning. If there is not, however, then it is far from obvious that the issues are connected. For if reality is meaningless, and I am right that this is not an evaluation, but rather just a description of a neutral fact, then arguably there is *no* connection between the issues, except for an historical one concerning how interest in meaning *in* life arose ([8], pp. 1-11). Reality as a whole is meaningless, and hence so is human life; but within life there is social meaning, generated relationally by our interactions. Social meaning is something we make judgements about.

Natural and important as it may be, however, within the recent debate in analytic philosophy, the distinction is routinely trivialised, conflated, or simply missed. One popular tactic (e.g., [13]) is to mention and dismiss the question of the meaning *of* life as if it were a trivial addendum to the real issue, namely social meaning judgements; which in terms of cultural significance and the history of philosophy, is to get things precisely the wrong way around. Metz, for instance, casually dismisses "cosmic" issues (*i.e.*, the meaning *of* life) as a minority interest, and resolves to talk exclusively about social meaning in his book *Meaning in Life*—as would be expected from the title—but then informs the reader that he will use the labels "meaning in life" and "the meaning of life" interchangeably ([10], p. 3ff.).[8] Another tactic is to start out with the question of the meaning of life, and claim to answer it with an account of social meaning. Robert Nozick [15] and Todd May [16] take this approach. However, most philosophers, especially those within the thought-experiment riddled paradigm which Susan Wolf [17] initiated in the late 1990s, seem oblivious to the distinction, and hence tend to change the subject without realising; most typically by engaging the reader's interest with the question of the meaning of life, and then proceeding to talk about social meaning.

I have grave reservations about the "meaning in life" project, quite apart from my overarching concern that it neglects, and encourages neglect of, the far more philosophically interesting issue of the meaning of life. Three main themes to these reservations, which I have developed before ([8], pp. 12-19, [18-19]), are as follows. The first is that judgements about social meaning take a number of different forms; four stand out. Sometimes they simply concern the social significance of a life, irrespective of its moral dimension; such that it might be said that Hitler had a particularly meaningful life. Sometimes they concern what a person valued about their life, such that we might say of someone who loved stamp collecting, that the hobby "gave meaning to his/her life". Sometimes they simply concern what a person did with their life, such that we might say that the meaning of a medieval peasant's life was determined by his or her farming activities. Sometimes

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[7]   Philosophers sometimes try to overcome this epistemic obstacle by positing intimations of transcendent reality within ordinary life; e.g., ([12], p. 100).

[8]   Metz now recognises the distinction, because he explicitly states it at the beginning of his review of Todd May's *A Significant Life* [14]; a book which Metz says provides a theory of meaning *in* life only. He is right about that, but somehow manages to miss the fact that May evidently takes himself to be addressing the meaning *of* life. The level of confusion this apparently simple distinction generates never ceases to amaze me.

they are used as a term of approbation; as in the case of Gandhi, or perhaps that of a great artist or scientist. It is this final, approving sense which the debate overwhelmingly fixates upon. Nevertheless, some philosophers instead opt for the "what the person valued" sense [20-21], leading to arguments at cross-purposes. Others, like Wolf [17], try to combine the two, leading to an incoherent "subjective and objective" account.[9]

The reason the approving sense is privileged within these debates, I think, is that its participants think they are providing a naturalistic account of the meaning *of* life. However—and this is my second theme of reservation—this particular sense is *obviously* culturally relative, in that which culture you were born into will obviously affect your judgements about which lives have good social meaning. A Samurai could hardly be expected to agree with the Pope on such matters. Yet the methodology of this debate is simply to think hard about various imaginative test-cases, in order to see if the feature the test-case shines a spotlight on would make a person's life more or less meaningful; according to the intuitions of individual contemporary western analytic philosophers, who as a group tend not to share many intuitions on these matters, judging from the disagreements that ensue. Perhaps such a methodology is apt when debating about perception or the problem of universals, for instance, where on the face of it, cultural background is of little or no relevance. But "socially meaningful in a good way" was hardly going to belong in that bracket.

