

The Meaning of Life: Science, Equality and Eternity

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ABSTRACT

We will: (1) argue that lives can be meaningful to different degrees; (2) explore some ways in which science can be used to make lives more meaningful; (3) explain why some people, such as Leo Tolstoy, even though they have the most meaningful lives, have been tempted to believe that their lives are meaningless.

The question of the meaning of human life came to the fore in the Western world as Christianity lost ground to modern science and philosophy. According to Christianity, our lives are embedded in a divine scheme which presents them as a preparation to an eternal afterlife. We are made in the image of the creator of the universe, and the Earth is the centre of the universe. According to modern science and philosophy, we are instead as mortal as the non-human animals from which we have descended, and this planet is a vanishingly small, perishable speck in a vast universe. From such a cosmic perspective, it seems inescapable that what we do, or what happens to us, will have virtually no significance. We might be oblivious to this perspective when we engage in the pursuits of everyday life, but when we sit back and contemplate our lives *sub specie aeternitatis*, they are bound to appear petty and futile. However successful our undertakings, however fulfilled and influential they make us, we along with all our achievements will soon be annihilated on a cosmic time-scale. Thus, it seems that from this detached point of view our lives cannot but be meaningless. We can suppress this insight by indulging headlong in our earthly lives, but if we are reflective enough it will now and then take possession of us. Our ordinary state of mind with all its anxieties and pleasures will then seem like a state of intoxication from which we are sobering up to a cold and bleak reality.

This picture wrongly presents the meaning of life as though it was an all-or-nothing matter: either life has meaning or it is meaningless. We will instead suggest that there are degrees of personal meaning: human lives can have more or less meaning to the people who live them. However, the fact that some human lives are more meaningful than others raises another problem. This is because some people's lives are often less meaningful than the lives of others through no fault or voluntary choice of these people. Under such conditions it seems unfair or unjust that these people lead less meaningful lives than some others do. To some extent, we might be able to rectify this unfairness by making social conditions more equal and by enhancing hereditary human capacities, but a certain amount of human inequality is bound to remain. We will review some of the ways science can tell us how lives can be made more meaningful by presenting the means to make them better. But philosophy alone can tell us what is ultimately good in life.

At this point, the cosmic perspective which seemed wholly destructive of the meaning of human life could be seen to have one redeeming aspect. Against a vast eternal backdrop, it will be seen that even the most successful human beings achieve comparatively little. Even the most lasting achievements shrink to insignificance in a cosmos which is infinite in space and time. Thus, although it remains true that some human lives are more meaningful than others from the personal perspective, the difference in meaning might appear as relatively small from the cosmic perspective; eternity will almost equalise the meaning differences between human lives. Which perspective we choose to evaluate our lives from is up to us.



INTRODUCTION

While human beings have puzzled over the meaning of life for thousands of years, the question of the meaning of human life came to the fore in the Western world as Christianity lost ground to modern science and philosophy. According to Christianity, our lives are embedded in a divine scheme in which they are mere preparation for an eternal afterlife. We are *Imago Dei*, made in the image of the creator of the universe, and the Earth is taken to be the centre of the universe. According to

modern science and philosophy, we are instead as mortal as the non-human animals from which we have descended and with which we still share the world, and this planet is a vanishingly small, perishable speck in an infinite universe.

We are social beings with an almost uncontrollable predilection for explaining things in mental and moral terms. This predilection is useful in our dealings with other human beings, whose behaviour is indeed explainable in such terms. But this predilection is so powerful that it produces false positives, i.e. we often believe that events can be given mental or moral explanations when in fact, as science has convincingly shown, this is not so. In early human societies, animism was prevalent; that is, processes in inanimate nature were accounted for in mental terms. Thus, a crop failure was seen as the result of the anger of some super-natural agent, the behaviour of liquids was explained by reference to their 'horror vacui', and so on. Such explanations not only made these processes comprehensible, they also promise a possibility of control, e.g. one could prevent future crop failures by appeasing the angry super-natural agent with suitable sacrifices. Science has long since outmoded such animistic explanations by highly successful mechanistic explanations.

