

A Stoic Approach to Living a Meaningful Life

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Abstract

In this paper I set out to accomplish two tasks. First, I develop a criterion as to what accounts for a satisfactory account of life's meaningfulness. Second, I use this criterion to evaluate four accounts of life's meaning, including Stoicism, existentialism, cosmological nihilism, and the theological purposive account. I argue that, in light of the criterion, that both cosmological nihilism and the theological purposive account are inadequate. While the existentialism account does meet the conditions of the criterion, it ignores important features of what it means to be human—the subject of what kind of meaningful life we are concerned with. Given that the Stoic account meets the criterion while correctly accounting for what it means to be human, I argue that Stoicism is a viable approach to understanding the meaning of life.

1. Introduction

The meaning of life has been a central question of philosophy, going back at least as far as Plato (C. 424-348 BCE). In his *Apology*, Plato recounts Socrates' famous statement that “The unexamined life is not worth living.”¹ By assuming that Socrates is correct, not only do we come to understand that a life that is worth living will be a meaningful one, but we also understand that the meaning of life involves reflection and for a person to live meaningfully she should examine life, including her own.

There have been more contemporary attempts to answer questions regarding life's meaning and how to live meaningfully.² While these are certainly important and worthwhile attempts to better understand the meaning of life, I believe more historical texts, in particular those provided by the Stoics, also offer significant contributions to our attempts to develop an understanding of life's meaning. This approach of appealing to the Stoics is consistent with the Modern Stoicism movement to better understand and resolve contemporary philosophical problems

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¹ Plato (2002), 38a5-6

² Notably Metz (2013).

through the implementation of Stoic techniques and texts.³ While Stoicism has generally been viewed as a *philosophy of life*, as far as I am aware, there has not been any formal discussion regarding *the* meaning of life and Stoicism.⁴

In this paper, I look specifically at the works of Musonius Rufus (30-100 CE), Seneca the Younger (c. 4 BCE-65 CE), and Marcus Aurelius (121-80 CE) to answer the questions regarding the meaning of a human life and what it means for a person to live meaningfully. For the purposes of succinctness, I refer to answers to these interrelated questions as *the account of life's meaning*. In what follows, I discuss some potential skeptical concerns with even attempting to give an account of life's meaning. These skeptical concerns provide a foundation for developing a criterion of satisfactoriness for an account of life's meaning. I then argue that the Stoic's account of life's meaning fulfills this criterion. In subsequent sections, I assess the extent to which examples of existentialism, cosmological nihilism, and theistic externalism fulfill the criterion's conditions. Lastly, I consider potential objections regarding the initial adoption of a Stoic perspective to the issue of the meaning of life.

2. Skeptical Worries

Why offer an account of life's meaning? There may in fact be reasons for not doing so, one metaphysical and one epistemological. With regards to, what I call the *metaphysical worry*, there may not be a meaning of life to discover, so we should not seek an answer. This is a mitigated version of *nihilism*, the view that there is *no* meaning of life.⁵ In response to the metaphysical worry, when we seek a meaning of life, we *at least* have the possibility of discovering meaning. While it may very well be possible that there is no meaning to discover, it seems that our lives become more meaningful when we attempt to discover life's meaning. This result is due in part to Socrates' own thought that when we examine life, we live lives that are worth living (i.e., meaningful).

The second reason for not offering an account of life's meaning I call the *epistemological worry*. This worry can be expressed as: *even if* there is meaning, we can never know what it is—therefore, we should not seek an answer. This

³ See Irvine (2008), Pigliucci (2018), and Robertson (2019).

⁴ I have conducted an extensive search to find any other academic discussions on the relationship between Stoicism and the meaning of life to no avail. I apologize if there are any papers I have overlooked, but I am also happy to incorporate those papers in subsequent discussions on the matter.

⁵ I respond to nihilistic concerns later in this paper.

worry, however, flies in the face of many other human pursuits that have proven valuable for unexpected reasons. For example, in cosmology we can never know how the universe came into existence, in the sense that the universe's origin will no longer be questioned. However, in having pursued the question of how the universe came into existence, presuming there was a time when the universe did not exist, we now have a better understanding of the behavior of light, the development of stars, and our own solar system. Similarly, by attempting to understand the meaning of life, we are able to understand what it means to be human and our relationships. For these reasons, even if we may not be able to know what the meaning of life is, we should still continue to seek an answer.

