

BETWEEN THE SPECIES

Living like a Dog: Can the Life of Non-Human Animals Be Meaningful?

ABSTRACT

Abstract: Most philosophers addressing the issue of meaning in life seem to think that non-human animals cannot have a meaningful life because only humans have what it takes to do so. In this paper, I discuss three prominent philosophical theories of meaning in life, all of which implicitly or explicitly deny non-human animals the possibility of living a meaningful life. I will argue that none of them is convincing and that we should embrace a more comprehensive and inclusive understanding of meaning in life that allows for non-human lives to be meaningful and, in their own right, worth living.

MICHAEL HAUSKELLER
University of Liverpool

Volume 23, Issue 1

Winter 2019

<http://digitalcommons.calpoly.edu/bts/>

MICHAEL HAUSKELLER

This one is for Lottie

“If there is no God,” William Lane Craig once remarked (Craig 1994, 45), “then our life is not qualitatively different from that of a dog,” by which he meant to say that it would be completely meaningless and have no value whatsoever. Whether Craig is right about God is a question I am not going to discuss here. Instead, what I shall focus on is whether he is right about *dogs*.

Clearly, Craig’s dog is a proxy for all non-human animals. There can be little doubt that non-human animals are capable of having good lives, just as much as humans are, although what makes life good for them may be different from what makes life good for us (Hauskeller 2018). However, can they also have *meaningful* lives? Most philosophers addressing the issue of meaning in life seem to think that they cannot and that only humans have what it takes to live a meaningful life (two recent exceptions are Purves & Delon (2018) and Thomas (2018)). Accordingly, the life of people who are believed to live a meaningless life is frequently compared to the life of animals: it is, supposedly, repetitive, without sense of time, not creative, not aspiring to anything higher, unreflected, dedicated to the pursuit of the lower pleasures, and revolving around the most basic (or basest) interests. For many philosophers writing about meaning in life, the life of non-human animals, or more precisely what we imagine such an animal’s life to be like, is the perfect foil to the meaningful life that humans are expected to aspire to. Thus Thaddeus Metz claims that we find meaning in life precisely by transcending our animal nature and connecting to goods that lie *beyond* what we share with other, “lower” animals. What we share is being alive, having a healthy body, exercising one’s perceptual capacities, and experiencing plea-

MICHAEL HAUSKELLER

sure, none of which is fit “to make one’s existence significant.” A meaningful life is one that “merits great esteem or admiration” because of that life’s bearer’s “sophisticated contouring” of their “rational faculties toward fundamental conditions of human life,” which is not possible for non-human, and that means essentially non-rational, animals (Metz 2013, 29).

In the following, I shall look into the assumption that is tacitly being made here: that the life of a non-human animal cannot be meaningful; I will discuss some of the justifications given for it, its apparent implications, and its plausibility.

What do we mean when we talk about meaning?

So what exactly are we talking about when we talk about meaning in this context? On the face of it, lives, be they human or non-human, do not seem to be the kind of things that can have meaning. Only things that are *about* other things can have meaning. This sentence, for instance, has a meaning. When I say “this sentence has a meaning,” what I mean is that the sentence “this sentence has a meaning” has a meaning. The meaning of the sentence “this sentence has a meaning” is that the sentence “this sentence has a meaning” has a meaning. My life, on the other hand, has no meaning, or if it does, its meaning appears to be different from that of a sentence. A sentence has a meaning because it *says* something, and because it does it can be read and understood and should be read and understood in a certain way. My life does not say anything, it just is, which is why it should not be read and understood in a certain way. Indeed, it cannot be read and understood at all (even though I may feel tempted to do so anyway). In that sense at least, sentences can have meaning, while lives cannot.

MICHAEL HAUSKELLER

Yet it is also clear that, for us, lives can very well be meaningful or meaningless, or more or less so. We know this because we feel it, or more precisely because we feel *something* that we try to capture with the word “meaning.” Before all else, what we call meaning in life is an *experiential* reality, and we are most keenly aware of that reality when it is absent: when our own life, or that of somebody else, appears to be devoid of meaning. That experiential reality can be expressed in different ways. A life that appears “meaningless” is a life that is lived without conviction, in which the things we do seem to have no point. It is a pointless life that, we feel, makes no difference, that is inconsequential, a life that does not matter or matters so little that it could just as well not be lived, just as a meaningless sentence is one that could just as well not be said or written. It is an empty, purposeless life, one that is felt to provide us with no good reason to live it, a life that appears, ultimately and all things considered, not worth living. (Philosophers like to make distinctions, and they are right to do so. However, our actual experience does only rarely adhere to the neat distinctions we make. Here, distinctions are often blurred. Thus, although it may well be possible to distinguish sharply between the pointless, the indifferent, the inconsequential, the purposeless, the meaningless, and the not-worth-living, in reality they often blend into each other.)

