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How Human Life Could be Unintended but Meaningful

A Reply to Tartaglia

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Abstract

The question “What is the meaning of life?” is longstanding and important, but has been shunned by philosophers for decades. Instead, contemporary philosophers have focused on other questions, such as “What gives meaning to the life of a person?” According to James Tartaglia, this research on “meaning in life” is shallow and pointless. He urges philosophers to redirect their attention back to the fundamental question about “meaning of life.” Tartaglia argues that humanity was not created for a purpose and, therefore, is meaningless. He assumes that humanity could not be meaningful unless we were created for a purpose. I will outline a different way that humanity could become meaningful. In addition, I will explain how the research on “meaning in life” is important for understanding how humanity could become meaningful.

1. Introduction

We live our lives, expending great effort to remain alive and achieve our goals, without knowing whether human life is meaningful. Laypeople often assume that philosophers seek to answer the question “What is the meaning of life?”¹ Actually, only a small number of philosophers give attention to questions about the meaning of life.² And when they reflect on these questions, they typically do so from a theistic perspective – a view that many people no longer find credible. I will examine these questions from a naturalistic perspective.

In recent years, there has been a growing interest among philosophers in the topic of meaningfulness. However, instead of focusing on the traditional questions about meaning of life that preoccupied existentialists, contemporary philosophers strive to explain what gives meaning to the life of *a person*. They refer to this latter topic as “meaning *in* life” to distinguish it from questions about the “meaning *of* human life” in general. Susan Wolf and Thaddeus Metz – leading

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¹ Laypeople often also assume that philosophy is “all about” the meaning of life. Tartaglia (2016b) argues for this view.

² See, for example, Cottingham (2003), Cooper (2005), and Seachris (2009).

figures in this research – have each proposed a theory of meaning in life.³ These theories support *objective naturalism* – the view that one accrues meaning in one’s life by engaging with inherently valuable and natural, mind-independent goods.

James Tartaglia is harshly critical of this work by these philosophers. He contends that this research is shallow,⁴ pointless,⁵ and can be misleading.⁶ He argues that there is nothing philosophical about identifying what makes a person’s life more meaningful.⁷ He seems to think that one can find this in a self-help book.

Regarding the topic of meaningfulness, Tartaglia claims that there is only one truly important question: “[W]hat are we here for?”⁸ This focus on “meaning in life” has diverted our attention from this question, he argues. Tartaglia acknowledges that there is meaning *in* life – what he refers to as “social meaning.” However, he argues that human life was not created for a purpose and, therefore, is meaningless.

“Life” can refer to *a human being* or all of humanity, which can lead to confusion in this debate about meaningfulness. Take, for example, the title of Tartaglia’s book: *Philosophy in a Meaningless Life*. With this title, some potential readers might assume that the book is about the life of a person. However, in reading the book, it quickly becomes clear that Tartaglia is referring to human life, as a whole.

As with “life,” “humanity” can be thought of in multiple ways. Humanity can be conceived *as a whole* or as the *many individuals* that make up the whole.⁹ These two different metaphysical conceptions of humanity give rise to two different ways of thinking about how humanity could be meaningful. With the traditional, *holistic* account of meaning of life, a meaning of life is conceived as a meaning that is possessed by humanity, as a whole. There is, however, an alternative, *individualistic* conception of meaning of life that I will outline. By engaging with inherently valuable and natural goods, it adds meaning to our individual lives, which in turn adds meaning to humanity from the “bottom-up,” as I will hypothesize.¹⁰

³ See Wolf (2010) and Metz (2013).

⁴ Tartaglia (2016a), p. 4.

⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 16.

⁶ Tartaglia (2015), p. 98 and (2016a), p. 1.

⁷ Tartaglia (2015), pp. 95, 102 and (2016a), pp. 4, 16. See Metz (2016a) for his response to the criticisms by Tartaglia and others.

⁸ Tartaglia (2016a), p. 2.

⁹ I will use the terms “humanity” and “human life” interchangeably.

¹⁰ I initially discussed this view in Trisel (2016). I further develop this view in this paper.

In the next section, I will provide an overview of Tartaglia’s nihilism. Many people, including Tartaglia, assume that humanity could not be meaningful unless we were created for a purpose. In section three, I will seek to demonstrate that this assumption is false. Then, in section four, I will compare the holistic and individualistic accounts of how humanity could be meaningful and will point out some problems with Tartaglia’s holistic account. In section five, I will advocate for the individualistic account. In addition, I will explain how the research on “meaning in life” is important for understanding how humanity could become meaningful.