Nonetheless, in modern societies our disposition to supply mental explanations still works overtime, though less blatantly than in animistic societies. People are still inclined to think that, for instance, misfortunes signify something, have a meaning. They ask questions like 'Why am I so unlucky, and Richie so lucky?', as though they expect a reason justifying this. They tend to attribute mental states even to dead human beings—witness how common it is for people who have been bereft to talk to the deceased and ask for forgiveness, etc. It has been suggested that this irresistible urge to seek explanations in intentional and moral terms may account for why the belief in an afterlife associated with some religions is found in societies all over the world at all times (see e.g. Boyer 2001). Similarly, we suggest that it is often what drives people when they ponder the meaning of their lives. What they want to know is what role or purpose their lives have in a cosmic plan or drama. This question can be answered positively only if there is some Intelligence authoring such a cosmic plan or drama. According to a scientific and secular view, our lives can have no meaning in this sense.

According to science, planet Earth is indeed a vanishingly small speck in a huge universe, and the conclusion is inescapable that whatever we do, or whatever happens to us, will have virtually no impact on this universe (cf. Nagel 1986). We are oblivious to this cosmic perspective as we engage in the pursuits of everyday life, but

when we sit back and contemplate our lives *sub specie aeternitatis*, this perspective opens up and makes our lives appear petty and futile. However successful we are in our undertakings, however fulfilled and influential they make us, we along with all our achievements are ephemeral on a cosmic time-scale. Thus, it seems that from this detached point of view our lives cannot but be meaningless. We can suppress this insight by indulging headlong in what our earthly lives have to offer; but, if we are reflective enough, it will now and then creep in on us and a sense of meaninglessness will take possession of us. Our ordinary state of mind with all its anxieties and pleasures will then seem like a state of intoxication from which we are sobering up to a cold and bleak reality.

In our view, there is a considerable amount of truth in these deliveries of the cosmic picture; but they are exaggerated. We will argue that they wrongly assume that the meaning of life is an all-or-nothing matter: either life has meaning or it is meaningless. We will instead suggest that there are degrees of meaning: human lives can have more or less meaning. The meaning of life is a scalar notion.

However, the fact that some human lives are more meaningful than others raises another problem. This is because some people's lives are often less meaningful than the lives of others through no fault or voluntary choice of their own. Under such conditions, it seems unfair or unjust that the former lead less meaningful lives than the latter. To some extent, we might be able to rectify this unfairness by making social conditions more equal and by enhancing hereditary human capacities. The progress of science has put in our hands powerful means to this end. Nevertheless, science is not all-powerful and a considerable amount of human inequality is bound to remain.

At this point, the cosmic perspective which seemed wholly destructive of the meaning of human life can be seen to have one redeeming aspect. Against a vast eternal backdrop, it will appear that even the most successful human beings achieve comparatively little. Even the most lasting and profound achievements shrink to insignificance in a cosmos which is infinite in space and time. Thus, although it remains true that some human lives are more meaningful than others, the difference in meaning will appear relatively small in a cosmic setting; eternity will almost equalise the meaning differences between human lives. So, the unfair inequality in respect of meaningfulness will be less glaring, though it will not be non-existent, and this small difference matters.

From the more involved, personal perspective that we adopt when we conduct our everyday lives, this difference is significant to us. You might be envious of your

neighbours because they are slightly better off than you—say their apartment has two bedrooms rather than one. To those who are much better off in a different country, whose houses have four or five bedrooms, this difference may seem too small to care about. But to you, the fact that your neighbour's apartment has one more bedroom may be a source of considerable unhappiness. How things appear from this personal perspective has priority when the subject is social equality.

THE MEANING OF 'THE MEANING OF LIFE': MEANING AND VALUE

As a first shot, we propose an analysis according to which an activity that you engage in has meaning only if it intentionally produces some good. It seems necessary that you intentionally rather than unintentionally produce the good. Suppose that you sit idly in a coffee shop, just whiling away your time, not knowing what to do with it; but that unbeknownst to you, your presence scares off a robber who would otherwise have held up the shop. Then your sitting in the coffee shop unintentionally produces some good, but we would not say that your sitting there had meaning—at least not for you, if you felt that sitting there was a waste of time. You have to mean or intend to produce the good that your activity in fact produces, which is not the case in this example.

On the other hand, imagine that your action fails to produce the good that you intend and produces no good whatsoever, e.g. you intend to rescue somebody, but fail to do so and achieve nothing of value. Then your action is meaningless, a waste of time and energy. This is precisely why Sisyphus' attempt to roll the boulder up the hill in a famous piece of ancient Greek mythology is seen as a paradigm instance of a meaningless activity; he fails to do it and it rolls back all the time.