If a life is felt, by the one who lives it, to be meaningless in that comprehensive sense, their life can reasonably be expected to not only be meaningless (to them), but also unhappy. It would be difficult to understand somebody who told us that they find their life not worth living, but that they are nonetheless very happy. That they find their life not worth living is an *expression* of their unhappiness or the particular form it assumes. In other words, at least part of what they *mean* when

MICHAEL HAUSKELLER

they say that they feel their life is not worth living is that they are unhappy with the way their life is going. We can of course be unhappy for other reasons than that we find our life meaningless. We can for instance be unhappy because we are poor and find it difficult to make ends meet, or because we are ill and hurting, or because we face problems in our life that we do not know how to overcome. But we can *also* be unhappy, and indeed profoundly unhappy, *despite* being healthy, not having to worry about money, and having no real problems in life, for the sole reason that we do not see a point in living, or at any rate in *our* way of living. Sometimes we are unhappy because we encounter obstacles on our chosen life path, and sometimes we are unhappy because we feel that there is something wrong with the life path that we have chosen (or that has been chosen for us). And there are indeed lives or ways of living one's life that strike us as not particularly meaningful, for instance when we spend most of our life doing things that we do not really care about just to make enough money to survive and to be able to continue doing those things, or when we spend our life doing things that we believe we *do* care about, but that seem to be not really *worth* caring about, like collecting bottle caps or watching trains and writing down the numbers of the engines. Yet then again, even if we spend our lives in pursuit of something that is commonly regarded as meaningful, such as helping other people, or creating great art, or making scientific discoveries that allow humanity to advance in some way, or any of the other things that are commonly associated with the idea of a "meaningful life," we can still reach a point where we wonder what, ultimately, all this is good for. Sometimes, even the things that are generally agreed to have a point can appear quite pointless to us.

MICHAEL HAUSKELLER

So where does this leave us? We have seen, or so I have argued, that the question of meaning in life arises mostly when said meaning is felt to be missing, and when it is felt to be missing, we are unhappy. A life felt to be meaningless is an unhappy life, although not every unhappy life must also be felt to be meaningless, since sometimes we are unhappy for other reasons than a perceived lack of meaning. However, what we have not ruled out yet is the possibility that someone may lead a happy, but meaningless life, which would only be an option if we can mistakenly feel that our life is meaningful, while in fact it is not. That this is possible is suggested by (usually imagined and therefore not very reliable) cases where a person is extremely happy doing something that most of us (those of us with more lofty ambitions) find utterly trivial and insignificant. It is difficult to see a life as worth living that is, for instance, spent mostly watching daytime soaps requiring a minimum of higher brain activity, even if enjoyed thoroughly. But then again, it is also difficult to imagine a person with normal human capacities actually being *happy* doing this and not much else in their life. If we actually found somebody who appeared completely happy watching soaps all day, every day, we could not but wonder how this was possible: how *anyone* can be happy living their life like *that*. Yet if they really are happy, then we should expect that they also see some point in what they are doing, and if they do not, then they are unlikely to be happy. Just like we cannot be truly happy if we think that our life is pointless and not really worth living, we cannot think of our life as pointless and not worth living if we are happy. A happy life is always meaningful for the one who lives it. Only if we look at it from the *outside* and privilege the third-person perspective over the first-person perspective can we doubt that what appears to be meaningful to someone really *is* meaningful. That happens when we fail to see the point in what they appear to

see a point in doing. While *they* may find their life worth living, we do not. We feel and think that we would not want to live our life like that and perhaps also that people should not live their life like that.

Susan Wolf's Fitting-Fulfilment Theory of Meaning

It is this intuition that has led several philosophers, most notably Susan Wolf, to surmise that happiness or subjective fulfilment is not sufficient to make a life meaningful. Something else is needed, a connection to something that lies outside of us. If you love doing something that is not really *worth* doing or at any rate not really worth *loving*, Wolf has argued, then doing it does not make your life meaningful. It may well be true that without love (for something that lies outside of ourselves), or more precisely the active engagement with something that we love, or that we love engaging with, our lives lack meaning, but Wolf insists that love is only necessary, but not sufficient. There are some things we do out of love that we should not really be doing at all. In those cases our love is misplaced. We love something that we should not love, see value in something that in fact does not have any value, or at any rate not as much value as we think it has. Meaningful is our loving engagement only if what we engage with deserves the love and attention that we bestow on it. Meaning, Wolf claims, “arises from loving objects worthy of love and engaging with them in a positive way” (2012, 8). Meaning in life is thus neither purely subjective nor purely objective. In order for there to be meaning in our lives, the subjective (love, appreciation, and the peculiar fulfilment that results from our active engagement with what we love) and the objective (that what we love is actually worthy of being loved) need to come together. Meaning “arises when subjective attraction meets objective attractiveness” (Wolf 2012, 9). Ful-

MICHAEL HAUSKELLER

fulfilment, in Wolf's terminology, is, although subjective, more than just pleasure. It is the specific kind of pleasure (or positive feeling) that arises from an engagement with what is taken to be objectively good. Wolf insists, however, that subjective fulfilment is not enough. If Sisyphus were not frustrated, but on the contrary completely fulfilled by his never-ending task of pushing a boulder up a hill, if he thought that pushing a boulder up a hill is a really (objectively) good thing to do, a worthy end, then this would not suddenly make his life meaningful. What he is doing would still be pointless, simply because perpetually pushing a boulder up a hill for no good reason is not an objectively worthy end. Fulfilment, according to Wolf, only makes our lives meaningful if it is a *fitting* fulfilment.