My initial responses to the metaphysical and epistemological worries might give the impression that I am suggesting we should pursue the question of life's meaning merely for the pragmatic benefits of having done so. But I want to go beyond pragmatism and state that it is not enough to pursue the question of life's meaning simply because doing so gives our lives meaning or that there may be unanticipated benefits. Instead, we should give an account of life's meaning. I acknowledge that we may not be able to produce the final answer of what the meaning of life is or what it means to live meaningfully, such that the question of life's meaning is no longer asked, but some answer is better than no answer. In large part, we should give an account of life's meaning since we orient our lives in accordance with what we take the meaning of life to be. Such an understanding has the capacity to influence and guide all our other pursuits, including professional, personal, and academic. Given the significant impact that an account of the meaning of life can have on how we live, we should give an account, while being open to its susceptibility to revision.

3. Definitional Concerns

Before setting out a criterion for a satisfactory account of life's meaning, we should be clearer as to what is meant by 'meaning of life'. By 'meaning' I mean 'flourishing'. There are, of course, other accounts of 'meaning' in the meaning of life literature, including 'accomplished', 'satisfactory', 'valuable', and 'pleasurable'. While I believe that each of these are important features of a meaningful life, I do not believe they are sufficient for understanding how we should orient our lives, which I believe we do in light of what we take life's meaning to be.

To pursue pleasure as the meaning of life runs the risk of a person constantly seeking pleasures that quickly dissipate (e.g., an orgasm) that result in the person desiring the next pleasurable event. Epicureans and other hedonists are quick to respond to this challenge by ranking pleasures, with intellectual pleasures being the highest form since they are the most withstanding form of pleasure. But even thinking of intellectual pleasures as the measurement by which a person lives meaningfully leaves the individual person looking to some external factor to determine if her life has meaning. Doing so is problematic since it is outside the person's control if those external factors will be available. Yet, it would seem that if a person truly has a meaningful life, it will not be contingent upon something outside the person's life. Furthermore, the person who is not able to pursue and enjoy pleasures should still be capable of having a meaningful life.

Something similar can be said regarding the view that a meaningful life is an accomplished life. The extent to which someone is able to enjoy accomplishments will be due to external factors such as the availability of opportunities that permit accomplishments to occur. A person who is not provided with these opportunities should still be able to develop an account of life's meaningfulness despite being unable to have accomplishments.

It is possible, though, that it is not so much that a person has accomplishments but has the *feeling* that she has lived an accomplished life given the available opportunities—no matter how few they may be. The reliance upon our own feelings or psychological states to determine how meaningful our lives are is problematic. A person with few life experiences will unlikely be able to distinguish between meaningful accomplishments and accomplishments not worthy of notoriety. Furthermore, a person who experiences emotional disturbances is not in the proper position to assess the meaningfulness of her own life. It is an open-ended question, though, as to what sort of accomplishments are meaningful ones; who is not capable of experiencing emotional disturbances (since we are all susceptible to these sort of disturbances); or at which point of our lives we are capable of assessing whether or not our accomplishments have contributed to the meaningfulness of our lives.⁶

These lingering issues give pause to accepting other emotionally based accounts of the meaning of life, including life-satisfaction views. It is not clear as to which aspects of a person's life with which she should be satisfied to have a

⁶ Haybron (2010) offers a similar line of reasoning, indicating that we are very bad at judging how well our own lives are going.

meaningful life. Also, individuals with different emotional capacities will experience different levels of satisfaction. It is unclear, though, how much satisfaction is needed to have meaning. Furthermore, it is not clear at which point of a person's life she should claim to be satisfied with her life to determine she has a meaningful life.

For someone to have a valuable life requires that either the person values her life or engages in a life that is valued. Requiring a person to value her own life befalls similar problems to the other subjective evaluative accounts. The person may not be mature enough or in the right emotional state to value her life in the right way to contribute to her understanding of the meaning of her life. Furthermore, it is likely that at later points of her life she will come to realize that things that gave her life value at earlier points are not as valuable as she had once thought. For these reasons, it is not sufficient to have a person value her life for her to have a meaningful life. On the other hand, in requiring a life to be valued for it to be meaningful begs the question *by whom is the life valued?* If it is the agent herself, then we encounter the aforementioned problems. If it is someone other than the agent, then we run into similar difficulties of looking to external factors to determine if someone's life is meaningful (as in the case of pursuing a pleasurable life as means to having a meaningful life). There may not be someone who is fit to value someone else's life or it is possible that no person is available to provide an evaluation. So, it is not adequate to think of a meaningful life as one that is valued. Therefore, understanding the meaningfulness of life in terms of a valuable life is unlikely to be a viable way for understanding the meaning of life.

