



## Source and Bearer : Metz on the Pure Part-Life View of Meaning

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## Source and Bearer

### Metz on the Pure Part-Life View of Meaning

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#### **Abstract**

According to the *pure part-life view* the meaning in our lives is always borne by particular parts of our lives. The aim of this paper is to show that Thaddeus Metz's rejection of this view is too quick. Given that meaning is a value that often depends on relational rather than intrinsic properties a pure part-life view can accommodate many of the intuitions that move Metz towards a *mixed view*. According to this mixed view some meaning is borne by parts of our lives and some by our lives as a whole. The arguments in this paper suggest, however, that even if a pure part-life view is to be rejected, a mixed view that incorporates a whole-life aspect is not going to be any more plausible.

#### **1. Introduction**

Thaddeus Metz's *Meaning in Life* is a magisterial treatment of this important topic as it is discussed in contemporary analytic philosophy. Early on in the book Metz discusses whether the bearers of meaning are whole lives, parts of lives, or both.<sup>1</sup> He argues for the last of these options rejecting the pure whole-life view, and the pure part-life view in order. Having done so he briefly raises some puzzles regarding the whole-life aspect of his mixed view without fully resolving them. In closing his discussion of the bearers of meaning Metz cautions the reader that, in keeping with the majority of the literature, he will focus on part-life aspects and largely set aside issues regarding meaning borne by whole lives.<sup>2</sup> Thus, by his own lights, Metz's book is somewhat incomplete: it fails to engage thoroughly with one way in which our lives can bear meaning.

In this short article I suggest that this incompleteness is merely apparent. I argue that Metz's rejection of the pure part-life view is too quick and that pure part-lifers can accommodate the intuitions that drive Metz to adopt his mixed view. Moreover, insofar as a pure part-life view has trouble accommodating these ideas adding a whole-life aspect does not help. I suggest that a properly

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<sup>1</sup> Cf. Metz (2014), Chapter 3.

<sup>2</sup> Metz (2014), 58.

developed pure part-life view is less vulnerable to the problems that Metz raises for the whole-life aspects of his view. Thus, while I reject Metz's mixed view on the bearers of meaning, my proposal would strengthen his overall project. Some of the loose ends he leaves become easier to tie up, and his almost exclusive focus on the way in which the parts of a life can contribute to its meaning is fully justified; for there is nothing else to discuss.

The paper proceeds as follows. I begin with a brief summary of Metz's discussion of the bearers of meaning (section 2). Next, I draw attention to resources at the disposal of the pure part-life view not fully considered by Metz, show how these resources help to accommodate the judgements that drive Metz to reject the view, and provide independent reasons why a pure part-life view would want to employ these resources (section 3). I then put these resources to use by reevaluating the considerations that Metz puts forward in support of his mixed view (section 4). Finally, I briefly discuss how this improved pure part-life view dissolves one of the puzzles that Metz raises for his own view (section 5).

## **2. Metz on the Bearers of Meaning**

Metz begins his discussion of the potential bearers of meaning by drawing the distinction between a whole-life view and a part-life view thus:

What I call 'pure whole-lifers' maintain that the only bearer of meaning is an entire life composed of certain relationships between its parts. Typically, they maintain that what can make a life meaningful is solely a function of the narrative structure among the parts, viz., a story or biography characterizing one's existence that admits of aesthetic properties... In contrast, 'pure part-lifers' maintain that the only bearer of meaning is a part of a life 'in itself', usually a spatio-temporal segment such as the fulfillment of a desire or the performance of an activity.<sup>3</sup>

He admits to not having a fully developed account of what is to count as a part of a life. While he suggests that developing such an account would be a worthwhile endeavour, he proposes to make do with the intuitive notion of a part

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<sup>3</sup> Metz (2014), 37.

as a ‘subset of a person’s existence’, a phrase which he intends to cover a liberal range including ‘mere slivers of space-time’ as well as lengthy periods such as a person’s adolescence.<sup>4</sup>

Having drawn this distinction (and after distinguishing it from a couple of other distinctions), Metz turns to rejecting arguments in favour of a pure whole-life view. He finds that there seem to be clear cases in which parts of a life are meaningful or meaningless; for example, finding a cure for cancer seems to confer meaning while a period of time spent torturing babies for fun appears to be meaningless. Metz surveys some theoretical reasons for overruling the intuitive verdict about cases like that and finds them lacking. As I agree with him on that count and the pure whole-life view is not my concern in this paper, there is no need to go into any more detail here.