The problem with this approach is, of course, that it is far from easy to say exactly *which* activities or "objects" merit our love and our being fulfilled by them, and which do not. Wolf suggests that the things that we are fittingly fulfilled by are things that offer us an opportunity to develop our powers, realize our potential, or achieve excellence (2012, 36-37), but does not want to rule out that there may be others that do not meet those criteria and with which to engage is still fittingly fulfilling. What she insists on, though, is that it is not enough for an object to give us pleasure. An activity can be very pleasurable to me, even very interesting, but may still be meaningless if what pleases or interests me is not of the kind that *merits* my attention. It would only merit my attention if its value exceeded the value that it has as an object of my pleasure or interest, or if its value had a different source than my pleasure or interest. We need to connect with and be concerned about a value that exists "outside of ourselves", so that it can, in principle, also be accessed and appreciated by others. "A meaningful life is one that would not be considered pointless or gratuitous, even from

MICHAEL HAUSKELLER

an impartial perspective” (Wolf 2012, 42). The trouble is, however, that a truly impartial perspective is nowhere to be found. All perspectives are necessarily partial. There is no view from nowhere. Instead, all views are from somewhere. Accordingly, even though it may seem to me that your life is pointless, the fact that my perspective on your life is not your perspective, i.e., not the perspective of the one who lives it, does not make my perspective impartial. And even if everybody else thought your life was meaningless, then this assessment would still not be impartial. It would simply be not your assessment, but somebody else’s. Yet despite acknowledging that it “is far from clear what a reasonably complete and defensible nonsubjective account (of value) will look like” (2012, 47), Wolf insists that we need to assume that certain things we do are *objectively* valuable to account for the fact that some lives do not strike us as meaningful even though they are lived in active engagement with an object of love (for instance, those of people who find subjective fulfilment in caring for a goldfish, which Wolf does not see as a *fitting* fulfilment). If our intuitions are to be trusted, then it seems that it is not sufficient to find something we love and then just do it: we also need to find the right, objectively worthy thing.

Should we trust this intuition? There are good reasons not to. For one thing, it is very much based on our own (considered, if you will) preferences in life or what we happen to think constitutes a worth-while life for us, and for another because we have no clear understanding of what makes a thing or an activity *objectively* worthy. If there is something objective about our considered preferences, it is the potential to do some truly remarkable things that we know human beings have and that we often see unfulfilled in some (or indeed the majority of) humans. That may be regrettable, but it does not make the lives

MICHAEL HAUSKELLER

of those who do not, or only partially, actualize this potential pointless and not worth living, and it most certainly does not make the lives of those pointless who never had that potential in the first place (such as non-human animals) or perhaps not even of those who have lost it (such as some dementia patients). We find our points where we can. If a human being who should know better lives like a dog, then we may have some (objective) grounds for judging their lives (comparatively) meaningless because that kind of life is not fitting for a human being given what a human being is capable of, but for a *dog* to live like a dog is perfectly fine. Indeed, what could be *more* fitting for a dog than to live like one? If the lives of non-human animals were indeed pointless and hence not really worth living, then this would seem to imply that the destruction of such a life would be a matter of little or no importance. This is the main reason why the issue merits scrutiny. A life that is not worth living is also a life that can be destroyed without loss. The death of a being whose life does not matter does not matter either. Thus, how we answer the question of whether non-human animals can have meaningful lives may have considerable practical consequences.

Antti Kauppinen's Teleological View of Meaning

Wolf contends that non-human animals cannot have meaningful lives because they are incapable of loving things and activities that are objectively worthy of love. According to Metz their lives are meaningless because they are incapable of transcending their animal nature and thus have no access to higher goods. Neither is very convincing, mainly because of the uncertain and rather dubious status of what are presumed to be objective or higher goods. However, there may be other reasons for concluding that non-human animals cannot live meaningful lives. Antti Kauppinen for instance suggests that in order to

MICHAEL HAUSKELLER

be meaningful, what a life needs more than anything else is a good plot: it needs to be narratable (cf. Rosati 2013).

Kauppinen understands meaning as one of two properties that makes a life good for the one who leads it, the other one being happiness (or pleasure). Both together constitute human well-being. Since happiness (pleasure) and meaningfulness are distinct properties, a life can be happy but meaningless, and also unhappy but meaningful. While happiness is the final good for *passive subjects of experience*, meaningfulness is the final good for *active agents* (Kauppinen 2012, 372). Since we are both, experiencers and agents, the best life for us is one that contains (a maximum of) both happiness and meaning.

That the passive or experiential side of our being makes for one sort of good, while the active or agential side makes for another, is an interesting idea and certainly worth considering. It does not necessarily exclude non-human animals from living meaningful lives either. It all depends on whether non-human animals are thought to be agents, which in certain respects they certainly are, but apparently not in the respects that Kauppinen thinks are relevant in this context. It is less agency as such that in his view generates the orientation towards meaning as a final good, but rather the ability to look back and plan ahead, to perceive one's life as being stretched out in time, surpassing the needs and rewards of the present moment (which is an ability that most, if not all, non-human animals appear to lack). Meaningfulness unfolds gradually over time and is thus, according to Kauppinen, ultimately a property of a life considered as a *whole*. Whether a moment or period in my life is meaningful or not depends not only on what is happening during that period, but also on what happened before and what will happen later. In other words, my life now is, properly speaking, neither

MICHAEL HAUSKELLER

meaningful nor meaningless. My life now may well contribute to the overall meaning of my life (which can be more or less meaningful), not because it is in itself meaningful, but because it helps create the narrative shape that makes (or perhaps better: will have made) my life as a whole meaningful. Meaning is not additive, which means that a life's (degree of) meaningfulness cannot be determined by adding up all the meaningful bits or periods in it and possibly subtracting all meaningless or "anti-meaningful" bits, as some have suggested (Metz 2013, 64; Campbell and Nyholm 2015).