However, the condition of an activity producing some good cannot be sufficient for it to be meaningful. This is because an activity might have both good and bad effects. If the bad effects were to outweigh the good effects, we would be disinclined to say that the activity had meaning. So, it would seem that to obtain a condition which is both necessary and sufficient for the meaningfulness of a life, we have to claim something like this: your life has meaning if and only if you spend your life intentionally producing a net balance of goodness over badness. This proposal raises the question of what we should say about a life spent intentionally producing a surplus of badness. It seems too weak to say that such a life—the life of a satanically wicked

person—is meaningless. It seems better to distinguish between positive and negative meaning and claim that when we speak of a life having meaning simpliciter, this is elliptical for a net balance of positive meaning. If a sadist spends his life intentionally producing a surplus of badness, of pain and suffering, his life has negative meaning, but we would be disinclined to say that it has meaning without qualification.

We should also distinguish between what is valuable for you and what is valuable for others. Imagine that you spend your life intentionally doing things that have value only for you, e.g. that give you pleasure, but that you produce nothing of value for others. Richard Taylor (1981) claims that such a life is meaningful: he conducts the thought-experiment of imagining that Sisyphus enjoys (rather than endures) rolling the boulder up the hill more than he enjoys anything else, though it always rolls back. Taylor claims that Sisyphus' life would then have meaning, even though it does not result in anything that is valuable for anyone else.

Susan Wolf denies this claim of Taylor's because, in spite of his enjoyment, Sisyphus' activity 'remains futile' (2010: 17). She claims that in order to be meaningful, apart from being subjectively fulfilling, a life must be 'something the value of which is (in part) independent of oneself' (2010: 22). According to her view, 'a life is meaningful insofar as its subjective attractions are to things or goals that are objectively worthwhile' (2010: 34–35). By it being 'objectively worthwhile', she means that it is of value to individuals other than oneself. In contrast to Wolf, we would like to claim that one's life can be meaningful, though it produces something that is of value only to oneself. As Wolf herself writes:

there seems good reason to ask why, if an activity's value to oneself is insufficient to give meaning to one's life, an activity's value to some other creature should make it any more suitable (2010: 38).

And,

It may seem odd that if I benefit you and you benefit me, our activities may contribute to the meaningfulness of each other's lives, but if we each tend to our own well-being, our actions will have no such effect (2010: 42).

Since we cannot see that Wolf has any satisfactory answer to this kind of query, we take it that spending one's life intentionally promoting what is of value to oneself

provides it with meaning just as spending it intentionally promoting what is of value to others. Both the promotion of what has value for others and of what has value for oneself contribute to making ones's life meaningful.

It should however be noted that we conceive the notion of value to a person more broadly than Wolf does. She takes it to imply 'a form of hedonism', where pleasure and other valuable mental states alone are of value (2010: 15). But consider someone who spends his life trying to achieve something that is remembered for thousands of years, long after his death, and succeeds. Even if this achievement is something that does not have value for others, this success is on a reasonable view enough to give his life meaning, by fulfilling the aim or desire this person had in his life. This is so, even after he is no longer around to enjoy or feel pleased by the successful fulfilment of the dominant ambition of his life. Hedonists would deny this, so this view is not 'a form of hedonism'. Thus hedonism, even if it is a part of the correct account of value, does not fully constitute it. According to the view proposed, a life like that of Herostratus—who burnt down the Temple of Artemis to gain immortal fame, knowing he would be executed—can be meaningful (albeit negatively meaningful).

What is needed for one's life to have meaning is that it in fact fulfils some self-regarding desire—roughly, a desire whose object ineliminably involves oneself (Persson 2005: 151)—not that one is aware of this fulfilment and feels satisfaction, as hedonists would require. On the view here sketched, value consists in the fulfilment of desires—value for oneself in the fulfilment of one's own self-regarding desires, and value for others in the fulfilment of the self-regarding desires of others.