While the previous line of reasoning would leave 'flourishing' as the most viable way of understanding 'meaning', there are independent reasons for doing so. First, flourishing is a description of how the person's life is going—regardless of how the person feels about her life. It is counterintuitive that a person may not know if she is living a meaningful life, but it is possible for a child to flourish without having the capacity to know if she is doing so. Yet, others with more experience would be able to recognize the child's flourishing. The child's flourishing, however, is not dependent upon the recognition—it is there such that it can be recognized. Similarly, an adult's flourishing does not depend upon her recognizing that she is flourishing. Such recognition might enhance her abilities to live meaningfully, but the recognition is not the determinant. For this reason, understanding 'meaning' in terms of 'flourishing' avoids many of the problems facing attempts to understand 'meaning' in terms of 'satisfactory',

‘accomplished’, and ‘valuable’.

Second, a person’s capacity to flourish will be constrained by the environmental factors in which she is situated. Yet, a person has the capacity to flourish as well as she can within those constraints—especially when such constraints are beyond her control. This way of thinking of a person’s capacity to flourish ensures that a person does not have to appeal to external factors to live a meaningful life, thereby avoiding the problems facing thinking of ‘meaning’ as ‘pleasure’ and one sense of ‘accomplished’. For these reasons, ‘flourish’ is the preferred way for thinking of ‘meaning’.⁷

With regards to ‘life’ I mean ‘human life’. There are different forms of life and we should not assume that what constitutes the meaningfulness of a human life will be the same things as a dolphin’s, tree’s, or worm’s life. It may turn out that what allows them to have meaningful lives will be determined by the same factors—albeit achieved through different means. My present concerns, however, will focus on what it means for a human to have a meaningful life. In the next section, I propose a criterion of satisfactoriness to use when determining which account of life’s meaning a person ought to adopt.

4. Criterion of Satisfactoriness for an Account of Life’s Meaning

There are four criteria that a satisfactory account of life’s meaning ought to fulfill. It should be *metaphysically non-skeptical*, *epistemologically non-skeptical*, *accessible*, and *empirical*. I treat each of these as being independently necessary for a satisfactory account and argue that they are jointly sufficient (yet, neither one is independently sufficient).

Given the earlier discussion of metaphysical and epistemological worries that comprise skeptical attitudes towards developing a satisfactory account of life’s meaningfulness, a successful account should at minimum assuage us of skeptical concerns. With respect to the metaphysical worry, in allowing for the possibility of there not being a meaning of life we should also take seriously the possibility of there being a meaning of life. But it is not enough to simply state that there is a meaning of life *out there* to be discovered. Instead, an account of the meaning

⁷ This may lead us to believe that a virtue ethics approach is the preferred approach to living a meaningful life. While Stoics certainly adopted much of virtue ethics, more would need to be said in this paper to make the case that a meaningful life is not just a flourishing life, but an ethical life (insofar as it flourishes). While I am inclined to agree, I am not making that claim here. Thank you to an anonymous reviewer for pushing me on this matter.

of life should be stipulated as a working hypothesis so that it can be evaluated in terms of its capacity to aid in our abilities to live a meaningful life—presuming that in having an account of the meaning of life we are then able to better understand how to live meaningfully.

In response to the epistemological worry, in having at minimum stipulated an account of life's meaning, we can establish the conditions for what is involved in knowing the account. In particular, we need to at least assume that we *can* know what the account of life's meaning entails so that we can assess if an account is more satisfactory than alternative accounts. The way we should go about assessing the viability of any account of life's meaning will be determined by the last two criteria.

For us to know whether we are appropriately adopting an account of life's meaning, we should have some degree of access to evidence. This accessibility condition is particularly important given that we should know whether we are living meaningfully. Without being aware of how successfully we have implemented the account we do not have the capacity to determine if the account is appropriate or how to live in accordance with the view. If we cannot determine if the account is appropriate, then we have no reason for preferring one account over others. Furthermore, if we do not know if we are living in accordance with the account, then we are unable to properly (re)orient our lives. For these reasons, a satisfactory account of life's meaning will require that we can have access to some level of evidence that warrants the adoption of the view.