Metz’s argument against the pure part-life view is much shorter and consists of a list of ways in which a life can be meaningful not in virtue of any part of it, but rather in virtue of how such parts are related. Metz identifies five types of patterns that he thinks make for a meaningful life above and beyond the meaning that can be found in its parts.<sup>5</sup>

First, he suggests that variety makes for a more meaningful life.

Even if the parts of a very repetitive life were quite meaningful in themselves, most would sacrifice some meaning in the parts in order to avoid repetition in the pattern and thereby enhance the importance of the whole.<sup>6</sup>

Metz illustrates this idea with the movie *Groundhog Day* in which the Bill Murray character relives the same day over and over and, after a while, continues to fill the day with more and more meaningful activities. While the day is very meaningful towards the end, it does seem that repeating this day until the end of his life would leave the character with a less meaningful life than if he moved on to different things.

Second, Metz suggests that a life that gets better through time is more

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<sup>4</sup> Cf. Metz (2014), 39.

<sup>5</sup> My presentation of this list of patterns slightly diverges from Metz’s. He seems to think that what I call the fourth kind of pattern is an instance of the third. On the other hand, he treats the ideas of bad parts causing good and bad parts causing goods in a particular way as distinct patterns while I lump them in together.

<sup>6</sup> Metz (2014), 50.

meaningful than one that deteriorates. Metz's third suggestion is that a life is more meaningful if its bad or meaningless parts later cause good or meaningful ones. To learn from one's mistakes makes life more meaningful than to make mistakes and learn independently of them; to make good use of that learning is even more meaningful; and some ways of doing so confer more meaning than others. Fourth, Metz believes that a life's posthumous influence can confer meaning on it. Finally, he mentions the idea that a life can have meaning in making for a compelling and original story.

Having listed these ways in which the patterns of our lives can make a difference to their meaningfulness, Metz sees only one option for the friends of the pure part-life view: to bite the bullet on all of them.

Pure part-lifers must reply that our judgements about these relational features are confused, such that when we judge there to be more meaning for these reasons, what is actually motivating us is the implicit supposition that there would be a greater sum of meaningful parts.<sup>7</sup>

But there is another option. A pure part-lifer may concede the force of (some of) the examples and maintain that, while it is true that meaning obtains in virtue of these relational features, this additional meaning nevertheless accrues to the parts of a life rather than to the life as a whole. Thus the part-lifer is not forced to deny the impact of relational features but could try to accommodate them. Indeed, I believe that a thoughtful version of the pure part-life view would already have the resources to accommodate relational features. In fully working out their view, then, pure part-lifers could approach Metz's list with an open mind. Of some of the features they might actually want to deny that they confer additional meaning. But they do not have to say this about all of them; some of these features can be accommodated within a pure part-life framework. How exactly this works is what I turn to next.

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<sup>7</sup> Metz (2014), 51.

### 3. Parts and Their Meaning

#### 3.1 Extrinsic Final Value

To have meaning in one's life is valuable for its own sake. Thus, meaning is what is often called a *final* good.<sup>8</sup> It has also been common for a long time to refer to such values as *intrinsic* goods. While this usage of the term 'intrinsic' remains common currency in many contexts, it is now widely recognized as inaccurate. Beginning with Christine Korsgaard's influential paper 'Two Distinctions in Goodness' ethicists have increasingly come to accept that the distinction final/non-final value (instrumental value being the most salient example of the latter category) cuts across the distinction between intrinsic and extrinsic value. The former distinguishes things that are being (or ought to be) valued for their own sake from those that are valued (merely) for the sake of something they are suitably related to. The latter distinguishes things that are valuable in virtue of their intrinsic properties from those that have value (partly) in virtue of their relational properties.<sup>9</sup>