So what exactly makes a life meaningful? Kauppinen lists a series of key features, which, when present in somebody's life, makes it appropriate for them to feel a certain pride and joy, and appropriate for us to admire and feel inspired by them. Key features of a meaningful life are: that the goals pursued are objectively valuable (!), that pursuing those goals challenges the agent's abilities, that nobody else can replace the agent in their pursuit, that the goals are pursued with some degree of success, that success is lasting rather than fleeting, and, perhaps most importantly, that the agent's life "forms a coherent whole", meaning that "past efforts increase the success of future goal-setting, goal-seeking, and goal-reaching" (2012, 346). Because it is so much goal-focussed, Kauppinen calls this particular conception of meaningfulness *teleological*. This view is summed up in the formula "life is ideally meaningful when challenging efforts lead to lasting successes" (2012, 346). If good things happen to us, this is good, but it is even better (namely in terms of meaningfulness) if we had to *work hard* to make them happen, and the harder we had to work to get them, the better (more meaningful) our lives are. Furthermore, although getting what we want is good, it is even better—and here Kauppinen echoes Wolf and Metz—if *what we*

MICHAEL HAUSKELLER

want is good (i.e. worthy of being wanted), and the better what we want is, the better our lives are. It is even better still if what we get will *last*, and the longer it lasts the better our lives are. Kauppinen holds that meaningfulness is an objective quality of lives: “Just as a food can be unhealthy for a person even if she thinks it is healthy, a life can be meaningless for someone even if she thinks it is meaningful” (2012, 356). However, as far as I can see, Kauppinen does not attempt to provide an argument for this claim, the reason probably being that what is important for him is not this, but that we understand meaning in terms of narrative shape. “A meaningless life is one that is not going anywhere or moving forward” (2012, 357).

If we accept Kauppinen’s account, then it would seem to follow that non-human animals are not capable of living meaningful lives: good lives perhaps (as in *happy* lives), but not meaningful ones. Galen Strawson makes the point that “even dogs and horses can be the subject of excellent biographies” (Strawson 2008), and maybe they can, but it is difficult to imagine them writing their own *autobiographies*: not only because they cannot read and write, but because their “ability to look back and plan ahead” appears to be rather limited. All this goal-setting, goal-seeking, and goal-reaching that Kauppinen finds so essential for a meaningful life is not exactly absent from the lives of cats and dogs and other non-human animals, but to the extent that it exists it is comparatively narrow in terms of time and scope. We don’t expect them to be making plans for their retirement or swapping stories about their youth. *We* could perhaps provide a narrative of their lives with a decent plot, but it is doubtful that *they* could. And for most non-human animals it is probably true that their life is “not going anywhere or moving forward”. Yet why should it *have* to go somewhere at all? Why can it not stay what and where it is? It may be true that

non-human animals tend to live in the present moment and that the future or the past means little to them, but if living in the present is pointless and ultimately not worth living, why would an orientation towards the future and an existence that is more aware of its temporal extendedness make it *more* worth living? After all, as Schopenhauer once pointed out, nobody ever lives in the future or the past. At the end of the day (and indeed throughout the day), we all, humans and non-humans alike, do the actual living of our lives exclusively in the present.

Richard Taylor's Conscious-Creation View of Meaning

That it is our sense of temporal extendedness that provides the foundation for a life that is meaningful and worth living has also been argued by Richard Taylor in a remarkable reversal of the position he originally endorsed, which makes it particularly interesting in the present context. While in his seminal paper "The Meaning of Life" (Taylor 1970) he had argued that all that is required for a meaningful life (and "the nearest we may hope to get to heaven") is that there is something in it that we pursue energetically, an "inner compulsion" to do whatever it is we do (which would allow us to regard as meaningful even the endlessly repetitive life of a blind worm in a cave and the endlessly repetitive life of a Sisyphus who desires nothing more than pushing boulders up hills), he later (Taylor 1987) renounced the claims he made previously, now arguing that even the life of a happy, passionately boulder-pushing Sisyphus (let alone that of a blind worm in a cave) is far from meaningful because it lacks one crucial ingredient: creativity. True creation, however, requires genuine newness, which is only possible if time is real.

Contrary to the countless philosophers, from Plato to McTaggart, who have claimed that time cannot possibly be real,

MICHAEL HAUSKELLER

Taylor very sensibly insists that it *feels* far too real to be an illusion. On the other hand, however, the reality of time is very much dependent on *us*. If there were no creatures like us, Taylor suggests, time would not be (fully) real. Imagine a world entirely devoid of life. Such a world would have no “history or meaning” (Taylor 1987, 297). Time may exist in some abstract way, but it is completely irrelevant because it “makes no difference” what happens when. In that sense, time in such a world is not real yet. Now add living beings to this world (but still holding back on *rational* beings). According to Taylor, time has now been introduced to the world, but still only in a very rudimentary sense. Importantly, a world containing living but not rational beings would still be a world without history because nothing genuinely new ever happens in it. “The sun that rises one day illuminates nothing that was not there the day before, or a thousand or million days before. It is simply the same world, age after age. (...) Every sparrow is just like every other, does exactly the same things in the same way without innovation, then to be imitated by every sparrow to follow. The robin or squirrel you see today does nothing different from those you saw as a child, and could be interchanged with them without discernible difference” (Taylor 1987, 298). Animals live their lives in “unchanging cycles,” “to be repeated over and over, forever.” Such a repetitive world, however, a world that goes nowhere, is not only a world without history, but also, precisely for this reason, a world without meaning. This is because in a world without history “nothing is ever created” (Taylor 1987, 299), at least not in the way that would be required to make what someone creates meaningful. For that, the creative act must be freely *chosen*. Whatever someone creates “must be something of his own, the product of his own creative mind, of his own conception, something which, but for his own creative thought and imagination, would never have existed at all” (Tay-

