

On the meaning of “the meaning of life”

Sobre o significado do “sentido da vida”

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ABSTRACT

When it comes to a question as notoriously unclear as “What is the meaning of life?”, clarifying the question and its conceptual setting is a necessary step before attempting to answer the question. The analysis of the concept of “the meaning of life” is a twofold task; “the meaning” and “life” both need to be examined. In this paper, I primarily focus on “the meaning.” I argue that, although there is much disagreement and confusion in the literature about the meaning of “the meaning” as it is applied to life, there is one most plausible interpretation of this notion. In the end, even though I do not answer the question of the meaning of life, I propose an account of what a correct answer to the question is supposed to look like, based on my original function analysis of “the meaning”.

Keywords: the meaning of life, meaningfulness, meaning in life.

RESUMO

No tocante a uma questão notoriamente pouco clara como “Qual é o sentido da vida?”, esclarecer a questão e seu marco conceitual é um passo necessário antes de tentar respondê-la. A análise do conceito “o sentido da vida” implica uma tarefa dupla: tanto “o sentido” quanto “vida” precisam ser examinados. Neste artigo, enfoco primordialmente o termo “o sentido”. Sustento que, embora haja muita divergência e confusão na literatura sobre o significado de “o sentido” quando este termo é aplicado à vida, há uma interpretação mais plausível dessa noção. No fim, embora não respondendo a questão do sentido da vida, apresento uma proposta de como poderia ser uma resposta correta a essa questão, com base em minha análise da função original de “o sentido”.

Palavras-chave: o sentido da vida, significatividade, sentido na vida.

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To many who are not professional philosophers, "What is the meaning of life?" is the paradigm philosophical question; however, partly because of its apparent unclarity, this question does not receive as much attention from academia as is supposed in popular culture. Clarifying this question and its conceptual setting is a necessary step before attempting to answer it. The analysis of the concept of "the meaning of life" is a twofold task; "the meaning" and "life" both need to be examined. In this paper, I primarily focus on "the meaning." I argue that, although there is much disagreement and confusion in the literature about the meaning of "the meaning" as it is applied to life, there is one most plausible interpretation of this notion.

In the first section, I briefly explore some of the interpretations of the question "What is the meaning of life?" (hereafter QML) and the answers given in the philosophical literature. In the second section, I discuss interpretive strategies for handling the apparent ambiguity of QML. In the third and the fourth sections, I examine two concepts, namely the psychological meaning in life and the meaningfulness of life, and point out the ways in which they are distinct from *the meaning of life* (hereafter ML) and the ways in which they are confused with ML in the literature. In the fifth section, I propose and defend my *original function* analysis of "the meaning." In the end, even though I do not answer the question of the meaning of life, I propose an account of what a correct answer to the question is supposed to look like, for any given sense of the term "life."

I. The meaning of life: questions and answers

Among the philosophers who offer answers to QML, there is no consensus on what the question is really about. Here are some questions that are offered in the literature as interpretations of QML.

"What, if anything, makes a life meaningful?" (Metz, 2002, p. 781); "What is it all about?" "What is (are) the purpose(s) of life (my life)?" "What makes life valuable?" "What makes life worthwhile and not irredeemably futile?" "What makes life significant?" "Does a particular life achieve a good purpose?" "What makes life worth living?" (Seachris, 2011); "What is the purpose of human existence?" "What should we seek?" "What ends (if any) are really worthwhile?" (Nielsen, 2000, p. 239, 246); "What is the use of a man's life?" "Under what conditions is a man's life of some use?" (G. E. Moore, quoted in Moorhead, 1988, p. 128), "Is human life ever

worthwhile?" "Does (or can) human life have any meaning?" (Edwards, 2000, p. 133); "What is it all for?" "Why am I here?" "What is the point of it all?" (Britton, 1969, p. 3); "Does life have a purpose or point?" "Does life have some value?" "Does my life signify something?" (Thomson, 2003, p. 12); "Why live?" "Why is life worth living?" (Thagard, 2010, p. 1, 3); and many other variations.

