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Fundamentality and Extradimensional Final Value

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Abstract

I argue that life's meaning is not only a distinct, gradational final value of individual lives, but also an "extradimensional" final value: the realization of meaning in life brings final value along an additional evaluative dimension, much as the realization of depth in solids or width in plane geometric figures brings magnitude along an additional spatial dimension. I go on to consider the extent to which Metz's (2013) fundamentality theory respects the principle that life's meaning is an extradimensional final value, and consequently suggest that the theory may stand in need of further refinement and supplementation.

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In the introductory chapter of his *Meaning in life* (2013), Metz helpfully articulates some principles that any conception of life's meaning should respect if it is to keep within the boundaries of the central concept at play in the relevant value-theoretic literature. One principle is that life's meaning is a feature of individual lives (whether in whole or in part), not merely a feature of humanity in general, life as such, and so on. Another principle is that life's meaning is a final value—a feature of individual lives that is desirable in its own right. This final value is also gradational: it can be realized to varying degrees, individual lives can be more or less meaningful. Yet another principle is that the final value is a distinct one, in the sense that it is neither identifiable with, nor reducible to a mere species of, any of the more familiar (e.g. moral, alethic, aesthetic, hedonic) forms of final value.

I quite agree that any conception of life's meaning should respect these principles. Any conception according to which meaning in life turns out to be a feature only of something other than individual lives, merely an instrumental value, an all or nothing affair, or just (a species of) moral, alethic, aesthetic, or

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hedonic final value, would seem clearly to be working outside the boundaries of the relevant concept. I think, however, that there is further principle that should be added to the list. My ultimate purpose in what follows is to consider Metz's own conception—the fundamentality theory he presents in the twelfth chapter of his book—in the light of this further principle. In the next section I will lay out the nature and plausibility of the principle. I will go on in the final section to consider the extent to which the fundamentality theory may be said to respect it.

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The further principle I have in mind is motivated by a serious consideration of pretheoretic metaphors for life's meaning. It is noteworthy that among these metaphors, spatial ones are especially common. Thus, as Wolf (2010) writes, meaning in life “is commonly associated with a kind of depth. Often the need for meaning is connected to the sense that one's life is empty or shallow” (pp. 7-8).

The central suggestion of the spatial metaphors seems to be about added dimensionality: meaning in life has to do with final value along an additional evaluative dimension, just as depth in solids or width in plane geometric figures has to do with magnitude along an additional spatial dimension. Relative to the magnitudes realized by rectangles, for example, cuboids realize a magnitude along an additional spatial dimension—an “extradimensional” magnitude; and rectangles realize an extradimensional magnitude relative to the magnitude realized by straight lines. Similarly, we may say in the light of the spatial metaphors, relative to the more familiar forms of final value that lives devoid of meaning may realize, meaningful lives realize a final value along an additional evaluative dimension—an extradimensional final value.

There are two important features of an extradimensional magnitude like depth or width: its realization always involves the realization to a certain degree of at least one other magnitude from which it is distinct, and its realization always yields more overall spatial magnitude than the realization to that degree of the other magnitude alone. Thus the realization of depth in a cuboid always involves the realization to a certain degree of length and width, as the realization of width in a rectangle always involves the realization to a certain degree of length; yet a cuboid with a certain length and width always has more overall spatial magnitude than a rectangle with the same length and width, and a

rectangle with a certain length always has more overall spatial magnitude than a straight line of the same length.

We may appeal to analogous features to define the relevant notion of an extradimensional final value:

Extradimensional final value: a final value whose realization (1) always involves the realization to a certain degree of at least one of the more familiar forms of final value and (2) is always more finally valuable overall than the realization to that degree of the more familiar form of final value alone.