MICHAEL HAUSKELLER

lor 1987, 300). This, Taylor insists, is a kind of creative activity that cannot be found in nature: it requires rational beings “who can think, imagine, plan, and execute things of worth”. Everything that may strike us as an example of immense creativity in the non-human world, like “the complex beauty of the spider’s web” or “the ingenious construction of the honeycomb”, is in fact just another example of “endless repetitions,” a “capacity of fabrication,” which discloses “not the least hint of creative power” (Taylor 1987, 301). True creativity brings forth things that are genuinely new. Only humans have that kind of creativity, though not everyone has it in the same degree. According to Taylor, creative power has an “indescribable worth,” which is why it gives human existence its significance and meaning: “That a world should exist is not finally important, nor does it mean much, by itself, that people should inhabit it. But that some of these should, in varying degrees, be capable of creating worlds of their own and history – thereby creating time in its historical sense – is what gives our lives whatever meaning they have” (Taylor 2012, 303).

Does it, though? Taylor argues that without us, or without rational beings, time would not be (fully) real because there would not be any history, and that a world without history is a world in which nothing “new” happens. Such a world is declared to be meaningless not because the past is not remembered, but because the past is supposed to be more or less (that is, in all relevant respects) identical to the present, as the future will be identical to the present. Yet whether or not it is largely depends on what we choose to mean by “new.” In many ways there is undeniably newness even in a world without life. Continents form and fall apart, seas dry out, and flat surfaces fold into mountains. And there are even more changes, more new things happening, in a world populated by living, though not

MICHAEL HAUSKELLER

rational, beings. Species come and go; old ones change, then disappear, new ones gradually enter the stage. And those new species could not have been predicted. None of those changes could have. So in what sense exactly is all that has happened in the world since its creation before the arrival of human beings devoid of newness? Perhaps in the sense that even though *this* particular kind of animal never existed before, animals have, and this one is just more of the same. But we could say the same about human productions, even highly artistic and original ones. A new nocturne of Chopin's (one of Taylor's examples of true newness) is different from the previous ones, but it would still be a nocturne, and still be a musical composition. And even though Chopin might be different from other composers, he is still a composer who basically does what other composers also do, namely compose stuff. It is not possible to draw a clear distinction between the genuinely or relevantly new and the ordinary and not really new.

Neither is the claim particularly convincing that every sparrow is the same as every other, doing exactly what all other sparrows do and have done since the beginning of time (or the beginning of sparrows). To a casual observer this may indeed appear to be the case, but if you look more closely you will find that even sparrows are individuals and do not generally behave exactly like any other sparrow. And for each one of them, what they do is very new to them, as if it were in fact the first time that it is being done. (That is actually the advantage of having no history: an abundance of newness.) The problem with casual observers is that they are also lazy observers. Of course, all sparrows do what sparrows do. Although even whole sparrow populations may occasionally learn new things when they adapt to a changing environment, they still live a sparrow life, and the general features of that life are well defined and fixed.

MICHAEL HAUSKELLER

But the same is true for us. We are alike in many ways, and behave alike in many ways. Everything we do is confined by the human life form. We do what humans do and never go beyond that. In sum, there is more newness in a sparrow's life and less newness in a human life than Taylor is willing to allow for.

What is the point of an animal's life?

Still, if the life of a non-human animal does not really connect with the things that we feel (rightly or wrongly) inclined to regard as objectively valuable, and if non-human animals have no understanding of their life as a whole and are incapable of consciously creating new worlds the way we can, then we may well wonder what the point is of their existence. What exactly are they *good* for? It has occasionally been suggested that the life of a non-human animal may acquire meaning by being put to an important use. Thus Viktor Frankl, in his holocaust memoir *Man's Search for Meaning*, when wondering whether there is any meaning to human suffering even though we may not be able to grasp it, proposes that the suffering of "an ape which was being used to develop poliomyelitis serum, and for this reason punctured again and again" (Frankl 1959, 121) would be meaningful, though not in a way that the ape would be able to understand. It would therefore be subjectively meaningless, but nonetheless objectively meaningful (like, perhaps, the life of a prisoner in a concentration camp). From this it would seem to follow that we could make the lives of non-human animals (more) meaningful by subjecting them to (if necessary painful and even deadly) experiments or other invasive practices that have the potential of resulting in some benefit for humanity, because then their lives would finally have a point, which otherwise they do not.