My third source of reservation is ethical. For if you focus exclusively on the approving sense, as most do—with paradigmatic great men like Gandhi as your starting point—then the result will almost inevitably be a formula for meaningfulness which the vast majority of human beings will fall short of, and thereby be condemned as living more or less meaningless lives.[10] For what is admired about lives of great moral, aesthetic or intellectual significance is little in evidence in the lives of people just trying to make ends meet. Even if it were an objective fact about the world that most ordinary lives are practically meaningless (in a negative sense), the enormity of this would still call for serious reflection about whether to reveal it; and if this was decided upon, then at least a little sensitivity would be apt. Instead, we find Metz, for instance, blithely recording the degree to which prostitution removes meaning from a life, perhaps to the point at which the life has negative value; that is, becomes worse than meaningless.[11] However, although the participants in these debates do not reflect on their motivation for looking into these matters, I think it is clear. It is to produce a theory of "the meaning of life" capable of offering the same kind of reassurance to dissatisfied atheists, which belief in a meaning of life (properly so-called) offers to religious believers. Their atheism persuades them that there is no meaning of life, this perceived absence leads to existential dissatisfaction, and so they turn to meaning *in* life for comfort. All they really do, however, is produce highly dubious theories of one particular type of social meaning judgement, with the added result—more often than not—of revealing their elitist prejudices.

I am no fan of the meaning *in* life debate, then. Yet, rather than further rake over old ground, I now want to ask a foundational question about it, with an eye to acquiring more insight into the transculturalist standoff concerning evaluative judgements. This foundational question should have been settled before the debate ever got underway, but was not in fact addressed. It is the question of whether there really is one type of social meaning judgement which has priority over the others, such that if there is such a thing as an objectively meaningful life, in the social sense, then this is the kind of judgement we need to employ to detect its presence. The debate was able to get off the ground because there were plenty of philosophers keen to talk about an issue of as general interest as the meaning of life (as they saw it), who belonged to a generation for which logical positivism was a distant enough memory for them to be unconcerned by its faded strictures on what a philosopher

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9　For the argument that this is incoherent, see ([8], pp. 14-15; also [19]).

10　I have added the word "almost" to this sentence in response to a reviewer who pointed out, quite rightly, that the formula need not have this result if the exemplary cases are just used to make vivid what the meaningful features are; ordinary lives might exhibit these features to a strong, if not exemplary, degree. Nevertheless, this has been exactly the result in every case I have seen, and given my views on the underlying motivation for this project, I think this is almost inevitable.

11　The prostitution example recurs throughout Metz's book [10].

may legitimately discuss. Since the foundational question was never asked, however, the vindicating connotations of the question of the meaning of life carried over into the meaning *in* life debate, and the approving sense of "socially meaningful" became the *de facto* focus.

What I shall conclude is that three out of four of the different types of social meaning judgement I distinguished could refer to an objectively meaning life. The only one that could not is the approving one which the debate has fixated upon. The argument is as follows.

Evidently, the criteria for an objectively meaningful life cannot have pre-dated the evolution of human beings. For our topic is social meaning, not the meaning of life, for which, to state the obvious, the possibility of some kind of human social interaction is required. In any case, the notion of such criteria pre-dating our appearance on Earth is alien to naturalism. In a universe of physical particles and forces, there simply cannot have been candidates for objective criteria dictating how humans must live in order to live meaningfully; not at a time when humans did not yet exist. Our existence was not preordained, so no prior arrangements were made. Rather, if there are such criteria, they must have been generated by our social interactions. We must have moved in such a way that certain of our movements laid down objective criteria for certain other movements to count as meaningful. More precisely, our linguistic behaviour of describing the movements of certain lives as "meaningful", or other cognates which amount to the same thing, must have set up the criteria for those movements, as a matter of fact, to be what count as objectively meaningful lives. Of course, talk of "describing" and "setting up criteria" raises the thorny issue of intentionality. However, since we are presupposing a naturalistic framework, let us assume this amounts to something like causal covariation. Thus, the linguistic behaviour covaried with certain patterns of behaviour, and those objective patterns are the meaningful ones. An objective pattern developed and we labelled it as "meaningful"; the latter amounting to another objective pattern.

So far so good, in that I doubt I have said anything a naturalist would seriously quibble about, at least in the sense that if there are objectively meaningful human lives, then within a naturalistic framework, they would have to have come about in something like the above fashion. However, now consider the type of social meaning judgement which is of primary concern in the meaning *in* life debate, namely the kind used as a term of approbation. This is an evaluative kind of judgement; we evaluate Gandhi's life positively, for instance, by saying that it was meaningful. The fact that this is an evaluation need not be a concern for the objective aspirations of the naturalist, since we are, for the sake of argument, supposing that there are moral (and other higher-order) facts to ground these evaluations; facts that supervene on the physical facts. As such, evaluations can be construed as a kind of description; in evaluating Gandhi's life as meaningful, we are describing the objective moral (or other non-fundamental) facts that the physical movements of his life, as embedded in his environment, instantiated.