To illustrate, consider famously realized final value—final value, that is, whose realization is widely praised. One might suppose that it counts as an extradimensional final value, on the grounds that its realization always involves the realization to a certain degree of at least one of the more familiar forms of final value. But is the realization of famously realized final value more finally valuable overall than the realization, to the relevant degree, merely of whatever more familiar form of final value it involves? I think there is some room for reasonable doubt here. Suppose that I realize famously realized final value by realizing moral final value to a certain degree: I intentionally afford you the consideration you morally deserve, and my doing so is widely praised. Suppose further that you realize moral final value to the same degree without realizing famously realized final value: you intentionally afford someone else the consideration they morally deserve, but your doing so goes quite unpraised. Must my realization of famously realized final value be more finally valuable overall than your realization to the relevant degree of moral final value alone? Not obviously, perhaps partly because we tend to think of praise as a largely if not entirely instrumental value. (Praise seems desirable at least largely by virtue of the sort of behavior or attitudes it encourages.) So although famously realized final value may count as an extradimensional final value, there is some reason to think that it may not: although it clearly meets condition (1) above, it does not so clearly meet (2).

Now consider final value whose realization brings a sense of satisfaction or enjoyment to the agent—satisfyingly realized final value. As with famously realized final value, its realization seems always to involve the realization to some degree of at least one of the more familiar forms of final value; but its

realization is not clearly always more finally valuable than the realization to a similar degree merely of whatever more familiar form of final value it involves. I am overly impressed with the importance of my own work in mathematics, suppose, and get a great deal of satisfaction in whatever work I complete in the field, however good or bad it may be; you, by contrast, are hypercritical of your own mathematical efforts, and never get any real satisfaction out of the mathematical work you do (which is typically much better than my work). Suppose further that we both independently discover an excellent proof of a modestly interesting theorem in the field. My discovery thereby realizes satisfyingly realized final value by realizing to a certain degree alethic final value. But does this bring more overall final value than your discovery, which merely realizes alethic final value to a similar degree? Again, there's room for reasonable doubt. Despite my satisfaction at what I have done, driven by my inflated sense of self-importance, it is not obvious that I have realized more overall final value than you.¹

Perhaps a clearer example of extradimensional final value is to be found in the sort of final value that figures centrally in Taylor's (1981, 1987, 1999) creativity conception of life's meaning: uncommonly realized final value, i.e. rarely before (and in the maximal case, never before) realized final value. The realization of uncommonly realized final value seems also always to involve the realization to some degree of at least one of the more familiar forms of final value; I can only realize uncommonly realized final value through realizing moral or alethic or aesthetic or hedonic final value to some degree. And it is quite intuitive that the realization of uncommonly realized final value is always more finally valuable overall than the mere realization to the relevant degree of whatever more familiar form of final value it involves: there is something about the uncommonly realized nature of uncommonly realized final value—something about its rarity or uniqueness—that seems to render its realization always of more overall final value. Intentionally to afford a social group the consideration they morally deserve, in a society where the group is (and has long been) regularly afforded such consideration, is, I take it, to realize

¹ As an anonymous referee points out, one might try to avoid examples like this by insisting that the sense of satisfaction involved in satisfyingly realized final value be appropriate, and so not driven by such things as an inflated sense of self-importance. But the main challenge would then be to tease out the relevant notion of appropriateness in a non-question-begging way, i.e. in a way that does not simply assume that condition (2) is met.

moral final value to a moderate-to-fairly-high degree (notwithstanding its commonly realized nature); being one of the first intentionally to afford the group the consideration they morally deserve, where they have heretofore almost never received it, is to realize uncommonly realized final value by realizing moral final value to a similar degree. But it is very intuitive that the latter realization yields more overall final value than the former. Likewise, the realization of uncommonly realized final value through the realization to a certain degree of alethic final value (e.g. by being the, or one of the first to discover a proof for an interesting theorem) seems clearly to carry more overall final value than the realization to that degree of alethic final value alone (e.g. by being yet another in a long list to come up with such a proof); the realization of uncommonly realized final value through the realization to some degree of aesthetic final value (e.g. by composing the first great poem of a particular type) seems to be of more overall final value than the realization to a similar degree of aesthetic final value alone (e.g. by being the most recent in a very long line of authors to compose a great poem of the relevant type); the realization of uncommonly realized final value through the realization to a certain degree of hedonic final value (e.g. by intentionally generating a rarely experienced gustatory pleasure with one's culinary efforts) is intuitively of more overall final value than the realization to a similar degree of hedonic final value alone (e.g. by generating a commonly experienced gustatory pleasure); and so on.