Part of the reason why people have traditionally used the term 'intrinsic' to denote what we now call 'final' is that, following G.E. Moore, it was assumed that final value could only ever accrue to something in virtue of its intrinsic properties.<sup>10</sup> Thus, the distinction between final and intrinsic value would be one without a difference.<sup>11</sup> But the arguments of Korsgaard and others have convinced many people that this is not so, or that it can at the very least be reasonably doubted.<sup>12</sup> Shelly Kagan, for instance, provides a number of cases that he takes to be instances of extrinsic final value. Among the items he considers is the pen Lincoln used to sign the Emancipation Proclamation.<sup>13</sup> This pen, he claims, has final value (is good for its own sake) in virtue of its instrumental history which is, of course, a relational property of the pen. Similarly, he claims that certain things can be finally valuable in virtue of their

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<sup>8</sup> Cf. Metz (2014), 62.

<sup>9</sup> Cf. Rabinowicz/Roennow-Rasmussen (2000) for a particularly clear articulation of these cross-distinctions.

<sup>10</sup> Cf. e.g. Moore (1922).

<sup>11</sup> Cf. Rabinowicz/Roennow-Rasmussen (2000), 34.

<sup>12</sup> Cf. Kagan (1992), O'Neill (1992), Hurka (1998). Cf. Zimmerman (2001) for an argument to the effect that the Moorean view equating intrinsic and final value is substantially correct.

<sup>13</sup> Kagan (1992), 285.

*uniqueness* which is a paradigmatically relational property.<sup>14</sup>

The import of this brief discussion for the question at hand should be clear. If it is possible for final value to obtain in virtue of relational properties, the defender of the pure part-life view may claim that the meaning that is added to a life through various patterns is nevertheless a value that the parts have. Parts of a life, on this view, are meaningful (partly) in virtue of their relational properties. I will now turn to why I believe this move to be particularly plausible in the context of meaning.

### **3.2 Meaning as a (Mainly) Extrinsic Value**

Metz is well aware of the possibility of extrinsic final value. Indeed, in his discussion of the value-theoretic differences between pleasure and meaning he claims that pleasure's final value is intrinsic whereas actions conferring meaning on a life often do so in virtue of their relational properties.

For example, consider creative behaviour. Imagine in one case that it is the result of substantial education, training, and effort, whereas in another case it is the consequence of taking a pill. Or imagine in one case that creative behaviour results in a novel art-object that others appreciate, whereas in another one it does not. In both pairs of cases, it is natural to say that we could have the same creative activity but differential meaning, because of how it was brought about and what its results were.<sup>15</sup>

This seems exactly right to me.<sup>16</sup>

Consider also that the very phrase 'meaning of life' points to an essentially relational concept. When we use the term 'meaning' in other contexts we refer straightforwardly to a relation. To say that a sentence or a symbol is meaningful is simply to say that it stands in a certain relation to something else. While Metz is right that it would be a mistake to assume that 'meaning' connotes the same concept in 'meaning of (or in) life' as in the context of language, it is surely no accident that we refer to this particular value with a term that has such strong

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<sup>14</sup> Kagan (1992), 282.

<sup>15</sup> Metz (2014), 67.

<sup>16</sup> It may be worth noting that meaning is in this respect different not only from pleasure but also from the Kantian conception of moral worth.

relational connotations.<sup>17</sup> When we say that a life was meaningful we do not say that it was a symbol for something else. But we do, I believe, mean that at least some parts of the life stood in significant relations to things or events outside themselves.

Again, Metz will need no convincing here. His account of the concept of meaning in life<sup>18</sup> as well as his favourite conception of it<sup>19</sup> are clearly formulated in terms that put relational properties front and centre. But if a part of my life can be (and typically is) meaningful in virtue of its relational properties, what reason is there to reject a pure part-life view of the bearers of meaning? After all, we could simply say that the bearers of meaning are always parts of a life but that these parts are sometimes meaningful in virtue of their relations to other parts.