From the above interpretations, we can identify some concepts that are regarded to be closely related, even identical, to the meaning of life, such as the purpose of life, what makes life valuable/worthwhile, and the reason/explanation of life. We also see that some interpretations of QML are about the existence of human life in general, some are about the life of the person who asks the question, and some are about existence in its entirety. Most importantly, some questions in the list are descriptive/explanatory and some are normative².

Let us now briefly survey the answers given to QML in the literature, which will help us better understand about what different philosophers take the question to be. According to Metz (2001, 2002, 2007, 2013a, 2013b) and Seachris (2011), supernaturalism, subjective naturalism, and objective naturalism are the standard categories of answers given to the normative versions of QML.

Supernaturalistic theories are those that derive the meaning of life from God, from the soul, or from both. For example, according to the "purpose theory," what gives a life meaning is acting according to God's purpose for that life (Metz, 2002, p. 784-7; 2013b, p. 79-117; also see Metz, 2000). Another supernaturalistic theory is Robert Nozick's "infinity theory." Nozick argues that life can only be meaningful if it is linked to an infinite being, because only an infinite being can be meaningful in itself (Metz, 2002, p. 788-789; Nozick, 1989, p. 167). Similarly, Charles Hartshorne argues that a life can only be meaningful if there is a God who appreciates and immortalizes (by remembering/knowing) that life (Metz, 2002, p. 788). Some supernaturalistic theories emphasize the importance of having an immortal soul. For example, according to "ultimate consequence theory," life can be meaningful only if it makes a permanent difference and that is possible only if life will not end (Metz, 2002, p. 789).

Subjective naturalistic theories assert that the meaning of a person's life consists in her subjective attitudes towards life, such as setting one's own purposes and following them, loving something/someone, or engaging in creative activities (Metz, 2002, p. 793, 797). It is important to note that these so-called subjective naturalist theories are only subjective in the sense that they explain meaning in terms of subjective attitudes, but, of course, if a subjective naturalist theory is true, then it is objectively true. For example, if the meaning of life is

² I use the term "normative" in the wider sense. A statement/theory is normative if it states what one should or ought to do, or what is right and what is wrong, but I will also regard any evaluative statement/theory as normative. So, a normative statement/theory is any statement/theory that declares something is better. Furthermore, a concept F is normative if and only if the statement "x is F" implies either that x is better than something else or something is better than x. For example, "good," "right," "wrong," "worthwhile" are normative concepts, and so is "meaningful." A meaningful life is better than a meaningless life *ceteris paribus*. I will talk more about the normativity of the term "meaningful" in section 4.

engaging in creative activities, the preferred creative activities would change from person to person, since the desirability of an activity is a subjective matter, but, if this theory is true, then that one's life is meaningful only if one engages in creative activities is an objective fact.

Objective naturalistic theories state that a non-supernatural objective/mind-independent component is necessary for meaningfulness. For example, Susan Wolf (2010, 2015) argues that, unless an activity is objectively valuable, it cannot make life more meaningful. According to Wolf, "meaning arises when subjective attraction meets objective attractiveness" (2010, p. 9). Another objective naturalistic view is that (objectively) morally good actions make life meaningful (Metz, 2002, p. 797-798).

These theories are not only normative theories about what makes life meaningful (as opposed to meaningless), they are also *theoretical* rather than *factual*. These are theories about what *would* make life meaningful under what conditions. Metz writes, about one of the standard answers to the normative question: "[this] theory is a thesis about the conditions for a meaningful life, not about whether these conditions obtain" (Metz, 2002, p. 784). So, a supernaturalistic theory according to which the meaning of life is worshiping God does not also claim that God exists; what this normative theory of meaning asserts is merely that one's life is meaningful if and only if God exists and one worships God.

Descriptive/explanatory answers are also given to QML. According to Milton Munitz (1986), QML is a question about the place of human existence in the universe (p. 258). When Stephen Hawking declared the death of philosophy and argued that science now takes over the traditional philosophical endeavor of answering the most profound questions, he was talking about the descriptive interpretations of QML:

But almost all of us must sometimes wonder: Why are we here? Where do we come from? Traditionally, these are questions for philosophy, but philosophy is dead. ... Scientists have become the bearers of the torch of discovery in our quest for knowledge (Hawking, qtd. in Warman, 2011).