Now it is reasonable to claim that in order for the fulfilment of a (self-regarding) desire to be of value the desire must satisfy some requirement of correctness. There are different ways of understanding such a requirement.¹ According to one account, a desire is correct if it is not based on any factual mistakes. According to a stronger account, there are certain norms of conative correctness that a desire must also pass in order to be correct. We cannot here attempt to solve this highly controversial issue. However, we would like to suggest that in order for one's life to be meaningful, it is not necessary that there be any objective norms that one's self-regarding desires satisfy. Whether or not our lives can be valuable and meaningful for us cannot reasonably hinge on the solution of this meta-normative issue. Perhaps things cannot be valuable simpliciter if there is not any objective value, but it is much harder to believe that objectivity is necessary for things to be valuable for us.

1. For a well-known discussion of this matter, see Parfit 1984: Appendix I.

It is important to stress that the meaning of your life can be constituted by the good you intentionally bring to the lives of others as well as your own life. This is because it is easier to bring great value to the lives of others than it is to bring a commensurate value to your own life. If you spend your life intentionally doing things that are good only to yourself, your life is likely to produce less good than if you intentionally do things that are good also to others. We propose to capture this fact by distinguishing between lives having more or less meaning. If you spend your life intentionally producing a greater balance of good over evil to yourself or others, your life will have more meaning than it would have if it had intentionally produced a lesser balance of good over evil to yourself or others.

This distinction between degrees of meaning also enables us to deal with some strange imaginary cases that Wolf describes. She writes of a woman whose life revolves around her pet goldfish that, although perhaps ‘the life and comfort of a goldfish is worth something’, these things ‘do not seem valuable enough to merit the kind of time, energy, and investment’ that the woman devotes to them, particularly not in light of the wealth of other things that she could devote herself to (2010: 37–38). But this seems to us not to be a reason for saying that focusing on the well-being of a goldfish cannot provide a life with any meaning. It seems more natural to claim that it could provide it with only very little meaning compared to other things to which the woman could have devoted herself. It would seem that if the woman had devoted herself to the well-being of many animals, Wolf would have to concede that this could make her life meaningful; but there is only a difference of degree between this case and the case of concern for a single goldfish. Therefore, we conclude that it is more natural to claim that this woman’s life has very little meaning than that it does not have any meaning whatsoever.

Compare two people with advanced dementia. Agnus doesn’t get pleasure out of anything, staring vacantly into space, drooling, unable to engage with herself, others or the world around. Gladys gains pleasure from one thing: tending to her goldfish. It is plausible to claim that the life of Gladys is a bit more meaningful than the life of Agnus. If we could apply some treatment to Agnus that could bring her to the level of Gladys, this would be a good thing. Of course, it would be much less meaningful than a normal life; but it would not be meaningless, as it was prior to treatment. Lives, then, differ in degrees of meaning and, if we can, we should make less meaningful lives more meaningful.

THE INJUSTICE OF SOME LIVES BEING LESS MEANINGFUL

If we introduce degrees of life meaning, it becomes obvious, as we have indicated, that the lives of some human beings have more meaning than the lives of other human beings. They are more meaningful because they contribute more to what is (positively) valuable to themselves and others. It is worth emphasising that lives of people differ most radically not in what they can contribute to themselves, but with regards their contribution to the lives of others. Think for instance of people who have created artistic masterpieces, like Leonardo da Vinci, William Shakespeare and Wolfgang Mozart; people who have made great scientific discoveries, like Isaac Newton, Albert Einstein and Alexander Fleming; or people who have founded worldwide religions, like Buddha, Confucius, Jesus and Muhammad. Since the achievements of such people could have an impact upon the lives of others for centuries, they could contribute to the good of others to an extent that enormously exceeds the impact of the lives of more ordinary people. In this way, the most meaningful lives will be those which produce a lot of value for others.

But, needless to say, humans also vary considerably in respect of the value they put into their own lives. Some people fail to put much value into their lives because they are lazy; others fail because of mental or physical handicaps. The value one's life has to oneself could also be increased by rewards that one receives because of the services one does to other people.

To a great extent, the fact that the lives of some humans are less meaningful than the life of many others is not due to the fault or voluntary choice of these people. Many people will contribute less to the value of their own lives and the lives of others because they happen to be born into social conditions which leave them malnourished, ridden with disease or uneducated. Others are genetically disfavoured and have severe mental or physical congenital handicaps. Still others who are genetically and socially well-endowed from the start have their lives stunted by unforeseen accidents, crimes or diseases which kill or cripple them prematurely. Through no fault or voluntary choice of their own, all of these people lead lives that are less meaningful than the lives of other, more fortunate people.