With the notion of extradimensional final value thus explicated, I can now succinctly state the further principle about life's meaning that I think any conception of it should respect:

The extradimensionality of life's meaning (ELM): life's meaning is not just a distinct, gradational final value of individual lives, but also an extradimensional final value.

Properly understood, ELM has a good deal of intuitive plausibility and makes good sense of the pretheoretic metaphors that motivate it. Further, it allows us to accommodate—much better than we could without it—some frequently recurring views on life's meaning.

Consider, for example, the view that meaning in life has something importantly to do with transcendence—with “rising above” or “going beyond” the familiar or ordinary—in life. I suspect that this view is largely responsible

for the appeal of both supernaturalist and personal transcendence conceptions of life's meaning. According to supernaturalist conceptions (e.g. Fackenheim 1965, Quinn 1999, Cottingham 2003), meaning in life requires that a life transcend its familiar natural setting by relating in the right sort of way to a supernatural realm or being. On personal transcendence conceptions (e.g. Frankl 1966, Nozick 1981, Gewirth 1998; cf. Nietzsche [1872] 1961, More 2010), meaning in life requires that the individual living the life transcend ordinary limits to her personhood—that she become an extraordinary, significantly less limited sort of person.²

ELM allows us to accept the transcendence view without committing ourselves to these conceptions. Given ELM, meaning in life has something importantly to do with transcendence because it has something importantly to do with *evaluative* transcendence: for a life to be meaningful, on ELM, it must realize a final value that evaluatively goes beyond or stands above ordinary, more familiar final values, in the sense that its realization necessarily brings with it more overall final value than theirs (to the relevant degrees) alone. Yet this evaluative transcendence need not involve any sort of metaphysical or personal transcendence, as the supernaturalist and personal transcendence conceptions would have it. In light of ELM, we can say that these conceptions are right to insist on transcendence for meaning in life, but (perhaps) wrong to insist on the nonevaluative forms of transcendence to which they advert.

Or consider the view that meaning in life cannot simply be a matter of having a very high degree of any of the more familiar forms of final value in life—simply a matter of doing a great amount of moral good, acquiring a large amount of truth or knowledge, manifesting an impressive amount of beauty, or getting (or giving) a great amount of pleasure, in life. This view is most salient in those individuals who, despite knowing full well that their lives realize extraordinary amounts of the more familiar forms of final value, seriously wonder whether their lives have any appreciable meaning at all.³ These individuals do not seem guilty of any obvious, basic conceptual confusion, as if they were worried about whether the great deal of this or that final value they have realized in life makes their lives at all finally valuable. They seem rather to be thinking, however tacitly, that no high degree of the sort of final value they

² Some personal transcendence conceptions, such as Nozick's, seem also to be supernaturalist in character.

³ Historically, Tolstoy ([1882] 1983) serves as one of the most famous examples in the literature.

have (obviously) realized in their lives can alone be sufficient for meaning in life, and then asking themselves whether their lives have whatever else is required. They may harbor some ultimately mistaken conviction about the “whatever else” that tempts them towards a distressingly negative answer to their question,⁴ but the question itself seems quite reasonable to ask and attempt to answer.