In fact, any formulation of the QML as a why question about existence, such as "Why do we (or I, or anything) exist?" is a descriptive/explanatory interpretation of QML.

Seachris (2009), similarly, argues that the primary meaning of "the meaning of life" is explanatory. The meaning of life, according to Seachris, is essentially a true narrative about life. He quotes philosophers who have similar views; Garrett Thomson writes that "to know the meaning of life is to know a true metaphysical narrative about human life in general that somehow makes sense of our lives," and accord-

ing to John Cottingham, when we ask about the meaning of life "we are asking about our relationship with the rest of the universe" (qtd. in Seachris, 2009, p. 5).

Seachris argues that when we ask "What is the meaning of life?", what we mean by "meaning" is what a father means by "meaning" when he goes into his children's playroom after he hears screaming and yelling, finds the children fighting and asks in an authoritative manner "what is the meaning of this?" (2009, p. 15-16). What the father is in search of is an explanation, a narrative, a story about the fighting. According to Seachris, "the accurate story is the *meaning* the father seeks" (2009, p. 16, emphasis in the original).

II. Two interpretive strategies: pluralist and monist

It seems that one can plausibly construe QML as a normative or as a descriptive question. Furthermore, QML can be a question about life (or even existence) in general or a question about a generic person's or a particular person's life. It can be posed as a theoretical question or a factual question. QML is apparently ambiguous in more than one dimension. There are two main interpretive strategies to handle this apparent ambiguity of QML, which I will call, adopting the terms from Metz (2013b, ch. 2), "The Pluralist Strategy" and "The Monist Strategy."

The pluralist strategy is to deny that QML can be understood as a single question. According to this approach, the best way to interpret QML is to take it to be essentially ambiguous among a cluster of different but interrelated questions and try to determine exactly which questions those are.

Metz (2002) argues that QML can best be understood as a disjunction of the following interrelated questions:

What should an agent strive for besides obtaining happiness and fulfilling obligations? Which aspects of a human life are worthy of great esteem or admiration? In what respect should a rational being connect with value beyond his animal self? ... Which goods command our awe? How may an individual identify with something incomparably higher? What is worthy of our love and allegiance? (2002, p. 802-803).³

According to Metz, what makes these questions interrelated is that the standard answers given to QML in the literature are in fact answers to these questions and those answers exhibit family resemblances (2001, p. 150; 2002, p. 802; 2007, p. 211).

Baggini (2005) defends a similar view. He maintains that "What is the meaning of life?" is an unclear sentence and it is a

³ Metz gives slightly different lists of questions in his *The Concept of a Meaningful Life* (2001), p. 150-151, and *New Developments in the Meaning of Life* (2007), p. 211.

place-holder for a set of questions such as "Why are we here? What is the purpose of life? Is it enough just to be happy? Is my life serving some greater purpose? Are we here to help others or just ourselves?" (Baggini, 2005, p. 1)⁴. According to Mawson's *hypothesis of polyvalence*, when one asks what the meaning of life is, "one asks an assemblage of largely overlapping, but significantly different, questions at once" (2010, p. 20).

Seachris (2009), however, rejects this pluralistic strategy and offers his *Narrative Interpretation* instead, according to which QML demands a meta-narrative of life. He interprets QML as a single question and, without rephrasing QML, explicates the term "meaning." Seachris's Narrative Interpretation is one of the possible interpretations of QML in accordance with the Monist Strategy. Seachris (2009) argues that his interpretation of QML is more plausible than the pluralist interpretations because his Narrative Interpretation retains the original question and retaining the original question is more desirable than reformulating it, and when we rephrase QML as a collection of various questions about purpose, value, worth, etc., QML becomes a question about those concepts, which are logically distinct from the concept of the meaning of life. Furthermore, he points out that his interpretation gives a unified account and hence his interpretation, as opposed to the pluralist interpretive strategy, does not ignore the definite article in the question "What is *the* meaning of life?" (p. 27-29). I submit that, for the reasons that Seachris elaborates, a monist analysis is preferable and a pluralist strategy must be adopted only if no acceptable monist analysis is available.