### 3.3 Locating Values

To answer the question just posted it will be helpful to appeal to Metz's distinction between the bearer of a value and its source.

I have claimed that a pleasant life consists of certain experiences that are good for their own sake, while a meaningful life is (substantially) made up of certain actions that are good for their own sake. Experiences and actions are in what these values respectively inhere, and they are to be contrasted with the source of these values, i.e., on what the values logically depend in order to inhere.<sup>20</sup>

Put in these terms a pure part-life view could claim that meaning inheres always in a part of a life but that the source of this meaning (what its inherence logically depends on) can be a relation between the meaningful part and some other part. In order to resist such a move, Metz's arguments against the pure part-life view are insufficient. While he argues that certain patterns can *enhance* the meaning of a life, he nowhere gives us a reason to believe that this additional value *inheres* in the life as a whole, rather than in some part of it. What we need

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<sup>17</sup> Cf. Metz (2014), 21-2.

<sup>18</sup> Cf. Metz (2014), 34.

<sup>19</sup> Cf. Metz (2014), 222.

<sup>20</sup> Metz (2014), 66.



is an argument not about the source of meaning but about its bearer (or location).

This question regarding the location of extrinsic final value has not been widely explored. The most direct and thorough discussion to date can be found in Thomas Hurka's 'Two Kinds of Organic Unity'.<sup>21</sup> Hurka's discussion starts with Moore's famous principle of organic unities according to which the (final) value of a whole does not have to be equal to the sum of the value of its parts.<sup>22</sup> Hurka points out that there are two ways of interpreting that claim. Moore's own interpretation is that the parts remain just as valuable inside a whole as outside of it, but that the whole itself bears additional value. This is what Hurka terms the 'holistic' interpretation. On the other hand, there is the 'conditionality' interpretation according to which the value of the parts itself changes when they are part of a given whole.<sup>23</sup> While Hurka admits that both of these interpretations can in all cases reach identical verdicts about the overall value of a whole, he argues that they have different value theoretic implications that allow for a choice between them.<sup>24</sup> Importantly, he insists that this choice is best made on a case by case basis rather than by appeal to general philosophical ideas about the metaphysics of value that would rule out one or the other interpretation.<sup>25</sup>

Hurka presents two criteria for choosing between a holistic and a conditionality interpretation of a given organic unity. First, he asks us to consider whether the whole or a part appears to be the appropriate object of evaluative attitudes. Say that A by itself has little or no value but that the whole comprised of A and B has considerably more value than B. Hurka argues that in some situations with such a structure it will seem more natural to say that we should be pleased about A, and in some situations it seems more appropriate to be pleased about A+B. As it happens the examples he gives to illustrate these two options are both on Metz's list of patterns that confer meaning on life. Hurka thinks that when we consider posthumous achievement we should think that what we should be pleased about are the (ultimately successful) actions of the achiever, rather than the whole comprising both the action and the success.<sup>26</sup>

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<sup>21</sup> Hurka (1998).

<sup>22</sup> Cf. Moore (1903), 28.

<sup>23</sup> Cf. Hurka (1998), 300-5.

<sup>24</sup> Cf. Hurka (1998), 299-300.

<sup>25</sup> Cf. Hurka (1998), 320.

<sup>26</sup> Cf. Hurka (1998), 306. In support of this claim Hurka argues that it helps to make sense of the idea that people have self-interested reasons to care about their posthumous achievements. If the value was not located in the person's life but in the whole comprising their activities and events after their life, it

By contrast when we consider the idea that it is more valuable for a life to get better rather than worse, it seems that what we should take pleasure in is the progression from bad to good rather than either of these parts (apart from the pleasure we should take in the good part's independent goodness).