2. An Overview of Tartaglia’s Nihilism

In the social framework in which we live our lives, there are pre-existing traditions, organizations, and fields of endeavor that one can join, as Tartaglia indicates.¹¹ Our individual activities can be meaningful because they are situated within the context of meaning provided by the social framework. Likewise, for human life, as a whole, to be meaningful, it must exist within a wider context of meaning, Tartaglia argues. Tartaglia claims that the physical universe does not provide life with a context of meaning. Therefore, he contends that a “transcendent context of meaning” is necessary for life to be meaningful.¹²

Tartaglia hypothesizes that consciousness transcends the objective world. If true, this opens up a possibility that reality transcends the physical universe, he argues.¹³

Tartaglia indicates that if humanity were created for a purpose by a transcendent context of meaning, “We might be here to *do* something, and so discovering the reason might persuade us to change our lives.”¹⁴ Alternatively, “the meaning of our lives might consist in *being* valuable, rather than having the capacity for *doing* something valuable.”¹⁵ However, he later concludes, “even if the physical universe does exist within a transcendent context, there is no reason this should be a context of meaning, or one in which human life has an overall purpose. All this is possible, but *possibility is cheap*.”¹⁶

¹¹ Tartaglia (2016a), pp. 22-23.

¹² Ibid., p. 48.

¹³ Ibid., pp. 10-11, 85-86.

¹⁴ Ibid., p. 2.

¹⁵ Ibid., p. 2.

¹⁶ Ibid., p. 52 (emphasis in original).

Despite its negative connotations, Tartaglia adopts “nihilism” as the name for his view that human life is meaningless.¹⁷ Contrary to some nihilists, Tartaglia does not deny that there are values or objective truths. In fact, he claims that existential nihilism is an objective truth.¹⁸

Within the social framework, people pursue various goals such as to graduate from college, get married, and have children, but these goals are nothing more than “socially constructed impositions upon life . . . ,” Tartaglia argues.¹⁹ Although our goals can seem like absolute imperatives, when we step outside of the social framework, we see that every human goal is “optional and ultimately pointless,” according to Tartaglia.²⁰

Tartaglia expresses admiration for the religious-based way in which John Cottingham and Joshua Seachris have analyzed questions about life’s meaning.²¹ In contrast, Tartaglia does not discuss the characteristics of his envisioned “transcendent context of meaning” or use the words “God” or “transcendent being.” Rather, he tries to distance his view from theistic accounts of transcendence. For example, he argues, “there is no need to associate transcendence with religious meaning”²²

The transcendent context of meaning, as imagined by Tartaglia, has the ability to create the universe and human life *for a purpose*. To have this ability, it would be necessary for the “transcendent context of meaning” to think, plan, and have a goal(s). Thus, although Tartaglia does not mention “God” or a “transcendent being,” I will sometimes refer to his envisioned “transcendent context of meaning” as a “transcendent being.”

Tartaglia’s argument that life is meaningless, in the absence of a transcendent context of meaning, is similar to the argument made by some theists, such as William Lane Craig, who contend that life without God would be meaningless.²³ However, unlike Craig, Tartaglia does not think that nihilism is “bad.”²⁴ He thinks it is just a “neutral fact.”²⁵ Tartaglia is adamant that nihilism will not lead

¹⁷ Ibid., pp. 6-7.

¹⁸ Ibid., pp. 57-60.

¹⁹ Ibid., p. 23.

²⁰ Ibid., p. 27.

²¹ Ibid., on p. 19, Tartaglia discusses Cottingham (2003) and Seachris (2013a).

²² Ibid., p. 170.

²³ See Craig (2000).

²⁴ Tartaglia (2016a), pp. 5-6. Another difference between the views of Tartaglia and Craig is that Craig maintains that God and personal immortality are both necessary for life to be meaningful. Tartaglia does not discuss personal immortality.

²⁵ Ibid., p. ix.

us to give up on, or care less about, our projects, activities, and relationships because when we realize there is no purpose of life, we will then step back into the social framework and reengage with our goals.²⁶

3. Why Transcendence is Unnecessary for Humanity to be Meaningful

Tartaglia argues that the famous question, “What is the meaning of life?” boils down to the question “[W]hat are we here for?”²⁷ I disagree. This latter question is too narrowly focused to serve as a guide in our search for a meaning of life. As philosophers have long recognized, there is an *amalgam* of questions about meaning of life, including the question “What makes life valuable?”²⁸ This latter question holds out the possibility that human life could be meaningful and valuable regardless of whether it was created for a purpose.

The universe does not exist for a purpose and, therefore, human life does not exist within a wider, context of meaning, Tartaglia contends. Tartaglia uses the phrase “context of meaning,” in an *overly narrow* way, to mean a context that has a purpose. As I will argue, the universe provides human life with a context of meaning despite whether the universe was created for a purpose or is inherently purposeful.