MICHAEL HAUSKELLER

William James played with the same idea in his essay “Is Life Worth Living?”: “Consider a poor dog whom they are vivisectioning in a laboratory. He lies strapped on a board and shrieking at its executioners, and to his own dark consciousness is literally in a sort of hell. He cannot see a single redeeming ray in the whole business; and yet all these diabolical-seeming events are often controlled by human intentions with which, if his poor benighted mind could only be made to catch a glimpse of them, all that is heroic in him would religiously acquiesce. (...) Lying on his back on the board there he may be performing a function incalculably higher than any that prosperous canine life admits of” (James 1895, 58). To be fair, James loved dogs, but he was also a scientist of his time and as such believed that vivisection was often necessary to gain knowledge. So, he tried to convince himself that the suffering non-human animals were routinely subjected to was ultimately justified, that it was meaningful, hoping against hope and his better judgement. He struggled with the issue his whole life (Campbell 2015).

Yet contrary to what James suggests here, knowing that his suffering is all part of a big plan and will actually benefit humanity is unlikely to provide much solace to the tortured dog. If that makes his life meaningful, it is not the kind of meaning that anyone, dog or human, would like their life to have, at least not primarily. It may be an added bonus or better than nothing, but in itself it is a long way from making a life worth living. To think that a non-human animal’s life would somehow be better or more meaningful if it in some way improved *our* lives is more than anything else an expression of our human arrogance and sense of entitlement. Kurt Baier, in an early paper on the meaning of life (1957), misleadingly claims that we do *not* usually think that a thing is better for having a purpose. “A row of trees growing near a farm may or may not have a purpose:

MICHAEL HAUSKELLER

it may or may not be a windbreak, may or may not have been planted or deliberately left standing there in order to prevent the wind from sweeping across the field. We do not in any way disparage the trees if we say they have no purpose, but have just grown that way. They are as beautiful, made of as good wood, as valuable, as if they had a purpose. And of course, they break the wind just as well.” The same, Baier claims, holds for animals: the sheep dog or watch dog is no better than the “dog that hangs around the house and is fed by us” (Baier 1957, 120).

This is, of course, only partly right. When it comes to animals and plants we do in fact tend to assign value to them in accordance with their perceived utility. Many people would probably value the sheep dog and the watch dog more highly than a dog that just hangs around the house (except when the latter is perceived to satisfy a strong emotional need), simply because they are perceived to be more useful. They are indeed *better*, namely for a certain (human) purpose. Similarly, a useful tree will be regarded more highly than a “useless” tree. Its usefulness makes it the better tree. However, even though it may not be true that a living being that serves a (human) purpose is not usually considered to be any better than one that serves no purpose, what we should be able to say with greater confidence is that a living being that has no purpose is in no way *worse off* than one that does, which means that life is just as much worth living for the no-purpose dog as it is for the sheep dog, watch dog, or companion dog. Baier does not see this because he is not much interested in non-human animals, which does not prevent him from making the following very keen observation: man, he says, “is in a different category, however. To attribute to a human being a purpose in that sense is not neutral, let alone complimentary: it is offensive. It is degrading for a man to be regarded as merely serving a purpose” (Baier 1957, 120).

MICHAEL HAUSKELLER

This is a very important insight: having an assigned purpose would not enhance our worth in our own eyes; it would diminish it. Yet if that is so, if having such a purpose would actually degrade us, then this suggests that far from being a precondition of a meaningful (human or non-human) life, having an assigned purpose would actually make one's life *less* meaningful because it would then not be lived on its own terms, but on somebody else's terms. Baier does not explicitly say this, but it is clearly implied. If my life has a purpose allotted to me by God or whoever, then my own purposes count for nothing or little. Yet it is these purposes that allow me to experience my life as meaningful. It follows that only if there is no meaning *of* my life, can there be meaning *in* my life. The same holds for non-human animals: if there is a purpose to their lives that we have chosen for them, then this does not make their lives more meaningful, but, on the contrary, less so, simply because there is less room for them to develop, explore and pursue their own purposes. To be truly meaningful, the purposes we have cannot lie outside of us. They must be our own purposes. Only if my life has no point, i.e., if it is not good for anything else, does the actual *living* of my life have a point. As a younger (and wiser) Richard Taylor put it: "The point of living is simply to be living, in the manner that it is your nature to be living" (Taylor 1970, 28).

Appreciating the meaningfulness of non-human lives

That the point of living is simply to be living does of course not mean that living is always meaningful. We may sometimes choose, or more likely be forced, to live in a way that is *not* our nature to be living, and then our living becomes pointless. Life can be meaningful only for beings that can experience the absence or loss of meaning. If an animal's life could never be

MICHAEL HAUSKELLER

meaningless, then it could not be meaningful either. But it *can* be meaningless because it can be *felt* to be meaningless, and it is felt to be meaningless when the one who lives it is prevented from living it the way it is their *nature* to live it. A paradigmatic case is a large animal confined to a small space. Such an animal is apt to feel like Rainer Maria Rilke's panther, locked in a cage in Paris's Jardin des Plantes: "His gaze against the sweeping of the bars/ has grown so weary, it can hold no more./ To him, there seem to be a thousand bars/ and back behind those thousand bars no world." (The translation is Stanley Appelbaum's.) The life of Rilke's panther has clearly lost its point. It has become meaningless (despite its possible entertainment value for the zoo's visitors) and appears no longer worth living. Yet unconfined and in its natural habitat, the panther's life would be, unquestioningly, worth living. For the panther, it would be a rich life, full of meaning, full of reasons to live. The life that a non-human animal is naturally equipped to live always means something to them, perhaps more than ours to us. Animals suffer from depression only when they are held in captivity, while we manage to feel depressed by our life despite being free to live differently. Something is not quite right here. Leo Tolstoy, in his *Confession*, remarks that our lives are now meaningless because we have lost our way: we do not live our lives the way we ought to. Non-human animals generally do a much better job at living meaningful lives: "a bird is made in such a way that it can fly, gather food and build a nest, and when I see a bird doing these things I rejoice. Goats, hares and wolves are made in order to eat, multiply and feed their families, and when they do this I feel quite sure that they are happy and that their lives are meaningful" (Tolstoy 1882, 68-9).