A second criterion for choosing between the holistic and the conditionality interpretation has to do with whether the parts that comprise the whole are to be treated symmetrically or asymmetrically. The former suggests a holistic, the latter a conditionality interpretation. The example of a life getting better seems to call for symmetric treatment of the parts. It would be arbitrary to say either that the good parts are better because they were preceded by the bad, or that the bad parts are better because they were followed by the good. The parts are related symmetrically rather than as enabler and enabled. By contrast, consider the Kantian idea that happiness is good only if it is combined with a good will which itself is unconditionally good. Here there is a clear asymmetry between the parts of the whole 'happiness plus virtue' and the extra value seems to accrue to happiness which would have no value otherwise (while virtue had its supreme value all along).<sup>27</sup>

### **3.4 Three Strategies for Defending the Pure Part-Life View**

The preceding discussion has brought into focus a strategy for defending a pure part-life view not considered by Metz. The pure part-lifer can concede that the way that the parts of a life are patterned contributes to its meaning, while arguing that this meaning is nevertheless located in the parts rather than the life as a whole. That being said, the part-lifer may, of course, also take the route that Metz suggests to be her only option: to deny that some of the suggested patterns suggested actually enhance the meaning of a life. A third strategy not yet discussed takes aim at a mixed view like Metz's that includes whole lives as potential bearers of meaning, without providing direct support for a pure part-life view. This strategy consists in claiming that, even if there is meaning that does not seem to inhere in a particular part of a life, the life as a whole is even more implausible as a candidate location for that meaning.

I think that pure part-lifers would do best to employ a mix of all three of these strategies in resisting a mixed view that includes a whole-life element. I

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becomes somewhat mysterious how such a value is one that is of special concern *to* the agent.

<sup>27</sup> Cf. Hurka (1998), 308-9.

cannot fully develop a pure part-life view here. But I will briefly indicate for each of the items of Metz's list of patterns what I take to be the most promising response on behalf of the pure part-live view.

#### **4. The List of Patterns Revisited**

##### **4.1 Variety**

The thought that 'variety is the spice of meaning' is certainly initially attractive but the longer I think about it the less clear it seems to me what this is actually supposed to mean. It does not help that Metz's example involves the movie *Groundhog Day*. The problem with the example is that it suggests a way in which lack of variety reduces the meaningfulness of our lives that does not speak against a pure part-life view at all. For the most natural interpretation of the example is that a lack of variety would make for a life that is boring for the one who lives it (this, I take it, is the main reason why the Bill Murray character is so relieved when the world finally moves on again). As Metz seems to acknowledge at various places, boredom is what he calls 'anti-matter', i.e. the kind of thing that reduces meaning in life (even if it is not incompatible with it).<sup>28</sup> But this thought is easily accommodated within a pure part-live view. Whenever there is boredom in a part of a person's life, this part has negative meaning (or less meaning than it otherwise would). There is no need to locate meaning in life as a whole.

Thus, despite what his example suggests, this cannot be what Metz has in mind. Rather it has to be that the absence of variety in itself makes for a less meaningful life, even if the person never got bored of what they are doing. Once the absence of boredom is stipulated, however, I find variety's claim to meaningfulness much less compelling. Would we really want to say of a doctor who spends her entire life curing malaria without ever getting bored or blasé about it that her life would have been more meaningful if instead she had invested some of her time in other meaningful activities (such as appreciating exquisite art or, even, curing yellow fever)? I find myself inclined to answer no to this question. I will concede that a person with more variety in their life will probably make for a more interesting conversation partner (and thus better

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<sup>28</sup> Cf. Metz (2014), 62; 174; 196.

friend); but I find it hard to believe that this could be a criterion for how meaningful their life is.

I am not quite ready to dismiss variety, however. One interpretation that I have not considered yet is that a more varied life would make for a more compelling life story. Maybe that is what Metz has in mind. The idea of a compelling life story is its own entry on Metz's list, however. And so I will leave variety behind for now.

## **4.2 Improvement**

The idea that a life that starts out poorly and becomes better as it goes is more meaningful than one that displays the opposite pattern is hard to accommodate within a pure part-life view. Indeed, as we saw in section 3.3 it is this very example that Hurka uses to illustrate his claim that sometimes a holistic interpretation that locates the value in a whole rather than its parts is sometimes superior to the rival conditionality interpretation.