By comparing the universe to other contexts that would be unsupportive of leading meaningful lives, as I will do, it becomes clear that the universe provides human life with a context of meaning. There are different ways that a context could be unsupportive of human flourishing. First, there might be a zero probability that intelligent life would originate in the context. Second, the context might be habitable to intelligent life, but the nature of that context might prevent one from engaging in meaning-conferring activities. For example, the species might have to spend all of its time searching for food and shelter and have no time left for meaningful activities. Alternatively, the species might have time to create things of value, such as artwork, but these things might disintegrate as soon as they are created.

We naturally emerged in this universe and it unknowingly nourishes and sustains us. Although the things we create do not last forever, they generally last

²⁶ Ibid., pp. 43, 175. In contrast, Kahane (2016) argues that belief in nihilism would have detrimental consequences.

²⁷ Ibid., pp. 1-2.

²⁸ See, for example, Hepburn (2000), pp. 261-276. For more discussion about the “amalgam thesis,” see Seachris (2013b), pp. 9-10.

long enough for them to enrich our lives. The universe has given rise to some intrinsically valuable goods. Goods often mentioned by objectivists include knowledge, autonomy, loving relationships, achievements, and excellence. By pursuing and promoting these and other goods, it adds meaning to our lives, and does so regardless of whether there is a transcendent context of meaning.

Early in his book, Tartaglia argues that a transcendent context of meaning is necessary for life to be meaningful. Later, he adds a new requirement - that this transcendent context of meaning be a “final context,” which is a context that “does not depend for its existence upon another, wider context.”²⁹ He contends that this is not an overly strong requirement. Unless the context is final, we could disengage from a purpose for which life was created, which would make it merely an optional pursuit within life instead of something that is constitutive of life, according to Tartaglia. He indicates that the purpose “would have to be something that determines the significance of our behaviour whether we like it or not . . . it would be like a game we could not stop playing.”³⁰

Under these conditions, it becomes difficult to see how we could have free will. Even if the purpose was not worth our efforts or evil, we *could not stop* implementing it.

If the purpose would have to “determine the significance” of our behavior, as Tartaglia indicates, does this mean that we could not make any decisions on our own? Alternatively, does it mean that we could make some decisions, but that these decisions could be overridden? For example, if you want to spend time with a loved one, could the purpose or transcendent being override your decision and force you to do something else instead? As Robert Nozick indicated, “Without free will we seem diminished, merely the playthings of external causes. Our value seems undercut.”³¹

Kurt Baier, in a well-known lecture, argued that having a purpose imposed upon us by a superior being would be degrading. He writes, “If . . . I ask a man . . . ‘What is your purpose?’ I am insulting him. I might as well have asked, ‘What are you *for*?’ Such questions reduce him to the level of a gadget, a domestic animal, or perhaps a slave.”³² In response, Metz has argued that it would not necessarily be disrespectful for God to have assigned human life a purpose.³³ If God assigned

²⁹ Tartaglia (2016a), p. 49.

³⁰ Ibid., p. 49.

³¹ Nozick (1981), p. 2. See also discussion by Fischer (2005).

³² Baier (2000), p. 120.

³³ Metz (2000), pp. 297-300 and (2013), pp. 102-103.

the purpose as a request rather than a command, then this need not be degrading. I believe this is correct. However, having a purpose imposed upon us in the controlling way that Tartaglia envisions would be degrading.

Tartaglia compares a meaning of life to the possibility of achieving checkmate in chess. He seems disappointed that human life does not have a purpose, as does a game of chess. Under the conditions that Tartaglia claims are necessary for life to be meaningful, human beings would be like the pawns in the game of chess. Even if we achieved the purpose for which we were created, because our actions were predetermined, or at least heavily influenced, this achievement would not be *our own*. Rather, it would be an achievement *by the transcendent being*.

Some people feel threatened by the thought that life arose through chance. For example, Craig argues that, if the universe and humanity arose through chance, “Man is just a lump of slime that evolved into rationality.”³⁴ If life originated by chance, this suggests that life was *unintended* and that it was *contingent*, meaning that there was a possibility it might never have come into existence. Craig and Tartaglia falsely assume that being created for a purpose by a transcendent being is the only way that humanity could be meaningful. There is, however, *another pathway* by which humanity could be meaningful. By engaging with the intrinsically valuable goods in the universe, it adds meaning to our individual lives, which in turn adds meaning to humanity.