If there is no plausible monist analysis of QML, then this can be due to the inherent ambiguity of "the meaning" or "life" or both. Instead of analyzing the ambiguity of QML as a whole, it would be easier to inquire the notions of "the meaning" and "life" separately. My aim in this paper is to analyze the concept of "the meaning" in QML, so I will not offer a thorough examination of the concept of "life," but I will just mention some of the interpretations of "life" in the meaning of life literature. After that, I will examine "the meaning" and argue that a monist analysis of this notion is possible.

According to Metz (2013b, p. 37-58), the bearers of meaning are particular human lives (and parts of those lives). However, questions such as "What is it all about?" (Seachris, 2011), "Why does the universe exist? Why does something exist rather than nothing?" (Britton, 1969, p. 3) are also stated as interpretations of QML in the literature. Some philosophers interpreted QML as a question about existence of the human species, such as Nielsen when he asked "What is the purpose of human existence?" (1981, p. 186). "Why are we here?" is also a question about humanity in general (Mawson, 2010, p. 21). Normative questions about the meaning of life, such as "Is human life ever worthwhile?" "Does (or can) human life have any meaning?" (Edwards, 1981), typically are theoretical questions about a generic human life, rather than

factual questions about the actual meaningfulness of particular lives. Although Metz argues that the bearer of meaning is particular lives, his question "What, if anything, makes a life meaningful?" (Metz, 2002, p. 781) is also about the life of a hypothetical generic human individual. QML can also be asked about existent particular lives, and most importantly one's own life. One of the most popular formulations of QML is about the life of the person who asks the question (Thomson, 2003, p. 12; Britton, 1969, p. 3; Mawson, 2010, p. 21). This is also how Tolstoy (1987, p. 19-80) and Camus (1991, p. 4) understood the question of the meaning of life, as they regarded the question to be basically about suicide.

Probably a pluralist strategy would be the right choice to examine the concept of "life" in QML, but the questions that Metz and other pluralists enumerate do not differ from one another significantly with respect to their employment of different senses of "life;" rather, they focus on different senses of "the meaning." What I argue is, contrary to the pluralists, that if we choose one of the senses of "life" and ask QML specifically about that, then QML will not be an ambiguous question.

Before I offer my analysis of the concept of *the meaning*, I want to examine two concepts that are sometimes confused with the meaning of life (ML), namely psychological *meaning in life* and *meaningfulness of life*.

III. The psychological meaning in life

The central subject matter of contemporary positive psychology is *meaning in life*. Positive psychology is "the scientific study of what makes life most worth living" (Peterson, 2008) from the perspectives of how pleasant, good (eudaimonic) and meaningful one's life is (Seligman and Pawelski, 2003). Various studies report that having meaning in life has positive effects on psychological well-being and lack of it impacts psychological well-being negatively (Cohen and Cairns, 2010, p. 2; Klefteras and Psarra, 2012, p. 337).

The psychological notion of meaning in life is substantially different from the philosophical notion of the meaning of life. Psychological meaning in life (hereafter P-MiL) is the perceived meaningfulness of one's life from one's point of view. It is "*the cognizance of order, coherence, and purpose in one's existence, the pursuit and attainment of worthwhile goals, and an accompanying sense of fulfillment*" (Reker and Wong, 1988, p. 221, emphasis added). The Meaning in Life Questionnaire, one of the most commonly used tools to measure P-MiL, is constructed to measure "sense made of, and significance felt regarding, the nature of one's being and existence" (Steger *et al.*, 2006, p. 81). Another questionnaire that is frequently used to measure meaning in life, namely the Purpose of Life Questionnaire, is designed to measure "the ontological

⁴ Note that Baggini's list contains both normative and descriptive questions. Metz, on the other hand, includes only the normative questions and dismisses descriptive/explanatory questions about life.

significance of life from the point of view of the experiencing individual” (Crumbaugh and Maholick, 1964, p. 201).

