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Comment

Don't Worry, Be Happy: The Gettability of Ultimate Meaning

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Abstract: Rivka Weinberg advances an error theory of ultimate meaning with three parts: (1) a conceptual analysis, (2) the claim that the extension of the concept is empty, and (3) a proposed fitting response, namely being very, very sad. Weinberg's conceptual analysis of ultimate meaning involves two features that jointly make it metaphysically impossible, namely (i) the separateness of activities and valued ends, and (ii) the bounded nature of human lives. Both are open to serious challenges. We offer an internalist alternative to (i) and a relational alternative to (ii). We then draw out implications for (2) and conclude with reasons to be cheerful about the prospects of a meaningful life.

Keywords: meaning of life; meaning in life; Weinberg; value; the self; meaning nihilism

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1. Introduction

According to Weinberg, life has no ultimate meaning and we should be very, very sad about this fact. It is not merely that lives *happen* to lack ultimate meaning, but that ultimate meaning is "impossible for us."[1] Although this is meant to be a metaphysical impossibility rather than a conceptual impossibility,[2] the two are related. Ultimate meaning is metaphysically impossible because of what it would involve conceptually. Here is the key claim:

> The problem of Ultimate Meaning—its metaphysical impossibility—results from the nature of points (i.e., that they are separate from the activities, pursuits, projects,

[1] Weinberg, R. 2021. Ultimate Meaning: We Don't Have It, We Can't Get It, and We Should Be Very, Very Sad. *Journal of Controversial Ideas* 1(1): 2. doi:10.35995/jci01010004. (https://journalofcontroversialideas.org/article/1/1/132).

[2] Weinberg, Ultimate Meaning, fn. 21.

> and efforts towards which they're aimed) and the nature of a human life (i.e., that it includes its entirety).[3]

For Weinberg, ultimate meaning is impossible due to (i) the nature of points and (ii) the nature of a human life. In the following two sections, we argue there is reason to doubt Weinberg's account of (i), and that (ii) is a tautology that only supports an error theory of ultimate meaning given a tendentious account of lives. In Section 4, we respond to the claim that, no matter how human life is understood, our projects merely contribute to everyday meaning.

2. On the Separability of Points and Activities

As Weinberg acknowledges, the term "meaning" is multiply ambiguous and used in different ways by different contributors to the literature on the meaning of/in life. Weinberg focuses on the idea of pointlessness, which she takes to "capture the essence of the problem."[4] The first point to notice is the restrictive nature of this choice. By contrast, psychologists prefer multidimensional, pluralistic approaches to perceived meaning in life. Typically, subconstructs include purpose and achievement, which seem related to life having a point, but also coherence, which is less obviously related.[5] Philosophical proposals are more varied still.[6] Restricting the problem to the question of pointlessness immediately tilts the playing field in favor of meaning nihilism by eliminating the need to consider alternatives. If the question of meaning is *essentially* about points, then, if life is pointless it is therefore meaningless (regardless of other candidate sources of meaning).

Setting aside this narrow focus, however, we want to object that the impossibility of life's activities having points depends on how points are construed. For Weinberg, points are valued ends that are separate to activities and external to them. Given this account, the points of lives must be external to them too. The upshot is that "we cannot possibly have a point to leading a life because valued ends are external to the projects toward which they are directed."[7] Let us call this position "points externalism," or "externalism" for short.

The examples Weinberg gives to support externalism are not entirely persuasive. She argues that walking can have the point of experiencing joy, and that the joy is external to the walking.[8] Again, she argues that the points of playing with children, such as intimacy and joy, are "separate from the actual playing."[9] But here is another way to describe these phenomena: we value joyful walking and joyful, intimate play. The redescription is not merely verbal and suggests an alternative conceptualization. Indeed, it points towards deep axiological questions that Weinberg does not pursue. Are walking and playing with children alternative ways to achieve the same separable and external end of

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3 Ibid., 6.
4 Ibid., 1.
5 Martela, F. and Steger, M. F. 2016. The Three Meanings of Meaning in Life: Distinguishing Coherence, Purpose, and Significance. *The Journal of Positive Psychology* 11(5): 531–545; King, L. A. and Hicks, J. A. 2021. The Science of Meaning in Life. *Annual Review of Psychology* 72(1): 1–24.
6 See Metz (2013) for a thorough overview of different accounts of what makes a life meaningful, as well as his own "fundamentality theory" that requires appropriate orientation towards the good, the true and the beautiful; Metz, T. 2013. *Meaning in Life*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
7 Weinberg, Ultimate Meaning, 4.
8 Ibid., 3.
9 Ibid.

joy? Or are some valued ends, such as these *particular* joys, inseparable modifications of their activities?

There are reasons to favor the latter view. Consider MacIntyre on the polymorphous character of pleasure:

> Pleasure or happiness are not states of mind for the production of which these activities and modes are merely alternative means. The pleasure-of-drinking-Guinness is not the pleasure-of-swimming-at-Crane's-Beach, and the swimming and the drinking are not two different means for producing the same end-state.[10]

On this view, pleasure's numerous forms are modified by activities. As a result, not all pleasures can be reduced to a simple, shared property external to the modifying activities. The same model can be applied to other "points" Weinberg identifies, like joy or intimacy. The joy of the parent who has just witnessed the birth of their first child and the joy of someone contemplating the beauty of nature are different joys. Witnessing birth and contemplating nature are not joyful insofar as they are contingent means of attaining the same separate, singular point of "Joy." Rather, they each contain their own unique joy that is modified by the nature of the activity.