The kind of evidence we should have access to ought to be empirically based. The adoption of an account of life's meaning will ultimately alter our experiences of how we live. This does not mean that we should only look to the extent to which we value, have pleasure, feel accomplished, or are satisfied with our lives, although these may be useful indicators. Instead, we should look to the observable effects of having adopted an account of life's meaning. These effects will likely conform to the details of the adopted account, but the effects need to be observable to ensure that it is through the adoption of the account that a person's life is more meaningful for having done so. If the effects are not observable, then the person does not know how to realign how she is living to live in better accordance with the adopted account. Furthermore, the effects can serve as a test as to whether the adopted account should continue to serve as guidance as to how the person should live. For these reasons, the effects need to be observable.

Given the above considerations, we can outline the criterion for a *satisfactory*

account of life's meaning as follows:

An account of life's meaning is satisfactory *if-and-only-if* it is:

1. Metaphysically Non-Skeptical: Assumes that there is a meaning of life *M*.
2. Epistemologically Non-Skeptical: Assumes that we can know *M*.
3. Epistemically Accessible: We can have access to the evidence in support of the belief that *M*.
4. Empirical: The evidence in support of the belief that *M* is observable.

In what follows, I will assess four different accounts of life's meaning in their abilities to satisfy the above criterion to argue that we ought to pursue a Stoic account.⁸

5. Stoicism

In answering the question of what constitutes a meaningful human life, we should be clearer on what it means to be *human*. Humans are social creatures. In addition to the feeling of loneliness being itself a negative experience, those who are left in isolation are susceptible to maladaptive traits. For example, those who are placed in solitary confinement are prone to anxiety, post traumatic stress disorder (PTSD), hallucinations, and paranoia.⁹ Thus, indicating that humans require some kind of social interaction to pursue a meaningful life, if not to survive.

The claim that humans are inherently dependent upon the social is reminiscent of Aristotle's (c. 384-322 BCE) own thoughts as to what it means to be human when he writes,

Man is by nature a social animal...Society is something that precedes the individual. Anyone who either cannot lead the common life or is self-

⁸ Metz (2013) sets out a similar criterion for determining what 'life's meaning' connotes. My aim, however, is to determine what we should expect from a satisfactory account—not necessarily what the term 'meaning of life' should pick out. While I do discuss in Section 3 what I believe is the appropriate interpretation of 'life's meaning' that is not the central aim of this paper. I do believe, however, that there is some overlap between our two accounts insofar as my account is naturalistic, not reduced to pleasures, and allows for a person to take both a part-life and whole-life view. My concern in this paper, though, is to assess how the Stoics can offer insight to the meaning of life.

⁹ Hagan, Wang, Aimnawung, et al. (2018).

sufficient as not to need to, and therefore does not partake of society, is either a beast or a god.¹⁰

Not only does Aristotle correctly identify that each person is born into a social context, but that a person needs to participate in that societal context if the person is to live meaningfully as a human.

Aristotle's views had a strong influence on Stoic thinkers. For example, Musonius Rufus suggests that human beings are participants, along with other organisms, in nature, indicating that nature is inherently social and that all living organisms participate in those social relations when he writes, "Human beings and other animals on the earth are involved in the turning and changing of the universe, as are divine beings."¹¹ Seneca suggests that we have an inherent need for others in his claim that "If we take away all interaction, and we renounce the human race, living turned inward only on ourselves, a need for things to do will be the consequence of this kind of isolation."¹² Similarly, Marcus Aurelius observes that humans are situated in relationship with other aspects of nature in claiming that "There are three relations: The one to the body which surrounds thee; the second to the divine cause from which all things come to be; and the third to those who live with thee."¹³ These relations shape how we should live, in suggesting that "We were born for cooperation, like feet, like hands, like eyelids...so to work in opposition to one another is against nature, and anger is opposition."¹⁴

Since I believe that the Stoics are on the right track regarding what it means to be human, it is worthwhile to also consider what insights they offer on what it means to live a meaningful human life. The biographer and historian Diogenes Laërtius (180-240 CE) offered some insight on this matter. He maintained that the Stoics divided humans into two classes: *virtuous* and *nonvirtuous*.¹⁵ Those who are virtuous are able to achieve their respective purposes and aims. Those who are nonvirtuous are incapable of fulfilling their respective purposes and aims. For this reason, we can begin seeing how the Stoics would maintain there being a close relationship between living virtuously and having a meaningful life. For Musonius Rufus, this is due to there being "an inborn capacity in the human

¹⁰ Aristotle (2013), I.1253a.