The most salient difference between the concepts of P-MiL and ML is that, conceptually, P-MiL is subjective but ML is not. Theories of P-MiL are about the conditions under which one perceives her life to be meaningful. Theories of ML (including so-called subjective naturalist theories), on the other hand, are about the objective conditions of meaning which are not contingent upon one’s perception of meaning. Consider a newborn child. She clearly does not have P-MiL, but according to some theories of ML, such as supernaturalist theories, her life can still have objective meaning (maybe God’s purpose for creating her constitutes the meaning of her life). To see the difference more clearly, let’s take a subjective naturalist theory of ML, say, Harry Frankfurt’s theory that ML is “devoting oneself to what one loves” (2002, p. 250). According to Frankfurt’s theory, if one devotes herself to something she loves, even though she does not feel or think that her life is meaningful, her life still has meaning. P-MiL, however, cannot exist if one does not perceive it. Similarly, it is conceptually possible that one’s life may be objectively meaningless even though one has P-MiL. Furthermore, P-MiL is more like a general state of mind (or mood) and does not signify something unique. *The meaning of life*, on the other hand, at least *prima facie*, is supposed to be unique, as the definite article suggests.

In the literature on ML, there is some confusion between ML and P-MiL. For example, Rudolf Wöhlgenannt takes “meaningful life” to be synonymous with “[life in which a person] feels satisfied upon achieving her aims” (quoted in Metz 2002, p. 801). Wöhlgenannt offers his account not as a subjective naturalistic theory of ML, but as an analysis of the concept of ML, which indicates that what he has in mind is not ML but P-MiL.

Paul Edwards (2000) argues that there cannot be ML independent of one’s knowledge about and attitude towards it. He writes,

If a superhuman being has a plan in which I am included, this fact will make (or help to make) my life meaningful in the terrestrial sense only if I know the plan and approve of it and of my place in it, so that working toward the realization of the plan gives direction to my actions (Edwards, 2000, p. 145).

Again, what cannot possibly exist unless one knows and approves of it is P-MiL, not ML. Similarly, A. J. Ayer equivocates between ML and P-MiL when he writes: “I do not think there can be any general answer to the question, what is the meaning of life. Our individual lives have whatever meaning, or meanings, we succeed in giving them” (quoted in Moorhead, 1988, p. 20).

IV. Meaningfulness of life

Meaningfulness of life is another concept that can be confused with ML; and it is easier to confuse because ML and

meaningfulness of life are not as conceptually distinct from each other as ML and P-MiL are. Both the meaning and the meaningfulness of a given life exist objectively, if they exist at all. The correct theory of ML could turn out to be a subjective naturalistic theory which asserts that, say, “setting and pursuing one’s own purposes in life” is the meaning of life, but if this is the correct answer to QML, then it is objectively the correct answer. And if the correct answer to QML is “setting and pursuing one’s own purposes in life,” then unless one sets and pursues her purposes in life, her life is objectively meaningless, even though she might be satisfied with her life.

However, meaning and meaningfulness are not equivalent to each other. Unlike *meaning*, I take *meaningfulness* to be an obviously normative term. Imagine two lives. These two lives have exactly the same amount (and type, if you think that is important) of happiness, satisfaction, knowledge, freedom, virtue, etc., but they differ in that one of these lives is meaningful, and the other one is meaningless. Which life is better? Which life is preferable, more intrinsically choiceworthy? If you don’t think that the difference in meaningfulness breaks the axiological balance between these otherwise indistinguishable lives, then you are using the term “meaningfulness” in a different sense than I and many other philosophers who interpret meaningfulness of a life to be about worthwhileness of a life use the term. When people ask “How can I make my life more meaningful?” I take it that they ask a question about a better life.

Unlike the meaningfulness of life, the meaning of life is not an obviously normative concept. A meaningful life is better than a meaningless life, but, as we have seen, many philosophers regard ML as a descriptive concept, or at least they recognize that a descriptive sense of meaning is as plausible as a normative sense. Any interpretation of QML that regards it as a question about some kind of explanation of life (or existence) rather than an evaluative question about the conditions of meaningfulness employs a descriptive notion of ML.