However, Hurka's claims are about value in general, rather than meaning in particular. And I for one find no plausibility in the claim that a life's improving rather than deteriorating enhances its meaningfulness. It may be worth noting here that both authors Metz cites in support of this claim (Michael Slote and Frances Kamm) make their claims, like Hurka, in terms of the generic goodness of a life rather than its meaning.<sup>29</sup> I think that the claim that improvement makes for a better life is somewhat plausible when we think about well-being. Having a bad childhood followed by happy sunset years may well be better for us than the opposite. But would we really want to say that Kant had a more meaningful life than Hume simply in virtue of and because he wrote his great philosophical works later in life? I think not.

Things are different, however, when we consider the related idea that meaning is gained when bad or meaningless parts of our life lead to good or meaningful ones. To this I turn next.

## **4.3 The Bad Causing the Good**

Metz illustrates this idea with a case of a person who spends a period of time

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<sup>29</sup> Cf. Slote (1983); Kamm (2003).

as a prostitute in order to finance her drug habit. This appears to be a paradigmatically meaningless part of this person's life. However, as time goes by she overcomes her addiction and begins to work as a counsellor for people in similar situations (this part of her life is meaningful). The suggestion here is that she is a good counsellor precisely because she went through the earlier meaningless period, presumably because she has first-hand knowledge of what the life of her clients is like.<sup>30</sup>

I think that denying that there is additional meaning here is not a plausible move. Thus, the pure part-lifer should hold that, while indeed a life with this pattern is more meaningful than one that has analogously meaningless and meaningful parts that are unrelated, this additional meaning is to be located in the parts. Or, in Metz's terms: while the pattern is the source of the meaning, the parts are its bearers.

Thinking back to Hurka's second criterion the pure part-lifer may seem to be in dire straits. Hurka suggested, remember, that a holistic view should be favoured when it seems arbitrary which of two parts of a whole we should think to be more valuable in virtue of the other part's co-presence. This is plausibly the case here. We might say that the period of drugs and prostitution is less meaningless (somewhat meaningful?) because of what it later led to. Or we may say that the period as a counsellor is more meaningful in virtue of what caused it. I do not think that either of these statements is inherently more plausible than the other, and picking between them would be arbitrary in exactly the way that Hurka objects to.

However, this test is inconclusive. And I think that Hurka's first criterion favours a part-life ascription of the meaning. It seems to me that in thinking about this case both the good and the bad period are appropriate objects of our attitudes. Unlike in Hurka's example involving a simple progression from bad to good the two descriptions I gave in the last paragraph are symmetrical because they are both plausible. It does actually seem that being redeemed in the way described confers meaning on the very period of prostitution that would otherwise have been (more) meaningless. And it also seems right that the later period seems more meaningful for having the background that it does. Thus, the pure part-life view can plausibly claim that the additional meaning in cases like this inheres in both the redeemed and redeeming parts rather than in the pattern

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<sup>30</sup> Cf. Metz (2014), 46-7.

itself.

But suppose this move fails to convince. Those who want to include a whole-life component would still not be out of the woods. For against them the pure part-lifer could use the third strategy adumbrated above and demand that they show that it is indeed the *whole* life of the prostitute/counsellor that is bearing this meaning. Especially given Metz's liberal understanding of 'part' the pure part-lifer may reasonably claim that the meaning that comes from the pattern of redemption inheres, if not in the redeemed and the redeeming part, in the part that consists of both of these periods. The fact that we are able to talk about the meaning of these two parts and the pattern connecting them, without knowing anything else about our protagonist's life, seems a fair indication that it is not her whole life that bears the meaning in question but simply these two episodes.