¹¹ Rufus (2011), p. 88.

¹² Seneca (2015) *De Tranquillitate Animi* 3.7

¹³ Marcus Aurelius (2006) *Meditations* VIII, 27

¹⁴ Marcus Aurelius (2006) *Meditations* II, 1

¹⁵ Diogenes Laërtius (1925) *Lives of Eminent Philosophers* 101 7.84-131

being's soul for proper living and that the seed of virtue exists in each of us...it is entirely fitting for us to be good.”¹⁶ Seneca maintains that our relationships will allow this “inborn capacity” to manifest itself when he writes,

Here's why we don't just shut ourselves up courageously behind the walls of one city, but set out to have contact with the whole world and proclaim that it belongs to us: it's so that we can give a wider playing field to virtue...You are never so shut out of the greater part of life that the better part of it is not left to you.¹⁷

From the above references, we can begin constructing a Stoic account of life's meaning. The Stoic approach is clearly teleological, since it determines what our purpose is in virtue of being human. If anything, keeping in line with Socrates' claim, our purpose is to live meaningful lives. For the Stoic, living meaningfully involves living virtuously. In doing so, a person is able to flourish (or exhibit *eudaimonia*). Therefore, to live meaningfully is to flourish.

To summarize, what it means to be human is tied to our relations to other humans, our communities, and the cosmos, at large. The better we are at working cooperatively with others, the more meaningful our lives become since it is through the flourishing of these relations that our own lives are better able to flourish. Therefore, the meaning of life is to flourish and the meaning of a human life is to flourish *as* a human being.¹⁸ It is important to note, though, that this does not require subjective well-being, although subjective well-being may be a side effect of flourishing.

In looking at the Stoic account of life's meaning, we get an answer to the metaphysical worry. The meaning of human life will be tied to the kinds of creatures we are—in particular, we understand ourselves as social creatures. Therefore, the meaning of life and how to live meaningfully will be tied to those social relationships. Furthermore, in knowing what kinds of creatures we are, we are able to know what is needed for us to not just merely survive, but to also flourish—therefore allowing us to know what is needed to live meaningfully. If we are living virtuously, then we are able to flourish. Now, there is the difficulty of recognizing if a person is living virtuously if the person is themselves not

¹⁶ Rufus (2011), p. 26.

¹⁷ Seneca (2006) *De Tranquillitate Animi* 4.4

¹⁸ On this account, then, the meaning of a tree's life is to flourish as a tree, and so on.

virtuous. Yet, this is why it is so important that a person surround herself with virtuous individuals so that others can serve as role models. While there is no clear way of knowing with whom we should associate, we can use guess work and be open to revisions in clear cases of relationships not being virtuous to better enhance our chances of flourishing. The extent to which our relationships become more virtuous, or at least less prone to vices, allows us to observe the extent to which we are flourishing by identifying our abilities to further cultivate virtuous relationships. While the Stoic account does not perfectly satisfy all the conditions for a satisfactory account of life's meaning, it fares better than other accounts. In the following sections I will illustrate how, beginning with existentialism.

6. Existentialism

While the Stoic account I offer here focuses primarily on our capacity to enter virtuous relationships, it is fundamentally an *internalist* view since meaning or purpose comes from humans. For this reason, I will discuss existentialism, since it is also an internalist account. One of the more prominent existentialist accounts comes from Sartre (1905-1980). In his 1948 *Existentialism is a Humanism* he provides an account of the meaning of life that is wholly dependent upon the individual person. His account can be summarized by the following passage:

Man is all the time outside of himself: it is in projecting and losing himself beyond himself that he makes man to exist; and, on the other hand, it is by pursuing transcendent aims that he himself is able to exist. Since man is thus self-surpassing, and can grasp objects only in relation to his self-surpassing, he is himself the heart and center of his transcendence. There is no other universe except the human universe, the universe of human subjectivity...This is humanism, because we remind man that there is no legislator but himself; that he himself, thus abandoned, must decide for himself; also because we show that it is not by turning back upon himself, but always seeking, beyond himself, an aim which is one of liberation or of some particular realization, that man can realize himself as truly human.¹⁹

¹⁹ Sartre (2007), p. 53.