There are other ways in which meaning and meaningfulness differ from each other. Suppose that a supernaturalistic theory is the correct answer to QML. In that case, say, worshipping God is the meaning of all lives but only the lives of the people who actually worship God are meaningful (provided that God exists). So, the fact that there is an overarching meaning of life, which is the meaning of every life, does not guarantee that every life is meaningful. Meaning is not the same as meaningfulness and confusing meaningfulness of life and the meaning of life causes serious problems for the analysis of the concept of the meaning.

Furthermore, QML asks what *the* meaning of life is. The definite article before “meaning” indicates that there is only one meaning of life (given a particular sense of “life”). More than one thing can make life meaningful together, but there can be only one *the* meaning of life. Lastly, a meaningful life can be more meaningful than another meaningful life, but, intuitively, the meaning of life does not come in degrees; either there is a meaning or there is not.

Let's see an example of the confusion between the meaning of life and the meaningfulness of life. According to Metz, it is obvious that meaning comes in degrees: "Nearly all those writing on meaning in life believe that it comes in degrees, so that, say, some lives as a whole are more meaningful than others" (2013b, p. 4). Metz takes the question "What is the meaning of life?" to be synonymous with "What (if anything) makes life meaningful?" (2002, p. 781; 2007, p. 196) and "How (if at all) [can] one's life ... be meaningful?" (2013b, p. 17). From his perspective, a life has meaning if and only if that life is meaningful, because he takes both "the meaning of life" and "meaningfulness of life" to denote importance/significance of life⁵. According to him, *meaning* has "inherent desirability and choiceworthiness" (2001, p. 140). This approach conceptually excludes all descriptive accounts of meaning. According to his view, all those philosophers who interpret QML to be about why we exist drastically misunderstand the question. Furthermore, intuitively, there are conceptually possible cases in which a life is not meaningful even though there is a meaning of life. For example, as I mentioned above, according to some god-centered supernaturalistic theories, each life has a meaning, namely God's purpose in creating that life, but the life of an atheist can be regarded as meaningless and not worth living, since the atheist rejects to serve the purpose that is assigned to her life by God. We cannot explain this conceptual possibility unless we distinguish between meaning and meaningfulness.

The meaning of life and the meaningfulness of life are separate but related notions. A successful analysis of the concept of ML, I believe, must account for the distinction *and* connection between the meaning and the meaningfulness. According to my view, as I explain in the next section, existence of the meaning of life is a necessary but not a sufficient condition for the meaningfulness of life.

V. The meaning as the original function

Suppose that you are speaking to your friend, telling her about your latest philosophical discovery. Then you realize that she wears earphones and could not hear you. She was not aware that you were speaking to her the whole time. When you realize this, you stop speaking, because speaking to her while she is not even aware that you are speaking is *meaningless*. When you were speaking to her without realizing that she was not listening, your speaking was *meaningless*. Similarly, trying to read a book in a foreign language that you don't know is *meaningless*. Or, suppose you want to buy a Malibu beach house but you work for the minimum wage. Saving money for the Malibu beach house is *meaningless* for you, be-

cause even if you save all of your earnings, you cannot afford a Malibu beach house. For similar reasons, drinking water to get drunk is *meaningless*.

What is common in all these examples is that there is a purpose that cannot be achieved. The purpose of speaking to someone is to be understood, the purpose of reading a book is to understand it. And, in the last two examples, your purpose for saving money is to buy a house at the Malibu Beach and your purpose for drinking water is to get drunk. If the activity you are engaging in is incapable of producing the relevant result, then we think that that activity is meaningless, in the sense that it is pointless and futile.

So, at first glance, it might seem that the purpose of an activity is its meaning and that activity is meaningful as long as it serves its purpose. But this is not exactly true. Buying the Malibu beach house and getting drunk are set as purposes of saving money and drinking water by the person who engages in these activities. But the meaning of life is supposed to be objective, one cannot just attribute an arbitrary meaning to her life as ML⁶. The examples of speaking and reading are more apt. To be understood is not just a purpose one subjectively attributes to speaking. Similarly, understanding a text is the essential and objective purpose of reading. Understanding a text is what reading is for.