Tartaglia acknowledges that our individual lives are “contingently valuable.” He writes, “For although our nature is not intrinsically valuable, we value many things, including ourselves. We might not have done so, so this value is not essential to what we are, or to the other things we value.”³⁵ He laments that value “does not flow inevitably from our nature”³⁶ Tartaglia assumes that if there were a transcendent context of meaning, and if this context explained why we exist, that this would somehow make human life inevitably valuable. However, this is a false assumption because even if human life were created for a worthy purpose by a transcendent being, human life would still be contingently valuable because the transcendent being *could have decided not to create us*.³⁷

Why do some people want human life to have been inevitable? They think that being inevitable would make life valuable, but this is not necessarily true.

³⁴ Craig (2000), p. 45. Tartaglia (2016a) discusses contingency on p. 50.

³⁵ Tartaglia (2016a), p. 6.

³⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 6.

³⁷ For earlier discussion about contingency, see Trisel (2012b) and Metz (2013), pp. 83-84. Seachris (2013a, p. 609) acknowledges that humanity is contingent from the perspective of Christianity.

Consider, for example, bedbugs – an insect that feeds on blood. Even if the universe was non-contingent, such as being infinitely old, and it was inevitable that bedbugs would arise in this universe, bedbugs would still not be valuable.

Early in his book, Tartaglia asserts that the hypothesis of a transcendent meaning is “worthy of faith,”³⁸ but later he discards this hypothesis because it is too remote of a possibility to be taken seriously.³⁹ There is an additional reason to reject the hypothesis that humanity was created by a transcendent being to “do something.” If humanity had been created to carry out a purpose, our role would have been revealed to us long ago. It would be self-defeating for a transcendent being to give humanity a role in carrying out a purpose, but then not reveal our role to us.⁴⁰ This would be like a person creating a business and hiring workers, but then failing to tell them the mission of the business and their role. It is the stuff of comedy to imagine these workers being bored to tears, while the business owner sobs loudly after learning that the business is losing money. Of course, no competent owner of a business would fail to tell the workers what they were hired “to do” because failing to provide this essential information would be *self-defeating*.

To sum up this section, the universe provides human life with a context of meaning by having given rise to intelligent life, by unknowingly sustaining us, and by containing intrinsically valuable goods. By engaging with these goods, it adds meaning to our individual lives and to humanity. This outcome occurs regardless of whether the universe and humanity were created for a purpose by a transcendent context of meaning. Not only is a transcendent purpose unnecessary for our lives to be meaningful, the one envisioned by Tartaglia would be degrading.

In response, Tartaglia will likely argue that I have not addressed the questions about “meaning of life,” but have only shown that our individual lives can be meaningful - something he does not dispute. Tartaglia wants us to focus on the question “What is the meaning of life?” where “life” refers to “humanity.” But to know whether humanity is, or can be, meaningful, we *must first* answer the fundamental question of “What is humanity?” The answer to this question might seem obvious, which likely explains why the question has not been explored. However, as I hope to show in the next section, the answer to this question is not obvious, and is one of the keys for unlocking the mystery of whether human life

³⁸ Tartaglia (2016a), p. 53.

³⁹ Ibid., pp. 169-184.

⁴⁰ I provide a more detailed version of this argument in Trisel (2012a).

is, or can be, meaningful.

4. What is Humanity? – Holism versus Individualism

Bertrand Russell made a distinction between a class *as a whole* and a class *as many*. For example, we can think of a navy as a whole or as many sailors, as he indicated.⁴¹ As I will argue, we can also think of “humanity” as one or many. More specifically, Tartaglia (and most other people I suspect) thinks of humanity *as a whole* - a perspective I will refer to as *holism*. We can also conceive of humanity as the *many, individual human beings* that make up the whole – a perspective I will refer to as *individualism*.

Before exploring the question “What is humanity?” it will be helpful to start with a discussion of a group that is easier to understand – the New York Yankees (hereafter “Yankees”). If we imagine we are watching a Yankees baseball game, we see the individual players, bats, and ball. It is uncontroversial that these concrete objects exist. But does the Yankees, *as a group*, also exist?⁴² Some proponents of *ontological individualism* deny that groups exist.⁴³ Thus, they will deny that the Yankees, as a group, won the World Series in 2009.

Many philosophers believe in the reality of groups. Even if we assume that the Yankees, *as a group*, exist, there are two different ways of explaining their achievement of winning the World Series. *Methodological holists* will argue that this group achievement was *more than* the sum of the achievements by the individual players because of the synergistic effects of the players working together. In contrast, proponents of *methodological individualism* will maintain that this achievement was nothing more than the sum of the individual achievements.