Sartre's view has some similarities with Stoicism in that he grounds the meaningfulness of life in terms of a human life. Yet, he focuses on the individual human life instead of allowing human relations to play as prominent of a role as they do for the Stoics. For Sartre, it is through the pursuance of projects that are beyond the individual that a person is able to more fully realize herself. Through such realizations, the person is able to determine the meaningfulness of her life.

On the surface, existentialism appears to be a viable theory when considered in terms of the criterion for satisfactoriness. Even though there is no meaning "out there" for the individual to discover, the existentialist allows there to be meaning of life in terms of whatever projects the individual has freely chosen to pursue. In other words, the meaning of life is whatever the person determines to be her meaning. Therefore, the metaphysical worry is met. Given that the meaning of life is self-determined for existentialism, the individual person can then establish the criteria needed to know if she has in fact achieved this sort of meaning. She would then be able to determine the kind of evidence needed to assess if she has fulfilled that meaning, which she would then be able to observe in terms of her own life experience. So, it would seem that the existentialist view is in good standing.

Unfortunately, with allowing the meaning of life to be up to the individual it also makes the meaning of life arbitrary. The first problem with this arbitrariness is that it would allow someone with little life experience to determine what the meaning of life is for herself. A person with little life experience may choose projects that she would not have chosen at a later point in her life. We do not expect children to dictate many things regarding what constitutes a meaningful life, although Sartre does advocate for allowing children to learn through making their own mistakes.²⁰ There are, however, instances in which a parent should intervene when the child engages in behaviors that may be detrimental to her long-term well-being. We also expect some level of paternalistic involvement when anyone engages in behaviors that are at odds with her own best interests, which the person does not always recognize as such (e.g., someone who is not mentally competent to sufficiently express her autonomy). While I agree with Sartre that a person has the freedom to choose for herself, we should also allow others to recognize and assist when some choices may be harmful.

Allowing some level of paternalistic intervention applies also to when

²⁰ Sartre (1943).

someone engages in projects that are not conducive to the person living a meaningful life. Meaning, that not all projects are of equal value when considering which ones will allow a person to live meaningfully—even if they are projects chosen by the individual. On Sartre’s view, and this is the second problem with the arbitrariness of existentialism, is that any project that allows the person to realize herself will be seen as a project that contributes to the meaning of her life. Consider the example of the The Self-Taught Man from Sartre’s *Nausea*, in which The Self-Taught Man realizes his life’s meaning in terms of reading every single book in the library.²¹ On the face of it, it does not seem problematic that someone would like to read books, but in reading the books The Self-Taught Man is not pursuing knowledge or making use of the information—instead, it is the arbitrary task of reading all the books. It is no different than a person who wishes to eat every flavor of *Cheetos* or watch every show on *Netflix*. In accordance with existentialism, these projects are conducive to the person living meaningfully, but I maintain that these projects do not make a person’s life more meaningful since they do not contribute to the person’s flourishing—they are arbitrary accomplishments.

The existentialist could respond by suggesting that it is the individual person’s life and, therefore, up to the person to determine which projects contribute to the meaningfulness of her life—no matter how seemingly arbitrary they may seem.²² The existentialist, however, is mistakenly identifying a person’s life as being solely her own. Given our dependency on others, our lives are intimately tied to our relations (as the Stoics correctly recognize). To ignore the roles that our relationships play in shaping who we are is to ignore what it means to be human. Once we recognize the significance of our relationships, we move away from that view that any project will make a meaningful contribution to our lives. So, while the existentialist account of life’s meaning satisfies the conditions of the criterion for a satisfactory account of life’s meaningfulness, it falls short in allowing any project to count towards a meaningful life since it ignores important features of what it means to be human.

²¹ Sartre (2013).

²² Thanks to Otávio Bueno for this point.

7. Theological Purposiveness

While both Stoicism and existentialism are instances of internalism, there are also externalist views that maintain that the meaning of life will come from some source outside humanity. A candidate source is God. In particular, is the *theological purposive account* that states God has a plan for the universe and that a person's life is meaningful to the degree that one helps God realize His plan.²³

Unlike existentialism, the theological purposive account does not meet all the conditions for the criterion of a satisfactory account of life's meaningfulness. It at least meets the metaphysical worry by positing the existence of God and acknowledging that the meaning of life will be dependent upon God having a plan for our lives. The account, however, becomes problematic when evaluating the epistemological aspects of the criterion.