This is not to say that the story so far bodes well for the meaning *in* life debate; in fact I think enough has already been said to show that it is completely untenable. For if philosophers are to isolate the meaningful patterns through *a priori* analysis, they need good reason to believe that there is some unitary, ahistorical pattern that such judgements have always co-varied with. But there is extremely good reason to think there is not. If the Samurai evaluated a life as meaningful in this sense, there seems little doubt that their judgements would not coincide with ours. So I cannot see how these philosophers expect to isolate a physical pattern, which amounts to anything more than: what I, and contemporary like-minded people, call "meaningful". Hardly an appropriate substitute for the meaning of life! But even if you did think that there is some pattern, which people would always have recognised as meaningful, the methodology of the debate is clearly inappropriate. For to isolate such a pattern, you would need to do considerable historical research, while also gathering extensive empirical evidence about contemporary meaningfulness-judgements; it would be quite a project, and imaginative thought-experiments would have little, if any, role to play in it. You might perhaps think the pattern has always been there, but many cultures have missed it; and perhaps continue to do so. However, we need only appeal to counterfactuals—"what would they have judged?"—for the question to arise of why we should trust *our* judgements about which patterns count as the meaningful ones, rather than others that differ.

This is orthogonal to my main point, however, since I am giving the project the maximum benefit of the doubt to see where it leads. My main point is as follows. Evaluations can always go either way: good or bad. If judgements about the objective patterns of meaningfulness are evaluative, then, these judgements must be able to go either way, even if they ultimately reduce to descriptive judgements about moral (or other non-fundamental) facts. Thus, since "meaningful" as a term of approbation is evaluative, it must be shorthand for meaningful-in-a-good-way; "good" may mean morally, aesthetically, conducive to the spread of knowledge, or whatever. But in that case, the pattern we are detecting must be that of a *good* meaningful life. There must also be a pattern for a *bad* meaningful life. All the philosophers in this debate—except for one—skirt around this consequence by simply talking about more or less meaningful lives, with the presupposed limit being a complete absence of meaning; by which they mean an absence of *good* meaning.

The exception is Metz, whose notion of negative meaning (which he calls "anti-matter" ([10], p. 64)]), shows recognition of this consequence of the naturalistic framework of the debate. For when we get down to very small amounts of meaning, our evaluation cannot be positive; we do not praise somebody for living an almost meaningless life, and certainly not a completely meaningless one. We are condemning them. Thus, at some point, the target of our judgements must switch from the pattern for good meaning to the pattern for bad meaning.[12] Metz shows insight, which I previously missed, in recognising that once the bad meaning pattern becomes the focus, there is no reason that incrementally more of that pattern should not continue to be recognised, even after the good meaning pattern has completely disappeared. Hence a life could count as having a worse meaning than one that is simply completely lacking in good meaning. Bad meaning, like good meaning, has no obvious limits; there may be some kind of physical constraint on the patterns, but if so, this is hidden from our ability to imagine lives accruing more and more meaning (positive or negative) without limit.

The important consequence of this is that the patterns tracked by the approving type of judgements about meaningfulness cannot be the patterns for an objectively meaningful life. They track the patterns for a *good* meaningful life, but that is just one type of meaningful life. Since good and bad meaningful lives must have something in common, if we are correctly labelling an objective pattern, there must be a third kind of pattern underlying both—and *that* is the pattern for an objectively meaningful life. *A fortiori*, no kind of evaluative judgement can track this pattern, since then the same issues will arise; there will be a good/bad split, and the pattern we are looking for must be common to both sides.

This means that the meaning *in* life project has focused on the wrong sense of "meaningful". Particularly if, as I think is clear, it was looking for a secular substitute for the meaning *of* life. For the attraction of the meaning of life is that it might provide guidance on how we should live, such that if we live in that way, then our lives are vindicated; we have not simply been "burning" our days, as May puts it ([16], p. vii). If our social interactions create objective meaning in life, however, then it is of a kind which is completely unsuited to this role. We can live in such a way as to acquire large quantities of it—we can amplify the pattern all we like—and yet the result may be worthy of universal condemnation.

Which, if any, of the other three "meaningful" judgement-types, which we considered, does track the relevant pattern? They are all candidates, because they are all descriptive. I think the answer must be that they all track patterns which have an equal right to be called a life's objective meaningfulness; but none of them provide anything worthy for us to aim for. That said, if we think of "meaningful" as an incremental term, and as something we *could* aim to get maximal amounts of—as philosophers typically do—then there are only two options.