Individuals can have rights, be blameworthy or praiseworthy, and be bearers of meaning. Can *groups* do the same? There has been extensive analysis of whether groups can have rights and be blameworthy, but there has been very little discussion about whether groups can be praiseworthy and meaningful.

Do human beings constitute a group? If so, what type of group is it? Katherine

⁴¹ Russell (1903), p. 68. Ritchie (2013, p. 258) makes the case that a group, like a class, can be thought of as one or many.

⁴² For further discussion, see Ritchie (2013) .

⁴³ Other proponents of ontological individualism acknowledge that groups exist, but maintain that groups and other social phenomena are exhaustively determined by properties or facts about individuals.

Ritchie outlines various criteria for determining what qualifies as a “social group.”⁴⁴ Some of these criteria include that a social group can be located in space and time and have different members at different times. Because other objects, such as trees, also meet most of the criteria she specifies, Ritchie adds the requirement that the members *intended* to form the group. In a later article, Ritchie distinguishes between “organized” and “unorganized” social groups. Whereas the members of organized social groups, such as committees, need to cooperate to achieve the goal(s) of the group, the members of unorganized social groups, such as racial and gender groups, “do not need to intend to cooperate or act in concord with other members of the group.”⁴⁵

One might try to argue that all human beings have shared intentions and, therefore, qualify as an “organized social group.” This argument, however, would be a stretch. Unlike the members of organized social groups, not all human beings have a shared goal. Indeed, some people have conflicting goals.

It seems plausible that human beings constitute an “unorganized social group.” Another option would be to conceive of human beings in the same way as biologists - as a species. But this might not get us very far in understanding the ontology of humanity because it leads to another, unresolved question: “What is a species and how do you distinguish one species from another?”⁴⁶ Because there is vigorous debate about the ontological status of social groups and species, more work will be needed to determine whether human beings make up a group and, if so, what type of group it is. I raise these questions about the ontology of humanity, and hope others will join me in exploring them, because addressing these questions is necessary for understanding whether it makes sense to think that humanity could be meaningful. In what follows, I will assume that human beings are an “unorganized social group” and that such a group can be a bearer of meaning.

Targalia thinks of a meaning of life as a meaning that is *possessed* by humanity, *as a whole*.⁴⁷ If we think of “humanity,” not in the traditional holistic way, but as the *many individuals* that comprise the group, it reveals a different way that humanity could become meaningful. As I will argue, when *individuals* accrue meaning in their lives, by, for example, making intellectual or moral

⁴⁴ Ritchie (2013), pp. 258-260.

⁴⁵ Ritchie (2015), pp. 313-314.

⁴⁶ For further discussion about this question, see Ereshefsky (2016).

⁴⁷ Targalia (2016a), p. 54.

achievements, this also adds meaning to humanity. As more individual lives become meaningful, there is a corresponding increase in the meaning of human life. Irving Singer made a few comments suggesting that he also believed that humanity could become meaningful through the efforts of individual human beings. He writes: “To the extent that life becomes meaningful in this accumulative way, its total meaning is increased.”⁴⁸ The two perspectives of how humanity could be meaningful are as follows.

Meaning of Life – Holism: A meaning of life is a meaning *possessed* by humanity, *as a group*, rather than by individual human beings.

Meaning of Life – Individualism: A meaning of life is a meaning that humanity *accrues* as individual human beings engage with intrinsically valuable goods. This meaning is *equal to* the sum of the meaning in the lives of individual human beings.

There could be holistic or individualistic versions of supernaturalism⁴⁹ and naturalism. For example, with the traditional view of *supernaturalistic holism* (as I will call it), God assigns the *same* purpose(s) to *everyone*. In contrast, Jacob Affolter suggests that God could assign each person a unique purpose.⁵⁰ He does not argue that these unique purposes need to be related. Affolter’s view exemplifies *supernaturalistic individualism*.

In the next section, I will seek to support a naturalistic and individualistic account of meaning of life, which I will call “*naturalistic individualism*.” Before doing so, I will point out some problems that arise with Tartaglia’s version of supernaturalistic holism. According to Tartaglia, “if you ask about the meaning of life, the answer will apply to everybody”⁵¹ When thinking about whether humanity was created for a purpose, we must keep in mind that “humanity” is not something that exists independently of human beings. Rather, humanity is comprised of individual human beings. Furthermore, the members of humanity are not static, but change over time, as new human beings are born and existing human beings die. With this in mind, suppose that a transcendent being created

⁴⁸ Singer (1996), p. 42. See also pp. 44-45.

⁴⁹ For more discussion about supernaturalism, see Metz (2013), pp. 77-118.

⁵⁰ Affolter (2007), p. 453.