There are multiple difficulties with coming to know God and what His plan is. In terms of knowing God, there is the challenge of knowing which account of God is correct. Even in assuming that the Judeo-Christian view of God is the correct one, there are difficulties in justifying belief in Him. Hume had laid out some of the challenges of using either miracles or testimonies of religious experiences to justify belief in God's existence.²⁴ There are additional problems of relying upon religious texts. First, many religious texts have been viewed as being apocryphal. Second, there are disputes as to whether or not religious texts should be read literally or metaphorically.

Presuming that these challenges can be resolved, there remains the obstacle of knowing God's plan. Even Leibniz, a theist, maintained that we did not have God's perspective and, therefore, could not know God's plan.²⁵ In terms of knowing God's plan, we run into similar difficulties of knowing if God exists, since we can only appeal to religious texts or testimonies regarding religious experiences to have a sense of what God's plan is. Without knowing what God's plan is, and without having a clearer way of resolving the difficulties of assessing the only available evidence, it is difficult to know if we are correctly living in accordance with that plan.

It is possible that through the adoption of what we take that plan to be that we can assess our lives and the extent to which they are more meaningful through the

²³ Affolter (2007).

²⁴ Hume (1947).

²⁵ Leibniz (1952).

adoption of that plan. We, however, run into the problem of underdetermination in which it is not clear if our lives have become more meaningful due to us fulfilling God's plan, the mere belief that we are fulfilling God's plan, or some other cause. Without resolving the issue of how to know what God's plan is, we are unable to resolve the problem of underdetermination. For these reasons, the theistic purposive account is unable to satisfy the criterion for life's meaning.²⁶

8. Cosmological Nihilism

Other externalist accounts involve looking to the cosmos as a whole for the source of life's meaning. I believe that looking to the cosmos befalls similar problems as the theological purposive account. For this reason, I will not discuss positive cosmological accounts. Instead, I will discuss potential problems of adopting *cosmological nihilism*—the view that a single human being or the entire human species is insignificant, without purpose and unlikely to change in the totality of existence.²⁷

Cosmological nihilism has much in common with existentialism. Both views acknowledge that there is no meaning in life when viewed from the perspective of the cosmos. Existentialism, however, posits that there is meaning insofar as an individual realizes projects that transcend the self. Benatar, however, endorses cosmological nihilism “My view of cosmic meaning is indeed nihilistic. I think that there is no cosmic meaning.”²⁸ This view clearly does not satisfy the criterion for life's meaning. There is no meaning posited, so it not only fails to resolve the metaphysical worry, but instead endorses metaphysical skepticism. For this reason, there is nothing to know. But this is exactly the point of cosmological nihilism. So, the cosmological nihilist would not be concerned with not satisfying the criterion. Given that we use our understanding of the meaningfulness of life to orient our lives, cosmological nihilism is inadequate for understanding how to live.

Benatar acknowledges that we should not be looking for meaning by adopting the cosmological view, since there will not be anything to find. Rather than looking to the cosmos for meaning, we should look at our lives and relationships

²⁶ Metz (2013) also rejects the theological purposive account, but for metaphysical reasons—whereas my argument is focused on epistemological reasons for rejecting the theological purposive account.

²⁷ Crosby (1988), Storey (2011), and Benatar (2017).

²⁸ Benatar (2017), p. 62.

for meaning. He acknowledges that while life is meaningless, as a whole, it has meaning. He maintains,

Many different meanings are possible. One can transcend the self and make a positive mark on the lives of others in myriad ways. These include nurturing and teaching the young, caring for the sick, bringing relief to the suffering, improving society, creating great art or literature, and advancing knowledge.

Whereas the existentialist provides an account as to why these sorts of activities contribute to the meaningfulness of our lives, Benatar does not. He should, though, offer some explanation as to why humans are capable of deriving meaningfulness from their experiences, projects, and relationships where there is not cosmological meaning.

In large part, I believe that this lack of an explanation is due to him not offering an account of what it means to be a human, person, or self. But some account should be given if we are interested in what constitutes the meaning of a human life. Benatar's discussion, however, only focuses on the meaning of life (in general). This is where I believe that existentialism is preferable to Benatar's account, since the existentialist is centrally concerned with the meaning of life as it relates to the subject of experience (i.e., human beings). But, given that the Stoics are more successful in accounting for the significance of human relations, the Stoic account is more viable than the existentialist account. Therefore, the Stoic account is preferable to the cosmological nihilist's in accounting for how we can have human meaning—even if we reject the idea of there being cosmological meaning (which I do not believe we should).