Without ELM (or something very much like it), I think, we lack the resources to explain the view that meaning in life is not simply a matter of having a very high degree of the more familiar forms of final value in life. The principle that life’s meaning is a distinct final value, for example, does not explain it, for having a very high degree of one or another of the more familiar forms of final value is itself a final value that is so distinct: it is neither identical with nor a mere species of any of the more familiar forms of final value. But with ELM, we do seem to have the resources to explain the view. If ELM is accepted, meaning in life cannot be regarded as simply a matter of having a very high degree of more familiar final value in life, because merely to realize any form of such value to any degree (however high) is to realize something other than extradimensional final value, and meaning in life is an extradimensional final value. On ELM, therefore, the view apparently adopted by individuals who seriously wonder whether their lives have any appreciable meaning at all despite clearly having a very high degree of moral, hedonic, etc. final value is correct, and the question these individuals pose to themselves is quite rational.

Yet another frequently recurring view on life’s meaning (see, e.g., James [1895] 1979, Wittgenstein [1929] 1965, Camus [1942] 1975, Kekes 2000, Haack 2002, Baggini 2005, Brogaard & Smith 2005, Reginster 2006, Goetz 2014) is that it has something specially to do with the worthwhileness of life. This view need not⁵ be understood as identifying, or even as asserting an analytic connection between, the concepts of meaning and worthwhileness in life: one can reasonably take meaning in life to be the prime candidate for what renders a life worth living (i.e. better lived than not, in an all-things-considered sense of ‘better’), for example, without holding that ‘meaningful life’ and ‘worthwhile life’ are synonymous or that ‘a meaningful life is a worthwhile life’ is analytically true. And the view is powerfully supported by the well-known Schopenhauerian insight that life inevitably involves so much *disvalue* along the

⁴ In Tolstoy’s case, the mistaken conviction seems to be more or less what Metz aptly calls the “perfection thesis” (2013, pp. 138ff.).

⁵ And if Metz (2012) is right, should not.

more familiar dimensions of final evaluation—so much moral, alethic, aesthetic, and hedonic evil or badness—that the realization of no amount of countervailing value along such dimensions could alone make it worthwhile.⁶ As the thought goes: in light of the inevitable final disvalue it includes, life could only be rendered worthwhile by realizing a particularly substantial sort of final value; and meaning in life seems particularly well suited to fit this evaluative bill.

To think that meaning in life is so suited is to hold the view that life's meaning has something specially to do with its worthwhileness. And that view is perfectly intelligible on ELM. Because, as ELM has it, life's meaning is an extradimensional final value, it is, unlike the more familiar forms of final value, a uniquely plausible candidate for the sort of value whose realization can render a life better, all things considered, lived than not.

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ELM thus has much to be said in its favor: not only does it have considerable intuitive appeal and account for the pretheoretic metaphors that motivate it, it also allows us to explain the appeal of various recurring views on life's meaning. Accordingly, I think, ELM deserves to be added to the list of framework principles about life's meaning. I want now to consider Metz's fundamentality theory in the light of this further principle.

Here I will be concerned only with the fundamentality theory as a conception of life's meaning *simpliciter*—as a conception of what Metz calls “*pro tanto* meaning” (2013, pp. 39 & 220); for present purposes I will leave aside his richly rewarding discussions of the ways in which this theory may be developed into an account of both “on-balance” meaning in life (pp. 146-56 & 235-6) and negative meaninglessness (evaluative “anti-matter”) in life (pp. 63-4 & 234). In this basic form, the fundamentality theory takes meaning in life to be essentially a function of the exercise of rationality in favor of fundamental conditions of human existence:

The fundamentality theory: An individual's life is meaningful just to the

⁶ Sober reflection on ordinary life, Schopenhauer famously argued, should drive us to the conclusion that life is simply “a business that does not cover the costs” ([1844] 2011, ch. 45, p. 638; cf. [1893] 1974, pp. 291-305). Benatar (2006, chs. 2 & 3) provides a jarring, recent expression of this Schopenhauerian insight.

extent that in her life she exercises her rationality in favor of fundamental conditions of human existence.