⁵¹ Tartaglia (2015), p. 93. See also (2016a), p. 7.

the universe and wanted to see if intelligent life could be created from matter. The transcendent being successfully created the first two human beings – a man and a woman. Let us also suppose that these two individuals were not created to “do something” and that the transcendent being was indifferent to whether they had children. These two individuals lived for 60 years and had many children who, in turn, had additional offspring. After 200,000 years, humanity consisted of seven billion people, let us suppose. To state it formally:

At t_1 , humanity was comprised of two members who were created for a purpose by a transcendent being.

At $t_{200,000}$, humanity was comprised of seven billion members who were not created for a purpose by a transcendent being.

Tartaglia claims that whether human life is meaningful will apply to “everybody,” but in the above scenario, where only the first two members of humanity were created for a purpose by a transcendent being, it is unclear that this is true. Is humanity, *as a whole*, meaningful or meaningless in this scenario? It would be helpful if Tartaglia would let us know the answer to this question.

In the following different scenario, suppose that a transcendent being created *all* human beings to “do something.” Suppose also that this transcendent being made our role clear to us, but that only 20% of people contributed toward implementing the purpose. The remaining 80% of human beings disregarded the purpose and spent all their time watching television. In this scenario, where only 20% of people contribute, is humanity meaningful or meaningless? If humanity is meaningless, what level of participation by human beings would be required for humanity to be meaningful? Would 51% of human beings have to contribute to the purpose or would the percentage have to be 80% or 100%? *Where do you draw the line* and how do you defend, *in a non-arbitrary way*, where it is drawn?

At first, the holistic account might seem appealing because of its simplicity at conceiving of human life, as a whole, as either *possessing* or *lacking* meaning. However, as shown by the preceding thought experiment, this simplicity quickly disappears as we think more deeply about what humanity is and how human beings, with our freedom and diverse interests, would carry out an assigned purpose. Tartaglia might respond that the above situation would not happen because human beings would be unable to disengage from the purpose (in the

scenario he envisions). But if our actions are predetermined, or everyone is forced to implement this purpose, it then becomes difficult to see how this would confer meaning on humanity.

5. Researching Meaning of Life from the Bottom-up

In discussing “What is philosophy?” Tartaglia contends that philosophy was originally motivated by questions of ontology and enframement; “we wanted to know what exists and why it exists.”⁵² He uses the word “enframement” to mean being situated within a context of meaning. In recounting the history of philosophy, Tartaglia argues that to determine whether there is a meaning of life, “a natural place to start is with the ontological question of whether there are any gods to provide a wider framework within which human life exists.”⁵³

This “top-down” approach, as I will call it, to researching questions about meaning of life has proven to be unsuccessful. For thousands of years, there has been speculation and discussion about gods and transcendence, yet human beings have made little progress in understanding the questions about meaning of life. Instead of continuing the top-down approach to researching the topic of meaning of life, we would be better served with a new, *bottom-up* approach.

From the perspective of naturalistic individualism, the *source of life’s meaning* is not a supernatural being, but the interaction between individual human beings and intrinsically valuable, natural goods. By explaining what gives meaning to the life of a person, the philosophical and psychological research that has been conducted during the last thirty years provides a good starting point for a bottom-up approach to researching meaning of life. Besides continuing this research on “meaning in life,” an additional necessary step for a bottom-up approach would be to determine whether the meaning that we accrue in our individual lives can serve as a foundation for making humanity meaningful, as I hypothesize.

With naturalistic individualism, the extent to which humanity is meaningful equals the sum of the meaning in the lives of individual human beings. For this proposed account to be plausible, (1) meaning must be *measurable*; (2) meaning must be *comparable* among individuals; (3) human beings must constitute a *group*; and (4) this type of group must be capable of being a *bearer of meaning*.

If meaning cannot be measured, then of course it cannot be aggregated. If

⁵² Tartaglia (2016a), p. 71.

⁵³ Ibid., p. 71.

meaning is measurable, but not comparable among individuals, then it could be aggregated, but the aggregate number would be unintelligible - it would be like adding apples and oranges. Finally, if meaning is measurable and comparable, but human beings do not make up a group, or are a group but this group is not a bearer of meaning, then the aggregate number would not represent the extent to which humanity is meaningful. Rather, it would simply be the sum of the meaning in our individual lives. Similarly, if there are no “nations” in this world, but only persons, it would be inappropriate to conclude that the sum of the wealth of persons in a particular geographic area reflects the wealth of a given “nation.”