#### 4.4 Posthumous Effects

In debates about well-being it is a very controversial question whether events after one's death can have an effect on how good a life went for the person living it. Many people take it to be obvious that the answer to this question has to be no.<sup>31</sup> But such worries would seem clearly misplaced when the value at issue is meaning. Here is Metz:

And, still more, many in the field believe that posthumous influence would confer meaning on one's life. Many of us seek to make ripples from the splash of our lives that would continue once we have gone under. Sundry ripples might be children, books, paintings, tombstones, buildings, or memories. Better that 5000 people benefit from and recognize one's accomplishments now and another 5000 also do so in the next generation than that 10,000 do so now but none does so posthumously. Or so I presume the reader will agree.<sup>32</sup>

One may quibble over the question whether posthumous influence is *more* meaningful than analogous influence during one's life (as implied by the quote). But what is truly puzzling about this passage is that it appears in the context of

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<sup>31</sup> Cf. e.g. Sumner (1996), 127.

<sup>32</sup> Metz (2014), 50.

motivating the inclusion of the whole-life component in Metz’s position on the bearers of meaning.

How exactly a life is to be delineated is not a trivial question. Whether something is part of my life or related to it is often not easy to decide. But one constraint on answering this question is surely to respect the fact that death is the end of life. That is to say that anything happening after one’s death is not part of one’s life (though it may be intimately related to it in all kinds of ways). Thus, posthumous effects of one’s life are something that cannot be accommodated without allowing for extrinsic final value – regardless of whether one has a part-life or a whole-life view. And once this point is made clear it seems to me that the examples of ‘ripples’ that Metz gives all lend themselves to a part-life treatment. If people still read Toni Morrison’s books, this makes her writing of those books meaningful rather than her life as a whole (Martin Heidegger’s work may be an even stronger case in point). Analogous things can be said, I believe, about painting, raising children, and constructing buildings.

I conclude that the case of posthumous effects demonstrates two things. First, it is not promising to think of meaning as solely an intrinsic value. As discussed in section 3.2, meaning is a final value that will often depend on relational properties. But secondly, for whatever difficulties a pure part-life view may have in capturing the meaning bestowed by events and patterns that cannot be clearly be attributed to any particular part of a life, adding a whole-life component is an unpromising solution. We will return to this point in section 5.

#### **4.5 A Compelling Story**

The last item on Metz’s list of meaning-bestowing patterns is that a life is meaningful if it “makes for a compelling and ideally original life-story.”<sup>33</sup> Now, what exactly this comes to is an issue that Metz leaves for another day:

I still lack a general and basic account of how to distinguish compelling life-stories from ones that are not so hot.<sup>34</sup>

This makes it somewhat difficult to evaluate the proposal. But there are a few things that can be said. First, Metz’s view cannot be that a life could be

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<sup>33</sup> Metz (2014), 235.

<sup>34</sup> Metz (2014), 235.

meaningful simply in virtue of it being the case that one could write a biography of the person that would make for a compelling read. The reason for this is that the kinds of things that make for what Metz calls anti-matter, i.e. things that deprive a life of meaning may be very interesting to read about. One could write a compelling biography of, say, Hannibal Lecter; but Metz would not want to count Lecter's life as meaningful. Similarly, I suggested earlier that being someone that it would be interesting to have a conversation with cannot plausibly be the hallmark of a meaningful life. What we can learn from having to reject both of these interpretations of what makes for a compelling life-story is that a life is not meaningful (in the sense of finally valuable) simply in virtue of being *interesting* for an outside observer.

A more promising way of thinking about what lies behind the metaphor of a compelling life-story is in terms of a life that is setting a good and inspirational example for others. In keeping with the ideas discussed in sections 4.3 and 4.4 we would probably want to say that more meaning is generated if that example is actually being followed. But even if nobody does follow it there might be some meaning in a life in virtue of it being the kind of life that *should* be inspiring people. This interpretation would also provide an explanation why a life is less meaningful if it is "merely an accidental repeat, let alone an intentional copy, of someone else's."<sup>35</sup> For such a life would be following an example rather than setting one. We might also think that a life that is fun to learn about (maybe partly in virtue of the variety it includes) would be more likely to inspire others. Thus, we would have an explanation of why a meaningful life is often the possible object of a compelling biography. Obviously, much more would need to be said here. But, like Metz, I will leave this for another occasion.