It is plausible to claim that when the lives of some humans are less meaningful through no fault or voluntary choice of their own, this is unjust or unfair. It is arguable that it could be just or fair that some are worse-off only if they are in some way responsible for their plight, and this is not so if it occurs through no fault or volun-

tary choice of theirs. To some extent, injustices can be rectified by human action. We can improve the socio-economic conditions of the worse-off, so that they will be better nourished and educated and, hence, better equipped to lead lives of value to themselves and others. We are also beginning to acquire genetic therapies and other biological interventions to cure or mitigate some congenital diseases and handicaps, so that not only the socio-economic, but also the genetic start of human lives could become more equal. Science and medicine constantly make progress such that more and more diseases can be treated. The fight against violent crimes could be made more effective, and roads could be made more secure, so that fewer people fall victims to violent crimes and traffic accidents, and so on. But it is most unlikely that we shall ever succeed in equalising all of the unjust differences in respect of the meaningfulness of lives. Some socio-economic differences will remain that will help some to a better start than others. So will some genetic disadvantages, and there will be some unforeseen accidents, crimes and diseases which claim or stunt lives prematurely.

In this connection, it is worth saying something about how the notion of one's life being less meaningful through one's voluntary choice is to be understood, and to reflect upon another common everyday dilemma in connection with the meaning of life. When considering how to live your life, you might well ask yourself whether you should 'live for the moment' or pursue some more long-term goal, such as writing a book or working for some political cause, though this requires you to sacrifice some immediate rewards. It might well be that, if you succeed in attaining the long-term goal, your life will be more valuable both to yourself and others than it would be were you successfully to live for the present moment. But if you fail in attaining the long-term goal—perhaps because some unforeseen accident, crime or disease prematurely kills or incapacitates you—it will be less valuable in both respects. Imagine that you choose to spend your life pursuing the long-term goal, but fail to attain it because of some fatality that you could not possibly have foreseen. Then your life comes to have less meaning in some sense because of your choice. However, this is not the sense which removes the injustice of your life being less meaningful, since strictly speaking you do not choose to lead a less meaningful life, but to pursue a long-term goal. Your leading a less meaningful life is not intentional, but accidental. It happens through no fault of yours and might therefore be unjust.

It should be clear that this dilemma of having to choose between living for the moment or living for long-term goals is inescapable so long as we cannot reliably predict what the outcomes of choices will be. Presumably, we shall never be able to

predict this in any detailed way. Moreover, in the unlikely event that we were to be capable of making such detailed predictions, a lot of the point of living would be lost, since much of this point concerns finding out what we are capable of achieving.² For instance, it would be rather pointless to set out to acquire knowledge of certain facts if you were able to predict in advance what facts you are going to acquire.

THE 'EQUALISING' EFFECT OF ETERNITY

We have defended a view according to which our lives can have meaning on a scientific and non-religious understanding of the universe. Our lives can have meaning even though death is the end and there is no eternal afterlife of the sort that many religions postulate. Now it is certainly good news that our lives are not necessarily meaningless according to a scientific picture of the universe, as many religious believers and non-believers have thought. But our view also implies that some of us lead more meaningful lives than others and that this is often unjust. Since injustice is something bad, our view also carries some bad news. In respect of justice, the nihilist view that all human life is meaningless is better than the view we have defended, since it does not imply that there is any unjust inequality in respect of meaningfulness—though it accomplishes equality by means of a radical 'devaluation' of our lives, by removing all life of meaning. We might ask whether our view could acquire something of the egalitarian merits of the devaluative view by assimilating something of what motivates it.

To find out whether this is possible, let us look at one of the most famous accounts of the experience of life as meaningless, namely Leo Tolstoy's. At the age of about fifty, Tolstoy was seized by a feeling that his life was meaningless, though he 'was on every side surrounded by what was considered to be complete happiness' (1981: 10): he was a famous writer, a rich land-owner, and had a loving wife and a large family. The origin of Tolstoy's feeling of meaninglessness seems to be the awareness that nothing of all this happiness would last:

Sooner or later there would come diseases and death ... to my dear ones and to me, and there would be nothing left but stench and worms. All my affairs, no matter what they might be, would sooner or later be forgotten, and I myself should not exist (1981: 11).