Rationality (or reason) is here to be understood very broadly: it is meant to include “all intuitive facets of intelligence of which human beings are characteristically capable and animals, even higher ones such as chimpanzees, are not” (Metz 2013, p. 223). Thus it includes not just “certain kinds of cognition and intentional action” but also many things that other theorists “might call ‘non-rational facets of our nature’,” such as various forms of judgment-dependent desire, emotion, or conation (p. 223). And for an individual to exercise her rationality in favor of fundamental conditions of human existence is for her to exercise it in such a way that either promotes these conditions (i.e. encourages their obtaining) or protects them (i.e. discourages their no longer obtaining) (pp. 233-4).

What then are the fundamental conditions of human existence that, according to the theory, rationality must be so exercised in favor of? They are, Metz says, conditions of broad human domains—human personhood, human sociality, and human environmental situatedness—and “largely responsible for many other conditions” of human existence (2013, p. 226). Thus, whereas the disposition rationally to care for other human beings as such, as a condition of both human personhood and human sociality (pp. 228-9), counts as fundamental, the disposition merely to share with or care for one’s own best friend presumably does not. Similarly, whereas the capacity of the human species to survive through natural selection, as a condition of human environmental situatedness, counts as fundamental (p. 229), my capacity to survive the particular strain of influenza I encountered last month does not. The fundamental conditions are all general conditions of broad human domains, causally responsible (at least in some structural sense) for a great many other particular conditions of human existence; the contrasting non-fundamental ones are particular conditions at best responsible for a few other particular conditions of human existence.

I take it, moreover, that Metz intends the fundamental conditions to be fundamentally good ones, or at least not fundamentally bad ones. This is why a deep-seated penchant for selfishness, violence, or destruction would presumably not in his view count as a fundamental condition of human existence even if it turned out to be of a broad human domain and largely responsible for many

other conditions of human existence. It would hardly be an attractive feature of the fundamentality theory to allow that great meaning in life can come through exercising one's rationality in favor of extreme selfishness, violence, or destruction.

So understood, it is clear that the fundamentality theory well respects the framework principles that Metz articulates in the introductory chapter of his book. The exercise of rationality in favor of fundamental conditions of human existence is obviously a feature that individual lives can share, is of some final and not merely instrumental value, comes in degrees (conditions of human existence can be fundamental to greater or lesser degrees, one can more or less rationally act in favor of the fundamental conditions), and is neither identical to nor a mere species of any of the more familiar forms of final value.⁷ Hence, as essentially a function of the exercise of rationality in favor of fundamental conditions of human existence, life's meaning is, according to the fundamentality theory, a distinct, gradational final value of individual lives.

But what about ELM? Does the fundamentality theory respect it as well? On the theory life's meaning does seem to satisfy the first condition for extradimensional final value, namely, being such that its realization always involves the realization to some degree of at least one of the more familiar forms of final value. Consider the sorts of activities that seem (following Metz's suggestions) to count as paradigmatic realizers of the exercise of rationality in favor of fundamental conditions of human existence, and hence of meaning in life according to the theory: sacrificing one's personal well being in order to undermine a widely oppressive social regime (cf. 2013, p. 227); doing what one can to contribute to an institution of wide social benefit (cf. p. 227); promoting healthy interpersonal (including intimate) relationships in general (cf. p. 228); making scientific discoveries of sweeping scientific importance (cf. p. 229); coming up with powerful theoretical explanations (cf. p. 229); creating great artworks reflective of universal themes (cf. pp. 230-1); and inventing admirable means of increasing human pleasure or comfort (cf. p. 223). All of these appear to involve the realization to some degree of one or more of the more familiar

⁷ One might think that the exercise of rationality in favor of fundamental conditions of human existence is merely a species of alethic (or epistemic, or intellectual) final value, but this would be a mistake given the broad sense of rationality here at play, which cuts across the other, more familiar forms of final value. Cf. Metz's remarks on how, given this broad sense of rationality, the fundamentality theory is not "overly intellectual" (p. 223).

forms of final value. Sacrificing one's personal well being in order to undermine a widely oppressive social regime, doing what one can to contribute to an institution of wide social benefit, and promoting healthy interpersonal relationships all seem to involve the realization to some degree of (at least) moral final value; making scientific discoveries of broad scientific importance and coming up with powerful theoretical explanations obviously involve the realization to a certain degree of alethic final value; creating great, universally-themed works of art involves the realization to some degree of aesthetic final value; inventing admirable means of increasing many others' pleasure or comfort is surely to some degree of hedonic final value; and so on.