The flat sense, in which we might say that agriculture determined the meaning of a peasant's life, is neither incremental nor a possible goal. The meaning of a person's life, in this sense, is simply determined by what they do with it; so everyone has an objectively meaningful life. A human life

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12   The issue of vagueness, concerning what happens in the vicinity of the "switch", is not relevant here; though naturalists might find an epistemic view on these matters conducive (e.g., [22]).

creates a physical pattern and part of that pattern is its meaning. We make this kind of judgement for the purpose of drawing attention to the dominant feature of that meaning-pattern—the farming activities, in my example—but the rest has an equal claim. The peasant no doubt did other things which generated social meaning, but we are interested in the dominant factor.

The sense in which our lives are meaningful when they subjectively engage us, which has attracted attention from philosophers, albeit nowhere near as much as the evaluative one, is both incremental and a possible goal; but it is not a worthy one. It might at first glance seem evaluative, but it is not, since it depends on what subjectively engages you. To say that a project really engaged somebody, and hence, in this sense, added meaning to their life, is not necessarily to positively evaluate it; for the project may have been utterly trivial or even evil. It is just to describe how the person engaged with it, which the naturalist might construe in terms of the presence of a certain kind of brain activity. It is incremental, however, and we could aim to maximise the meaningfulness of our lives in this sense. But the aim itself would not be worthy. Villains tend to be highly engaged people, which is something philosophers overlook when they commend to us "intensity" ([16], p. 75) or phenomenological "whooshing up" ([23], p. 200) as routes to a meaningful life.

The final sense, that of sheer social significance, is certainly incremental and also a possible goal. But it is a terrible goal. For if that is the objective meaning you are trying to acquire for your life, then you could hardly do better than by spreading a disease that eradicates human life; perhaps slowly and painfully, since that would be bound to increase the meaning-patterns. By contrast, doing something so wonderful that the whole world sings your praises, would be an immeasurably more difficult route to take to the same outcome.

Any of these three descriptive senses could track the objective meaning at the root of evaluative judgements of meaningfulness; any or all. The second and third are disturbing, however, because they can be goals. This is not just a theoretical consideration. People do, in fact, abandon their ordinary lives for the thrills (intense subjective engagement) of crime. Shows like *Breaking Bad* teach us to admire this. Moreover, achieving objective significance (a synonym for "meaning") is a motivation for high-school massacres. A culture in which fame is not necessarily linked to merit actively encourages this. If that is what the aim of achieving objective meaning in life can lead to, then it is not just an aim best forgotten, but one which should be actively resisted. Aiming for a good meaningful life is to be commended, of course; but you are really just aiming for "good" and hoping to maximise its effects (or the pleasure you will realise in it; or both). Objectified and isolated, however, meaning *in* life—the supposed secular alternative to the meaning *of* life—is an utter disaster. Philosophers, of all people, should wake up to this.

3. Description and Evaluation

Both post-Nietzscheans and moral objectivists attempt to dilute the distinction between description and evaluation; but from opposite directions. The post-Nietzscheans do so by rejecting the notion of objective truth, thereby making all statements about the world a kind of culturally rooted evaluation. The moral objectivists do so by positing objective moral facts, thereby making all statements about the world a kind of description. I think both are reactions to the waning of the firm hold over intellectual life that religions once enjoyed; a process which began in earnest in the nineteenth century and has accelerated ever since. With a meaning of life assured to us by religion, evaluation stood on just as firm metaphysical ground as description. The epistemic ground for this evaluation was not so good—the observable physical world had the advantage on that count—which is one major reason why religious influence began to fade; but nevertheless, so long as we trusted the religion, the metaphysic which evaluation rested upon was assured. As science increasingly took over our intellectual aspirations, however, the situation changed.

Science presents us with an objective physical universe in which human life blindly evolved; in that universe there is no place for a meaning of life. Given the residual influence of religion on how we thought about this, the resultant nihilism seemed like a negative evaluation of all our efforts. Ultimately, we were worthless. This situation led to the post-Nietzschean and moral objectivist reactions. The post-Nietzscheans, like Nietzsche himself, coupled the meaning of life with objective

truth: both had to go in a world where there was no greater authority than the human. This immediately removed the sting from nihilism, because it now emerged as simply an optional interpretation of our situation; and conceived as the ultimate negative evaluation, nihilism was plainly not an attractive interpretation. With the newfound freedom to put it aside in favour of others, a freedom purchased by the rejection of truth, nihilism could thereby be overcome.