Supposing, however, that something like the sketch in the last paragraph is the best way to make sense of the idea that a compelling life-story makes for a (more) meaningful life, I again, see no reason why this meaning should be thought to accrue to the life as a whole rather than to those parts that are inspiring. Of course, sometimes what is inspiring will be patterns like the ones discussed in the past couple of sections. But as we have seen there, these patterns are not best construed as being features of life as a whole. Thus, this last item on Metz's list cannot supply any fresh reason to reject a pure part-life view.

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<sup>35</sup> Metz (2014), 51.



If anything, it could give added force to a reason generated by a different pattern.

## 5. The Ground of Narrative Structure

I claimed early on that this paper would propose a friendly amendment to Metz's view. I have so far focused on the amending part. I should like to demonstrate that the amendment is indeed a friendly one. So, before I conclude, let me briefly consider how my argument all but dissolves a puzzle that troubles Metz and that he finds himself unable to deal with to his own satisfaction. Witness the following passage.

To see the problem, consider the most straightforward proposal about what grounds narrative structure in a human person's life:

(GNS 1) A narrative structure is constituted by every spatio-temporal moment of one's life.

If (GNS 1) were true, no life-story would be a good read, or would otherwise exhibit the kind of coherence that is characteristic of a narrative structure. It would have to include daily mention of eight hours of sleep. A good third of the hours spent every day are not only terribly boring, but also fairly constant over the course of one's life. Imagine a novel a third of which were pages with 'zzzzzzzz' on them, perhaps generously peppered with 'snore'; the whole would be marred.<sup>36</sup>

Metz then considers a number of ways of excluding moments where one is not conscious as well as 'dead time' (such as time brushing one's teeth or dusting the living room) to end up with the suggestion that whether and to what degree a life has a meaning-conferring narrative structure should be based on "only those spatio-temporal moments of one's life of which one is aware beyond the dead time that is average for human beings."<sup>37</sup> He is not fully satisfied with the suggestion, however, for two reasons. First, this view does not account for the fact that the narrative structure can be influenced by both things outside of

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<sup>36</sup> Metz (2014), 52.

<sup>37</sup> Metz (2014), 54.

one's consciousness and events after one's death. Second, there could be cases where large amounts of dead time do not negatively impact the narrative structure of a life (such as when an entire generation of humans were to go into a long freeze only to continue life like nothing happened afterwards).<sup>38</sup>

Interestingly, however, Metz also remarks, just after the passage quoted above, that it shows that the whole-life view is “not to be taken literally.”<sup>39</sup> In my view this is really all that needs to be said here. As I have tried to show throughout section 4, the patterns that motivate whole-lifers are often best thought of as sources rather than bearers of value. But even in cases where that reply fails to convince, it is a mistake to go to life as a whole as the bearer of meaning. Life as a whole contains both too much (such as times spent sleeping) and too little (such as events after one's death) to be the bearer of the value that comes into our lives through these patterns. What these patterns show us is not that the meaning in life is not borne by its parts; it is that much (maybe most) of the meaning in the parts of a life obtains in virtue of the relational rather than the intrinsic properties of these parts.

## 6. Conclusion

I have argued that, with regard to the bearers of meaning, Metz should abandon his mixed view according to which meaning is borne both by parts of lives and by lives as a whole. I have shown that once we bring into focus the fact that meaning is a value that largely depends on relational (rather than intrinsic) properties a pure-part life view has the resources to accommodate many of the intuitions that Metz uses to motivate rejecting it. The pure part-lifer can admit that meaning depends on certain patterns as a *source* while insisting that it nevertheless *inheres* in a given part. Moreover, while it may sometimes seem counterintuitive to locate some meaning in a particular part of a life, it is typically no less counterintuitive to locate this meaning in life *as a whole*. Thus, even if the pure part-life view needed to be rejected, the necessary amendment would not consist in the addition of a whole-life aspect.

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<sup>38</sup> Metz (2014), 54-5.

<sup>39</sup> Metz (2014), 52.

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