In my view, the *meaning* of speaking is to be understood by others and the *meaning* of reading is to understand a text; however, some points need to be clarified about the notion of meaning and its relation to meaningfulness. First of all, the meaning is more like a function, rather than a purpose that is deliberately set by someone. The function of a thing, as I understand the term, does not need to be intentionally set by some agent. For example, getting nutrients is the biological function of eating and reproduction is the biological function of sexual intercourse. They are functions, rather than purposes, since eating and mating did not evolve teleologically for some future purpose or goal, but instead their function was realized as they evolved (cf. Searle, 1995).

I will call the function that explains existence of a thing the "original function." Not everything exists to serve a function. An original function features in a functional explanation of the existence of a thing; it is what that thing is *for*. Functional explanations are predominantly used in evolutionary biology, but also if a thing is intentionally created for some purpose, then serving that purpose counts as its original function. To be clear, the original function explains why something exists, but fulfilling the original function might not be a persistence condition for that thing. Detecting light is the original function of eyes in general, which also explains the existence of each individual eye, but blind eyes still exist even if they can't serve their original function. They are supposed to see, but they don't cease to exist just because they cannot see.

⁵ Metz maintains that the phrase "meaningful life" is synonymous with the phrases "significant existence," "life that matters" (Metz, 2002, p. 801); "important [life]," "[existence that] has a point" (Metz, 2001, p. 138); "way of being that matters" (Metz, 2013b, p. 21).

⁶ This point is systematically ignored by those who mistakenly equate ML with P-MiL, as I discussed in section 3.

I believe that “original function” is an appropriate synonym for “meaning” in QML. It is related to the notion of purpose, although not identical to it, which explains why the concept of the meaning of life is often confused with the concept of the purpose of life. The original function of a life is objective, in the sense that one cannot subjectively attribute an original function to an existent life. The original function of a life can be unique and not a cluster of different things, as the concept of “the meaning of life” suggests. The equivalence of the meaning of life and the original function also explains why QML is interpreted as a question about *why we exist* by many philosophers.

Now, given this analysis of the meaning, let us look at the relation between the meaning and the meaningfulness of life more closely. If something does not satisfy its original function, then it is objectively meaningless in the relevant sense. For example, eating non-nutritious things, however delicious they may be, is meaningless, provided that, as an objective evolutionary fact, receiving nutrition is what eating is for. It is important to see, however, that its meaningfulness does not mean that one should not eat anything non-nutritious or that there is anything morally wrong with this activity. Receiving pleasure can be a subjective purpose of engaging in objectively meaningless activities and this would be enough reason to engage in them. Similarly to the fact that one can have an objectively meaningless life but have P-MiL, an activity that does not serve its original function can be desirable and satisfactory for other reasons.

Another important point about the original function is that it can be negative. For example, if we are created by Descartes’ evil demon who deceives us about everything, including the existence of the external world, then the original function, and hence the meaning, of life is a global deception. Or, suppose there are some people who are created by God to deterministically live a life that inevitably leads to Hell. Going to Hell is the original function and the meaning of their lives. Arguably, being created for being globally deceived or for Hell makes one’s life less meaningful and worthwhile than a life of a person who was not created for constant deception or Hell. So, not every life that fulfills its original function is meaningful. Although “the meaning of life” is a neutral concept, the actual meaning of life can be negative or positive, that is, it can be objectively bad or objectively good/valuable. And, of course, a negative meaning does not make life more meaningful, since, conceptually, a meaningful life is *ceteris paribus* better than a meaningless life. A life created for constant deception or Hell is not *ceteris paribus* better than a life that is not created for constant deception or Hell. For something to be meaningful, aside from having and serving an original function, it must have a *positive* original function. A positive original function of life is such that, when it is fulfilled, it makes one’s life more worth living independent of the subjective satisfaction one might or might not have from her life. In this sense, being deceived by the evil demon and waiting to go to Hell does not add to the meaningfulness of one’s life, but, for example, arguably, serving a benevolent god does.