There is debate about which metric(s) we should use to assess the quality of our lives. Recently, researchers have begun to measure “subjective well-being” in addition to, or sometimes instead of, happiness. For example, although the *World Happiness Report* contains happiness in the title, it is a report about “subjective well-being,” as the report acknowledges. The report compares the degree of subjective well-being by country.⁵⁴ In this study, the primary question to measure well-being is as follows. Imagine a ladder with 10 possible steps, with the bottom step representing the worst possible life for you and the top step representing the best possible life for you. “On which step of the ladder would you say you personally feel you stand at this time?”⁵⁵

The data source for this “life ladder” question is the Gallup World Poll. Gallup conducts this poll in more than 160 countries that include 99% of the world’s adult population. They select a representative sample of about 1,000 individuals from each country so that the results will be generalizable to the various countries.

Amitai Etzioni argues that happiness and subjective well-being are inferior measures because they fail to take into account whether people are living up to their moral responsibilities.⁵⁶ In response, Metz makes the case that meaningfulness should be included as one of the metrics for appraising a society because it is not reducible to happiness or morality.⁵⁷ But is meaningfulness something that we can measure and compare?

To reflect on the preceding question, it might be helpful to list the different aspects that are involved in measuring subjective well-being, as I will do in the

⁵⁴ See Helliwell (2015), p. 26.

⁵⁵ A discussion of the survey methodology can be found in the “Statistical Appendix” at <<http://worldhappiness.report/ed/2015/>> or at <<http://www.gallup.com/178667/gallup-world-poll-work.aspx>>.

⁵⁶ Etzioni (2016).

⁵⁷ Metz (2016b).

table below, and then to think about these aspects as they relate to meaningfulness. First, we can ask, “Who is being evaluated?” With the Gallup World Poll, those being evaluated include the respondents to the survey and each country. Although Gallup conducts the interviews, the respondents *rate their own* subjective well-being. Thus, these are internal or self-evaluations of well-being, rather than an external evaluation of the participants in the study.⁵⁸ If Gallup were to ask the question, “Is your life going well?” this question would have only two possible answers: “yes” and “no.” It would be a binary variable. Rather, their “life ladder” question reflects the assumption that there are degrees of well-being. Thus, they treat well-being as an ordinal variable.

Aspects of Measuring Subjective Well-Being	
Who is Being Evaluated?	Individual Respondents to the Survey and the Countries in Which They Reside
Who Performs the Evaluation?	Self-Evaluation
Type of Measure	Subjective
Is the Measure Binary or Ordinal?	“Life ladder” question is ordinal

Measuring meaningfulness is more controversial than measuring happiness or subjective well-being. There is debate about what meaning is, whether it is objective or subjective, and whether meaning is something that is present or absent or whether there are degrees of meaningfulness. There is also debate about how meaningfulness should be measured, namely whether it should be measured internally or externally.

Metz, with his “fundamentality theory,” hypothesizes that one’s life is more meaningful, the more that one orients one’s rationality toward fundamental conditions of human existence.⁵⁹ Some critics of this theory, including Masahiro Morioka, deny that there are degrees of meaningfulness and that it is possible to make interpersonal comparisons of meaning. Morioka has proposed an internalist account of meaning in life. He argues that the question about meaning in life is often asked in the following way, “does my life like this have any meaning at

⁵⁸ See Helliwell (2015, pp. 17-20) for discussion about why they measure well-being internally rather than externally.

⁵⁹ Metz (2013).

all?”⁶⁰ He contends that this question has only two possible responses (“yes” and “no”) and can be answered only by the person who asks the question.

Even if meaning is binary and not objective, it would still be possible to make some interpersonal comparisons of meaningfulness. For example, one could calculate the number and percent of people living in a country *who self-report* that their lives are meaningful. However, because these individuals might have different conceptions of “meaningfulness,” these results would be less useful, from a policymaking perspective, than they would be if meaning were objective.

If we knew whether meaning was objective (as I believe) or subjective, it would help to determine how we should measure meaningfulness. For example, if meaning is purely subjective, then the person being evaluated would be in the best position to know whether his or her life is meaningful. Alternatively, if meaning is objective, then one could be mistaken about whether one’s life is meaningful. Consequently, this would lend support to those philosophers who think meaningfulness should be measured using mind-independent, external standards.

Tartaglia argues that there are four different notions of “meaning” and that meaningfulness is culturally specific.⁶¹ Unless there is a way of resolving these disputes about the nature of “meaning,” this will pose a serious threat to the prospect of measuring meaningfulness. Because we are at an early stage of analyzing what it means to say that a person’s life is meaningful, I remain hopeful that we will be able to work through these issues.

If it turns out that meaning is objective, measurable, and comparable among individuals, then it would be possible to aggregate this meaning and to have confidence that the aggregate number is intelligible. Moreover, if human beings constitute an “unorganized social group,” and this type of group can be a bearer of meaning, then the sum of the meaning in our individual lives would represent the extent to which humanity is meaningful.