I worry, however, that on the fundamentality theory life's meaning does not satisfy the second condition for extradimensional final value. Recall that condition: meaning in life must be such that its realization is always more finally valuable overall than the mere realization, to the relevant degree, of whatever other more familiar form of final value it involves. Compare now a situation in which meaning in life is on the fundamentality theory realized through the realization of moral final value to some degree, with a situation in which moral final value is to that degree alone realized. In the first situation, suppose, I exercise my rationality in favor of a fundamental condition of human existence by realizing moral final value to a moderate degree: I sacrifice a modest amount of my personal well being in order partially to undermine a widely oppressive social regime. In the second situation you merely realize moral final value to a similarly moderate degree: you sacrifice a large amount of your own well being in order completely to correct an injustice suffered by just a single individual with whom you are acquainted. (The realization of moral final value in this second situation does not count as an exercise of rationality in favor of a fundamental condition of human existence because it is only in favor of a particular condition of a particular individual, and hence not in favor of a general condition that is responsible for many other conditions of human existence.) Here, does my realization of what the fundamentality theory considers as life's meaning carry more overall final value than your realization to a moderate degree of moral final value alone? Is my action in the first situation more finally valuable overall than yours in the second situation? My intuition provides no clear answer here; it does not strike me as counterintuitive to say that your strong effort fully to correct an injustice suffered by a particular individual is just as finally valuable overall as my comparatively weak effort

partially to undermine a widely oppressive social regime.

In a similar vein, compare a situation in which meaning in life is, on the fundamentality theory, realized through the realization of alethic final value to a certain degree, with a situation in which alethic final value is to that degree alone realized: I realize alethic final value to a high degree by making a scientific discovery of modest interest to a broad range of scientists; you realize alethic final value to a similarly high degree by making a scientific discovery of great interest to a much narrower range of scientists. (My discovery, suppose, is of modest interest to all sorts of physicists, chemists, biologists, and so on; yours is of great interest just to a small handful of high-energy particle physicists.) I thus realize what the fundamentality theory takes to be life's meaning, but you do not: you merely realize alethic final value to the relevant degree. Does my discovery intuitively carry more overall final value than yours? I see no obviousness to the suggestion that it does; it strikes me as at least as plausible to suggest that your discovery is of pretty much the same overall final value as mine.

I suspect that similar examples, in which the realization of what the fundamentality theory takes as life's meaning is contrasted with the realization to the relevant degree merely of aesthetic or hedonic value, will turn out along similar lines: it is not obvious that the former sort of realization always yields significantly more overall final value than the latter. And if that is indeed the case, then it is unclear whether the fundamentality theory affords ELM its due respect. The exercise of rationality in favor of fundamental conditions of human existence seems clearly to meet one of the two conditions for extradimensionality, namely, that its realization always involves the realization to a certain degree of at least one of the more familiar forms of final value. But it does not seem clearly to satisfy the other important condition—that its realization is always more finally valuable overall than the mere realization, to the relevant degree, of whatever more familiar form of final value it involves. To revert to a spatial metaphor that helped motivate ELM, the worry is that the fundamentality theory does not obviously capture the depth of life's meaning, only its width or length.

Even so, just how well the fundamentality theory respects the other key framework principles about life's meaning—much better than most conceptions in the literature—should not be ignored. Surely any conception that does so well respect the other principles is largely on the right track. The considerations I

have raised about the extent to which the fundamentality theory respects ELM call not, in my view, for wholesale abandonment of the theory but for its further refinement and supplementation. I am uncertain about the particular direction in which this refinement and supplementation will lead. But I am certain that, in whatever direction it leads, it will yield even more meaning in the life of the one who pursues it.

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