What exactly that meaning consists in we cannot always say because it is their world and not ours that generates it. We can-

MICHAEL HAUSKELLER

not fully understand it because it is so different from ours, but it is not so alien either that it cannot be approximated through careful and caring observation and life-sharing. Take for instance the following description of a moment in the life of a hunting dog that Tolstoy gives his readers in *Anna Karenina* from the dog's perspective: "Their smell struck her more and more strongly, more and more distinctly, and suddenly it became perfectly clear to her that one of them was there, behind that hummock, five steps away from her. She stopped and her whole body froze. On her short legs she could see nothing ahead of her, but she knew from the smell that it was sitting no more than five steps away. She stood, sensing it more and more and delighting in the anticipation. Her tense tail was extended and only its very tip twitched. Her mouth was slightly open, her ears pricked up a little. One ear had got folded back as she ran, and she was breathing heavily but cautiously, and still more cautiously she turned more with her eyes than with her head to look at her master. He, with his usual face but with ever terrible eyes, was coming, stumbling over hummocks, and extremely slowly as it seemed to her" (Tolstoy 1878, 593).

When we judge the lives of non-human animals to be devoid of meaning or pointless and therefore ultimately not worth living, we give expression not so much to the comparative poverty of their lives (being unconcerned by what is objectively worthy of being loved, incapable of transcending their animal nature, storyless, temporally challenged, and uncreative), but instead to our own humanist prejudices, the limitations of our imagination, and our unwillingness to empathically relate to the specific circumstances of their life. Non-human animals may have no access to the goods that we pursue, and even if they did would probably lack the comprehension to see any point in pursuing them. They cannot understand why we do the things we do and

MICHAEL HAUSKELLER

what they mean to us. However, we do not have any access to the goods they pursue either. The very fact that we do not see much point in doing what they do shows clearly enough there is something here that we are missing. Generally speaking, if there is something we do not see, the reason may be that what we don't see is not there, or alternatively we may simply be blind to it. Accordingly, if the lives of non-human animals appear meaningless to us and not worth living, then this is either because they are indeed meaningless and not worth living or because we fail to recognize and appreciate what makes them meaningful. Given that animals, under normal circumstances, give no indication whatsoever that they find their life not worth living, the latter is far more likely. "Take our dogs and ourselves," writes William James in his seminal essay "On a Certain Blindness in Human Beings," "connected as we are by a tie more intimate than most ties in this world; and yet, outside of that tie of friendly fondness, how insensible, each of us, to all that makes life significant for the other! – we to the rapture of bones under hedges, or smells of trees and lamp-posts, they to the delights of literature and art. As you sit reading the most moving romance you ever fell upon, what sort of a judge is your fox-terrier of your behavior? With all his good will toward you, the nature of your conduct is absolutely excluded from his comprehension. To sit there like a senseless statue, when you might be taking him to walk and throwing sticks for him to catch!" (James 1899, 267).

If dogs could philosophize about meaning in life, they would probably come to the conclusion that the life of a human is of little value and, all things considered, not really worth living at all. Who, after all, would want to spend a large part of their life sitting on a chair gazing intently at a computer screen and tapping away with their fingers on a board? Instead of wilfully

MICHAEL HAUSKELLER

ignoring the possibility that a life that is very different from ours can possibly be meaningful, we should follow James's advice that "where-ever there is conflict of opinion and difference of vision, we are bound to believe that the truer side is the side that feels the more, and not the side that feels the less" (James, 268). This also means that we should not pronounce on the "meaninglessness of forms of existence other than our own; and it commands us to tolerate, respect, and indulge those whom we see harmlessly interested and happy in their own ways, however unintelligible these may be to us. Hands off; neither the whole of truth nor the whole of good is revealed to any single observer" (James, 264).

It is a rather regrettable fact of our modern lives that we are often blind to the "fundamental static goods of life," to the good "of seeing, smelling, tasting, sleeping, and daring and doing with one's body" (James, 258) and the "intense interest that life can assume when brought down to the non-thinking level, the level of pure sensorial perception" (James, 259). Contemporary philosophers have a tendency to see the notion of a meaningful life as reserved for the few—those who make a lasting impact, those who change the world. Even those who acknowledge that non-human animals can have meaningful lives tend to use examples that strongly suggest that it is the exception rather than the rule for non-human animals to live meaningful lives and that meaning results primarily if not exclusively from extraordinary accomplishments, especially in the service of humanity or at least some fraction of humanity. Thus Joshua Thomas uses as his prime examples for animals that lived a meaningful life Smoky the dog, who "was found abandoned in a foxhole in the New Guinea jungle during World War II, and accompanied Corporal William Wynne through twelve combat missions over two years, earning eight battle stars and surviv-

MICHAEL HAUSKELLER

ing 150 air raids and even a typhoon,” and the space dog Laika, who “started off life as a stray dog on the streets of Moscow but who was picked up by the Soviet Space Programme, underwent specialist cosmonaut training, and eventually became the first animal ever to orbit the earth” (2018, 266). When we focus on such animals we make the same mistake as when we associate meaning in life primarily with people like Mother Teresa, Nelson Mandela, Vincent van Gogh, or Albert Einstein. The notion of a meaningful life needs to be democratized. Meaningful lives are not the exception; they are the rule. We do not start from a position of meaninglessness and then acquire meaning only if we are particularly gifted, lucky, and hard-working. The default mode of existence is a life steeped in meaningfulness. What we should be concerned about is not how to give meaning to our lives, but how not to lose it.