Naturalists of a more metaphysical bent did not see the cold, uncaring physical universe in which nihilism holds sway as simply an optional interpretation, however; but they still conceived nihilism as a negative evaluation. So they developed a different humanist response which seemed more in keeping with science and its ideal of objectivity; and one which allowed them to avoid the unpalatable Protagoran tensions of the post-Nietzscheans. Their tactic was to replace the meaning *of* life with a humanistic and naturalistic substitute: meaning *in* life. Humans make their own meaning, and this, they thought, could do all the work of the older idea; but without the religious and metaphysically untenable baggage. They thought of this meaning as objective, as everything must be in a purely physical universe, and since they thought of meaning *in* life—just like the meaning *of* life it had replaced—as essentially evaluative, they thereby came to endorse forms of moral objectivism.

Both responses produced equally unattractive results. The post-Nietzscheans, over and above the conceptual tangles and manifest implausibility they embroiled themselves in, ended up promoting a cultural insularity that was squeamish about looking for transcultural common ground, and consequently, progress. The moral objectivists, on the other hand, building upon patently shaky philosophical foundations with earnest and supposedly scientific seriousness, ended up promoting the goals of *making your mark* and *loving what you do*; no matter what that mark is, and no matter what it is that you love. The moral or otherwise praiseworthy element they tried to build into these goals, was always destined to appear as a preachy and expendable addendum to the main message, *i.e.*, make your life objectively meaningful, any way you like. The "any way you like" was meant to be redacted, but once convinced that you can secure objective meaning for yourself, who cares what some theorists (who cannot agree with each other in any case) say about how you ought to do it? Who cares what anyone thinks, in fact, so long as your life is *meaningful*. The meaning *of* life was conceived as the be-all-and-end-all, and conceived as its secular replacement, so is meaning *in* life. This priority was desirable in a religious context, since the meaning *of* life was bound up with moral precepts. But outside that context it is not, because theoretically, the goal of an objectively meaningful life cannot be moral in and of itself, and practically, the goal is highly unlikely to be taken that way within a secular context; where scientific realism dominates, and the view of some philosophers that objective morality resides in the atoms is little known.

All this can be avoided. First, we need to realise that nihilism is not an evaluation but rather a description. If there is no meaning of life, then human beings do not exist for a reason; there is no purpose to human existence, and this is simply a fact about the reality we are describing. Outside of a religious context in which living a meaningless life contravenes an imperative to live in accordance with the meaning of life, this is not an evaluative condemnation. Second, we must keep description and evaluation distinct; which is easy to do in a refreshingly meaningless reality. Description concerns working out what reality amounts to. Evaluation concerns the value we invest in it. Evaluation is guided by description, but is ultimately a matter of collective and personal action. Our aspiration for objectivity is to have as little role in description as possible and instead let the world guide us. But in the case of evaluation, our input is not an obstacle, but rather the whole point of the exercise. We *do* value things, and can come to value new things; but our evaluations can only change rationally when we know what is available to value. Understanding our cultural history can reveal things of value to us that others might overlook; but transcultural considerations can show us new things to value, which we might find that we value more—and have good reason to.

4. Conclusions

Returning to the transculturalist standoff, then, the worry is that some cultures have evolved practices that seem abhorrent to us, but that our desire to help reveals cultural prejudices of our own, which we could never persuade them of, only force upon them. Underlying that worry is a

conflict between two humanistic thoughts. The first is that such practices reveal that these cultures are not pursuing meaning *in* life in the right way; the second is that they should be free to pursue it however they like. However, if we reject meaning *in* life as a goal, since it has nothing to do with "the right way", the first thought is divested of metaphysical significance; we are left with an evaluative disagreement, to be resolved as best we can. In addition, if we accept that life is metaphysically meaningless without collapsing the distinction between evaluation and description, then the second thought is also divested of metaphysical significance; for we still have a common descriptive background against which our evaluative disagreement can take place. The conflict is no longer metaphysically principled, and we can return to the particularities of the case in hand. If we find some of their practices abhorrent, and think we have good reason to do so, then we try to persuade them of our evaluations while advertising their benefits. They can do the same with us. In the end, we hope, a rational, well-informed equilibrium will emerge. The concern that we could never find common ground fades against a common descriptive backdrop for our conflicting evaluations; there is a point of entry for debate, at the very least in physiological facts like pleasure and pain. The more niggling concern is that without firm foundations of the kind provided by the meaning of life, this process might go the wrong way, such that we end up in a Naziesque world. However, if we no longer believe in a meaning of life, there is not much we can do about that. After all, the meaning of life has hardly proved a recipe for peace throughout the ages, and continues, in the hands of religious fanatics, to generate much of the trouble we find ourselves in today. The remedy is not to try to drag the meaning *of* life into the secular world as the humanistic doctrine of meaning *in* life. For it cannot do the same theoretical work; and its practical implications are considerably more worrying than the lack of guidance it seeks to remedy.

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