One way that critics will challenge these claims is by attempting to raise doubt that an “unorganized social group” could be meaningful. That human beings constitute an unorganized social group does not mean there is no cooperation among human beings. Rather, it only means that *not all members* of humanity have a shared goal. However, *many* human beings do have shared goals, such as the teams of scientists who are researching a cure for cancer. Let us compare two

⁶⁰ Morioka (2015), p. 55.

⁶¹ Tartaglia (2015), pp. 103-106. See also Tartaglia (2016a), p. 14.

scenarios. The first scenario reflects the current state of our lives. The second scenario reflects our current lives with the following changes: human beings have discovered how life originated, have attained an understanding of how consciousness arises in human beings, and have recently discovered a cure for all types of cancer. Even if human beings are an “unorganized social group,” it seems to make sense to say that humanity is more meaningful in the second scenario than in the first.

I suspect that Tartaglia will be unconvinced that accruing meaning in our individual lives can provide a foundation for making humanity meaningful. He will likely maintain that humanity is meaningless no matter what we do in our lives. Tartaglia’s claim that humanity is meaningless is based on the hidden assumption that human beings make up a group and that this group *had the potential* to be meaningful (if it had been created for a purpose by a transcendent being). If human beings do not make up a group that has the potential to be meaningful, then claiming that “humanity” is “meaningful” or “meaningless” would be *nonsensical*. Furthermore, under these conditions, it would be irrational for anyone to worry that “humanity” is meaningless.

Let us now return to discussing naturalistic individualism. I will conclude this section by responding to a potential, different criticism of this proposed account of meaning of life. One might argue that this account implies that we *should maximize* the meaning of human life. This account leads, a critic will argue, to the counterintuitive conclusion that we should create billions upon billions of future people, even if their lives would only have a tiny amount of meaning in them. Because the meaning of human life is an aggregation of the meaning in the lives of human beings, creating vast numbers of new human beings would make humanity much more meaningful than it currently is. However, this conclusion is *repugnant* because the lives of these new persons might only have a negligible amount of meaning in them.⁶²

The universe, as a context of meaning, unknowingly supports our desire to lead meaningful lives, but this support will collapse if we create too many people.

⁶² See Parfit (1984) for the original formulation of the “Repugnant Conclusion.” He begins by stating the “Impersonal Average Principle,” which is, “If other things are equal, the best outcome is the one in which people’s lives go, on average, best” (p. 386). He then considers a Hedonistic and a non-Hedonistic version of this principle. He expresses the non-Hedonistic version in terms of maximizing “the quality of lives.” In contrast, I discuss maximizing the meaning in our lives. The concept of a “quality life” is more encompassing than that of a “meaningful life,” and takes into account a number of factors including the amount of meaning and happiness in that life.

Creating vast numbers of new people might make humanity more meaningful *in the short run*, but it would have counterproductive and devastating long-term consequences. It would deplete and overwhelm the biosphere and likely result in the extinction of humanity and many other forms of life. Thus, if we were to pursue the goal of maximizing the meaning of human life, it would need to be balanced against the goal of preserving the biosphere.

There is an alternative, better way of making humanity more meaningful that does not involve creating vast numbers of future people. By supporting and encouraging *existing* human beings to engage with intrinsically valuable goods, it can help them to realize their potential and lead meaningful lives, which in turn will enhance the meaning of human life.

6. Conclusion

Because the topic of “meaning *of* life,” in recent years, has been overshadowed by discussion about “meaning *in* life,” I found it refreshing to read Tartaglia’s works. I disagree, however, with his top-down and narrow approach for researching the topic of meaning of life and with his conclusion that human life is meaningless. Like Tartaglia, I do not think that life was created for a purpose. However, lacking an assigned purpose would not necessarily render human life meaningless because there is at least one other way that human life could become meaningful.

I have pointed out two conceptions of humanity, one that focuses on the group, as a whole, and one that focuses on the “many human beings” that comprise the group. By conceiving of humanity in the individualistic way, and combining this individualism with objective naturalism, it reveals a pathway by which humanity could become meaningful. It is through the *efforts of individuals* that a sports team, university, nation, or other group is successful. Similarly, it is through the efforts of individuals that humanity could become meaningful.

Finally, I have responded to Tartaglia’s claim that the research on “meaning in life” is trivial by explaining how this research is related to understanding how humanity could become meaningful. This research is important not only for explaining what gives meaning to the life of a person, but for the larger reason of explaining what we, as individuals, can do to make humanity meaningful.

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