2. Cf. Persson 2005: 148–50.

It seems that Tolstoy was of the opinion that his life could have meaning only if there is something eternal and indestructible that could issue from it:

The question was ‘Why should I live?’ that is, ‘What real, indestructible essence will come from my phantasmal, destructible life?’ (1981: 15)

And,

‘What is the meaning which is not destroyed by death?’—‘The union with infinite God, paradise’ (1981: 16).

The fact that life is nothing but ‘a particle of the infinite not only gives it no meaning, but even destroys every possible meaning’ (1981: 14). In sum, Tolstoy’s view seems to be that if our lives are to have meaning, they must go on forever, in a way that is (overall) valuable, or at least they must result in something of eternal value. If this is right, a scientific, secular view of the universe will imply that our lives are meaningless because death will then seem to be tantamount to our annihilation. And whatever value we contribute to the lives of others will fade gradually to nothing over eternity. Our lives being meaningful, according to people like Tolstoy, requires a religious view like Christianity, which offers an eternal afterlife.

However, it is certainly false that something cannot be of value unless it lasts forever, or is of infinite duration. That something is of infinite temporal extension is as little necessary for it to be valuable as it is that it is of infinite spatial extension. Perhaps something cannot be of infinite value, unless it is of infinite duration or infinite spatial extension. But why claim that our lives must result in something of infinite value in order to be meaningful; why is it not enough that they result in something of finite value (overall)? Once we distinguish between degrees of meaning, it should readily be seen that in order to have some degree of meaning, it is enough if our lives (intentionally) result in something of finite value or, more precisely, a finite net balance of positive value. True, our lives would be more meaningful if they resulted in something of infinite value to ourselves or others, but that is no reason for denying that their resulting in something of finite value is capable of supplying them with some meaning.

But when one adopts a cosmic perspective which opens up a universe that is

apparently endless both spatially and temporally, why is it so tempting to deny that anything that we could do here and now on Earth could make our lives meaningful? This is doubtless tempting, since Tolstoy is far from being the only one who has succumbed to this temptation.³ If one views a valuable everyday state of affairs from a mundane personal perspective which often does not range over more than our neighbourhood and the near future—in any case, not beyond this planet and its foreseeable future—this state of affairs could occupy a relatively large part of the perspective. For this perspective cannot harbour states of affairs that are hugely more extensive in space and time. But with a switch to a cosmic perspective which extends over more of the universe than the Earth and over millions of years, hugely more extensive states of affairs become imaginable. In comparison to them, what we could accomplish in our lives dwindles to something so small that we may find it difficult to care about it. If we take into consideration the billions of years that we shall be dead, a few decades of happiness before we die might seem insignificant. In contrast, if our time frame is nothing beyond the rest of our lives, and we compare being happy with being unhappy during those decades, it comes out as being so much better to be happy that we will be keen to be so. The loss of concern about our few decades of happiness that we experience when we shift from this mundane perspective to a vastly more extensive cosmic perspective is so drastic that we might feel that this period of happiness loses all value, though this is strictly speaking not true.⁴ This might explain why people like Tolstoy come to perceive life as meaningless; however, this is an erroneous exaggeration.

Although adopting the cosmic perspective can involve such a negative exaggeration, it must not be confused with situations in which we claim that our life is meaningless because we take an altogether false view of it. Consider people who spend most of their life in pursuit of some aim—perhaps they aim to create a great work of art, make some important scientific discovery, or promote some political cause—and in old age find out that they have failed to achieve this aim. They might then feel that their entire life has been meaningless, a waste of time and effort. At this moment of disappointment, they are prone to overlook that they have spent many long periods

3. For a recent example, see Robert Nozick's speculations about the meaning of life culminating in the boundless *Ein Sof* (1981: chap. 6).

4. Cf. the discussion in Persson 2005: 224–27).

of their lives happily engrossed in the pursuit of this goal, experiencing what has been called flow by Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi. They might also overlook the joy they have brought to their family and friends.

In general, it is exceedingly difficult to make a balanced estimate of the good you have done to yourself and others during your life-span. So, you are prone to be guided by some episodes in your life that readily present themselves to you, e.g. what you experience right now.⁵ Such misguided estimates could be self-fulfilling: if you judge that your life has been going badly, this might cause you to make your life take a turn for the worse. Of course, misguided positive estimates are also likely to be self-fulfilling: if you judge that your life has been going well, this might make your life go better than it otherwise would have gone. But note that we are more likely to make misguided negative estimates because we are more inclined to reflect upon our lives overall when we are dejected and bored than when we are fulfilled and stimulated. In the latter case we simply immerse ourselves in the activities of life, get on with the business of living.