9. Objections and Implications

While I have provided reasons for adopting 'flourishing' instead of other candidate definitions of 'meaning', I have given priority to Stoicism to understand what it means to live a meaningful life. In addition to the ways in which I believe that Stoicism more successfully satisfies the criterion for life's meaningfulness, there may still be concerns with adopting a Stoic framework. In particular, some additional explanation should be given as to why humans are better off when they live and work virtuously in accordance with others. In large part, it is not simply

due to the pragmatic benefits of living and working virtuously with others (e.g., security), but I would go so far as to say that we do flourish when we live virtuously and that it is due to the sorts of creatures that we are that we see this result.

Compare this assessment to other living organisms. For example, a sunflower has particular natural needs to flourish as a sunflower. It requires an appropriate environment in which it has full and bright sun, in addition to well-drained soil. The sunflower will not grow if it does not have these things. Furthermore, the quality of these things will determine the ways in which it grows. The better quality these things are then the more likely the sunflower will flourish. Human beings are similar insofar as in addition to food, shelter, and water, we also need social interactions. The quality of food, shelter, and water will impact our abilities to maintain good health. Furthermore, the quality of our social interactions will impact our capacity to develop and make meaningful contributions to those relations. A way to measure these relationships is in terms of virtue. By entering virtuous relationships, we greatly increase our chances of becoming virtuous. By becoming virtuous ourselves, we further enhance the virtuosity of the relationships. Thereby, enhancing the overall community. Since humans are born into a community, the more virtuous the community is in which they are born, the greater chance the person has in becoming virtuous. Yet, this is a natural feature of us in a similar way to how the environmental factors impact a sunflower's capacity to flourish.

With regards to the meaningfulness of our lives, when adopting this Stoic way of thinking, our lives have meaning and we can understand how to live meaningfully insofar as we pursue a virtuous life. The meaningfulness of our lives, however, will not be tied to us as individuals (as the existentialist would have it). Instead, meaning will be tied to the extent to which our relations can flourish. Furthermore, we should not believe that by looking only at our relations that there is no meaning when viewed from the cosmological perspective. Instead, there is still cosmological meaning in the sense that the meaningfulness of our lives will be tied to the kinds of creatures that we are.²⁹ Therefore, we also have cosmological reasons for adopting the Stoic account of what it means to live a meaningful life.³⁰

²⁹ I am not making a claim about natural kinds.

³⁰ It is at this point of the discussion where my account has some overlap with Wolf (2015). In particular, the conditions for flourishing are objective conditions in a similar way to how the projects

10. Conclusion

In this paper, I have set out to motivate the pursuance of a Stoic account of the meaningfulness of life. At its core, the argument can be summarized as follows: With regards to the question of what it means to live a meaningful life, we can either adopt an externalist or internalist position. As least some specific variations of two externalist views, the cosmological and theological, are unsatisfactory. When considering some specific variations of two internalist views, existentialism and Stoicism, existentialism is unsatisfactory due to its deemphasis of human relations in shaping the meaningfulness of our lives. Not only does Stoicism adequately fulfill the criterion of satisfactoriness of life's meaningfulness, but it correctly emphasizes the importance of human relations as well as accounting for how we can have meaning in our lives as a result of pursuing various projects that enable us to transcend ourselves in the contexts of our relationships. In large part, this is due to how in pursuing those projects we are further cultivating virtue in both ourselves and our communities. Therefore, we have reasons to further explore, if not accept, a Stoic view of what it means to live a meaningful life.³¹

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that give our lives value do so objectively. Whereas Wolf's account is focused on projects, my account is focused on relationships.

³¹ For Mirai. An initial version of this paper was presented at the Second International Conference of Meaning of Life October 8th, 2019 at Waseda University in Tokyo, Japan. Thank you to the members of the audience for their helpful feedback. Thanks to John Partridge for providing substantive comments and conversation. Another version of this paper was presented as part of the Distinguished Guest Lecture Series at Yavapai College in Prescott, Arizona January 28th, 2020. Thank you to the participants, especially students, who attended. This paper was greatly improved by the helpful comments provided by an anonymous reviewer and Masahiro Morioka.

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