Conclusion

Craig was *not* right about dogs. To the extent that people can live meaningful lives, lives that matter, have a point, and are worth living, non-human animals can too. Perhaps their lives do not matter in the grand scheme of things. Perhaps they do not lead anywhere. But if they do not, then our human lives, for all we know, do not really lead anywhere either, not in the long run. We have no idea what if anything is “objectively valuable.” We have no idea whether there is any cosmic purpose to our lives that we fail to grasp, and even if there were, it would be of little use to us. In the absence of any evidence to the contrary, we can only assume that our life is meaningful to the extent that it is *felt* to be so, and there are myriad ways in which life can be felt to be meaningful, depending on who and what we are. “Wherever a process of life communicates an eagerness to him who lives it, there the life becomes genuinely significant. Sometimes the eagerness is more knit up with the motor ac-

MICHAEL HAUSKELLER

tivities, sometimes with the perceptions, sometimes with the imagination, sometimes with reflective thought. But, wherever it is found, there is the zest, the tingle, the excitement of reality; and there is “importance” in the only real and positive sense in which importance ever anywhere can be” (James 1899, 269).

References

- Baier, Kurt. 1957. “The Meaning of Life”, in: *The Meaning of Life*, edited by E.D. Klemke. New York/ Oxford: Oxford University Press 2000, 101-132.
- Campbell, James. 2015. “Pragmatism and Moral Growth: William James and the Question of Vivisection.” *Pragmatism Today* 6/1: 61-6.
- Campbell, Stephen M., and Sven Nyholm. 2015. “Anti-Meaning and Why It Matters.” *Journal of the American Philosophical Association* 1/4: 694-711.
- Craig, William Lane. 1994. “The Absurdity of Life without God.” Originally published in: William Lane Craig. *Reasonable Faith: Christian Truth and Apologies*. Wheaton, Ill.: Good News Publishers/ Crossway Books, 57-75. Reprinted in: *The Meaning of Life*, edited by E.D. Klemke. New York/ Oxford: Oxford University Press 2000, 40-56.
- Frankl, Viktor. 1959. *Man’s Search for Meaning*. London: Rider 2004.
- Hauskeller, Michael. 2018. “Do Animals Have a Bad Life?” *Journal of Animal Ethics* 8/1: 50-61.
- James, William. 1899. “On a Certain Blindness in Human Beings.” In William James, *Talks for Teachers on Psychology*

MICHAEL HAUSKELLER

ogy: and to Students on Some of Life's Ideals. London/
Bombay/ Calcutta: Longmans Green and Co.

James, William. 1895. "Is Life Worth Living?" In William James, *Essays in Popular Philosophy.* New York/ London/ Bombay: Longmans Green and Co. 1897, 32-62.

Kauppinen, Antti. 2012. "Meaningfulness and Time." *Philosophy and Phenomenological Research* 84/2: 345-377.

Metz, Thaddeus. 2013. *Meaning in Life.* Oxford: Oxford University Press.

Mill, John Stuart. 1861. *Utilitarianism.* In: *Collected Works of John Stuart Mill*, vol. 10, edited by John M. Robson. Toronto/ London.

Purves, Duncan, & Nicolas Delon. 2018. "Meaning in the Lives of Humans and Other Animals." *Philosophical Studies* 175/2: 317-338.

Rosati, Connie S. 2013. "The Story of a Life." *Social Philosophy and Policy* 30/1-2: 21-50.

Strawson, Galen. 2008. "Against Narrativity." In Galen Strawson. *Real Materialism and Other Essays.* Oxford: Clarendon Press 2008.

Taylor, Richard. 1970. "The Meaning of Life." In Richard Taylor, *Good and Evil.* New York: Macmillan. Reprinted in *Life, Death and Meaning. Key Philosophical Readings on the Big Questions*, edited by David Benatar. Lanham: Rowman & Littlefield 2004, 19-28.

MICHAEL HAUSKELLER

- Taylor, Richard. 1987. "Time and Life's Meaning." *The Review of Metaphysics* 40/4: 675-686. Reprinted in: *Exploring the Meaning of Life. An Anthology and Guide*, edited by Joshua W. Seachris. Chichester: Wiley-Blackwell 2013, 296-303.
- Thomas, Joshua Lewis. 2018. "Can Only Human Lives Be Meaningful?" *Philosophical Papers* 47/2: 265-297.
- Tolstoy, Leo. 1878. *Anna Karenina*, translated by Richard Pevear and Larissa Volokhonsky. London: Penguin Classics 2001.
- Tolstoy, Leo. 1882. *A Confession*, translated by Jane Kentish. London: Penguin Books 2008.
- Wolf, Susan. 2010. *Meaning in Life and Why It Matters*. Princeton and Oxford, Princeton University Press.