In my view, the meaning of life is the original function of life, and life is meaningful if and only if it has an objectively positive/valuable original function and fulfills that function. So, a life can be meaningless in the following ways:

1. The life does not have an original function.
2. The life has an original function, but its original function is not objectively valuable.
3. The life has an objectively valuable original function, but it doesn’t serve this function.

To be clear, I don’t claim that there actually is an objectively valuable original function for our lives. Maybe there is no original function, maybe there is an original function but it is objectively negative, or maybe objective values don’t exist at all. My claim is conceptual. My claim is that, conceptually, our lives can be meaningful only if there is such an objectively valuable original function of life, and *a fortiori*, only if there is objective value at all (cf. Wolf, 2010, 2015).

This is a monist analysis of the concept of the meaning, but it is different from Seachris’s monism. As we have seen above, according to Seachris, the meaning of life is the true existential narrative of life, which is the concept of meaning a father employs when he asks to his fighting children “What’s the meaning of this fight?” Seachris argues that what the father wants is a true narrative about the fight, but according to my view, provided that the “meaning” in the father’s question is same as the “meaning” in QML, what the father wants to know is the original function of the fight. In other words, his question can be rephrased as “What is this fight for?” Suppose that the fight is due to a misunderstanding, then there is no original function of the fight. There is a reason and explanation of it, which can have the form of a narrative, but it is not an original function. In this case, the narrative about the misunderstanding would be the meaning of the fight according to Seachris’s Narrative Interpretation, but the fight would have no meaning according to my analysis.

Not any explanation/narrative of existence of something counts as the meaning of that thing. Every person’s existence is caused by her mother and father having sex, but we do not see it even as a candidate for the meaning of one’s life. It is an explanation, but not a functional explanation. Suppose, on the other hand, a clone is created by geneticists to be scientifically examined and studied. Then, that clone has an original function, which is also the meaning of her life: to contribute to science by being scientifically examined. And if that is a positive/valuable function (which is very questionable, especially from a Kantian perspective), then being studied by scientists makes her life meaningful (whether she has P-MiL or not is another question).

Let us return to Seachris’s fighting children example. Now suppose that one of the children got jealous since she thought that her sister was prettier than she was, wanted to make her less pretty by punching her in the face and that’s why she started the fight. In this case, deforming the sister’s face is the original function of the fight, and it is the meaning of the fight according to my view, but it is not a positive mean-

ing. So, even though the fight serves its original function, it is not a meaningful fight.

Although the original function account of meaning regards ML not as a normative notion but as a descriptive one, it still captures the basic intuitions of those who pose QML as a normative question. I take the normative interpretations of QML to be most directly about the meaningfulness rather than the meaning of life, but of course any question about the meaningfulness of life is indirectly also about the meaning of life, since *meaningfulness* is fulfilled positive original function and the original function is *the meaning*. All normative theories of ML, i.e. the supernaturalistic, subjective naturalistic and objective naturalistic theories, are theories about a *positive* ML.

VI. Conclusion

I have argued that the best way to understand the concept of *the meaning of life* is to interpret it as *the original function of life*. As I mentioned above, the concept of *life* must also be analyzed and I concede that a pluralist strategy would probably be more appropriate for the analysis of the concept of *life*. However, there is no inherent ambiguity in the notion of *meaning* in QML. In my view, whether we ask QML about existence as a whole, or about the existence of the human species, or about a hypothetical generic human life, or about a particular human life such as the life of the person who asks the question, we ask what its original function is. If a life has no original function or has a negative original function, then it cannot be meaningful. The search for what makes life objectively meaningful is the search for a positive original function of life and the ways to fulfill that function.

I have tried to clarify the meaning and the meaningfulness of life conceptually, but I haven't analyzed every concept that I use in my proposed analyses of these terms. I didn't, for example, discuss in detail what "positive" and "negative" mean when they are applied to the meaning. Before attempting to answer QML, these terms also need to be clarified. Even though my analysis of QML is not complete, I do think my original function view of ML and the related analysis of meaningfulness in terms of ML provide a good starting point and conceptual framework for those who are in search of the meaning of life.

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