You are not guilty of such erroneous, partial judgments of your life when you adopt a cosmic perspective: this perspective could take into account every fact about your life that the most accurate mundane personal perspective on your life can take into account. But it covers more by widening the earth-bound context of your life to a cosmic context. In virtue of being more encompassing, the cosmic point of view can claim to present your life in a truer light than any mundane point of view it contains. This does not imply, however, that you should adopt a cosmic perspective rather than a mundane personal perspective, since it is not clear that being more truthful is worth the cost in respect of involvement in life. This involvement is probably necessary to motivate us to make our lives as meaningful as possible, by promoting what is of value in our own life and in the lives of others. Also, it is probably necessary to motivate us to rectify unjust inequalities in respect of the value of lives as far as this is possible.

However, to a considerable extent the injustice of some humans leading less meaningful lives than others through no fault or voluntary choice of their own cannot be abolished by us. To the extent that this is so, the loss of concern that the adoption of a cosmic perspective brings could provide some consolation, by alleviating some of the sting of the feeling of this unavoidable injustice. Even the achievements of the most influential people, the people whose achievements have affected the history of

5. Cf. Kahneman: 'the score that you quickly assign to your life is determined by a small sample of highly available ideas, not by a careful weighting of the domains of your life' (2011: 400).

the world for centuries and even millenia, like Aristotle and Buddha, will shrink to minuteness from a point of view which ranges widely over the universe for billions of years. Thus, the cosmic perspective has something of an equalising effect: its spatio-temporal vastness will make the differences between more and less meaningful human lives appear comparatively small. Note, however, that this perspective does not obliterate the differences in meaning between human lives: it is still true—and important—that some lives are more meaningful than others.

Bernard Williams (1973) speculates that if we were to live forever, we would eventually be overcome by boredom. If he is right, eternal life would be terrible, since there would be no possible escape from the boredom of an eternal life (at least if we cannot make ourselves unconscious forever). But it is hard to tell whether he is right, since it is so difficult to imagine a life that goes on forever. However, we can imagine a life that goes on apparently without end, i.e. a life such that, whatever point in it we consider, life goes on beyond that point. There seems to be no reason why such a life cannot be happy and fulfilling. The world is seemingly inexhaustible, so an alert and curious person could constantly discover new sources of interest. Compared to such a life lasting for thousands and even millions of years, the few decades of happiness that we could hope for appear trivial. Since such an indefinitely long life is a possible object of comparison *sub specie aeternitatis*, a humanly possible period of happiness could appear trivial to us.

If the explanation of the meaninglessness of life is a shift to a cosmic perspective, we can understand why Ludwig Wittgenstein could believe that '[t]he solution of the problem of life is seen in the vanishing of the problem', and that this is the reason why those who, after doubting 'the sense of life', have become clear about it have 'been unable to say what constituted that sense' (1963: 6.521). If you cease feeling that life is meaningless because you are sucked back into a mundane personal perspective from a cosmic perspective, this feeling could evaporate even though you have not made any new discovery about life to which you could point.⁶

6. However, the same inability to report a 'sense' could also result when your judgment that your life is meaningless has been prompted simply by the disappointment or unhappiness you feel at a particular stage of your life: when this stage becomes temporally distant and you enter a happier phase of life, this gloomy judgment is likely to vanish.

CONCLUSION

In this paper, we have argued that science represents no threat to finding meaning in life. Our lives have meaning if we intentionally promote what is of value for ourselves and for others. The meaning of life in this sense is scalar: some lives are more meaningful than others. It is true that science undercuts our lives having meaning in the sense of having a role or purpose in cosmic plan or drama designed by a super-natural intelligence. Instead it opens up a vast universe of which human affairs occupy a vanishingly small place. On the other hand, science provides us with effective means to provide our own lives and the lives of others with value and to reduce the inequality in respect of value between human lives. Although the value our lives can have appears small from the cosmic perspective of science, it is a mistake to feel that they have no value and meaning at all. In particular, it is mistake, committed by Tolstoy and others who have been taken in by religious world-views, to think that our lives can have meaning only if they last forever, or make contributions to something that lasts forever.

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