Another concern with externalism is that it threatens to leave points shallow and characterless. By alienating joy or intimacy from concrete, particular activities (the joy *of* walking, the intimacy *of* playing with my children), ends are deprived of elements which provide some of the depth and character that makes them valuable. The valued end, wrenched from its defining context, is reduced to an empty and abstract generalized "form." It is not clear that this joy of nothing in particular, or intimacy understood from an unsituated "view from nowhere," is something that should matter to us, especially when our concern is with meaning. Indeed, thinking of points as external ends may drain meaning from our valued activities by instrumentalizing them. Playing with my child, going on a romantic date with my partner, and creating art all become mere means for some further goal of joy, intimacy, or beauty.[11] Yet, thinking of our valued activities in this way seems to miss the point, or involve "one thought too many." We have gone from cherishing the joy-of-playing-with-my-child as meaningful in itself to valuing playing with my child only insofar as it produces the valued end of joy. By conceiving of the things we do as mere means, we risk demeaning them. Sad!

While we prefer the internalist alternative and have motivated it above, our central line of argument doesn't depend on its superiority. Rather, we are arguing that the supposed metaphysical impossibility of a meaningful life depends on a controversial and eminently contestable assumption built into the conceptual analysis. Given the availability of an attractive alternative, it would take further work to show that points are *necessarily* external to activities and, hence, that a life's meaning cannot depend on *living meaningfully*, but must depend on achieving separable ends.

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[10] MacIntyre, A. C. 2007. *After Virtue: A Study in Moral Theory*, 3rd ed. Notre Dame, IN: University of Notre Dame Press, 64.

[11] By this, we do not mean the externalist view entails that we treat other people as means or tools in the Kantian sense of disrespecting their ends. Of course, when we go on a date with our partner for the purpose of intimacy, we respect and share our partner's valued ends, and in this sense, we are not using them as a "means." However, it remains the case on the externalist view that the activity—going on a date with my partner—is a means in the sense that it is instrumental to a further valued end—namely, intimacy. We thank an anonymous reviewer for encouraging us to clarify this point.

3. On the Boundaries of Lives

In this section, we argue that Weinberg's claim that life "includes its entirety"[12] bears differently on the meaning *of* life debate depending on how lives are characterized.[13] Crucially, different characterizations draw life's boundaries in different places. Where these boundaries are drawn has implications for whether lives are good candidates for bearing meaning. Weinberg's argument for the impossibility of a meaningful life rests partly on the contestable assumption that a human life is best characterized as an "empirical biological state."[14] As we will show, this assumption tilts the playing field towards meaning nihilism. Furthermore, it is WEIRD and, so, likely to be a product of contingent, cultural psychology rather than a conceptual necessity.[15] Other conceptions exist, such as relational and narrative ones that take the self to be porous to others and the world, and that are better candidates for being meaningful.

According to Weinberg "your life includes your whole damn life."[16] Well, fine, it is a truism that one's life, like anything else, "includes its entirety."[17] But this isn't helpful as it stands. To know whether a life has meaning requires some conception of what makes for a whole life, and that requires thinking about what binds the parts of a life together into a meaningful unit of analysis. It might be thought that Weinberg's argument applies to whatever it is that binds together temporal slices of lives into a whole (i.e., whatever constitutes a person's self). But, as we'll explain, that is not so. Alternative conceptions of the self put pressure on her account of lives as incapable of bearing ultimate meaning.

For Weinberg, "life is not a very good candidate for intrinsic value [being a valued end in itself] because it's an empirical, biological state."[18] Again, "life itself is a biological state, not a reason at all."[19] Of course, it is true that we can talk about lives from this restricted perspective. The question arises, however, as to whether a life, characterized biologically or otherwise, can bear extrinsic, relational properties that make it meaningful. In general, an extrinsic property of X depends on the relationship between X and some

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[12] Weinberg, Ultimate Meaning, 6.

[13] Are we mischaracterizing our target by focusing on the nature of a life rather than on the enterprise of "leading and living a life"? (We thank an anonymous referee for pressing us on this question). Weinberg sometimes claims that the enterprise of "leading and living a human life is pointless" (2021, p. 6; cf. pp. 1, 2, 4, 5, 7, 17) and sometimes more simply that "life is pointless" (2021, pp. 1, 5, 6, 7, 10, 19, 21). So, clearly, she intends both. However, the relation between the two is not always clear. Consider the following: "We cannot find a valued end for leading a life, or for life itself, and life itself can't be that end since it is the *enterprise*" (p. 7). This looks like an identity claim: life *just is* the enterprise of "leading and living a life." On this interpretation, whatever we say about life can be said of the enterprise of leading a life, and vice versa. However, Weinberg immediately continues as follows: "Life itself is a biological state, not a reason at all, and it isn't a reason for leading a life any more than a jump is a reason for jumping or a hut is a reason for building." (p. 7). Here it seems that "life" and "leading a life" are non-identical in the sense that life is the product of the enterprise of leading a life, just as a hut is the product of building work. The obvious interpretation is that leading a life is pointless in part because life is a merely biological state that is unsuited to lending a point to the enterprise. This is the conclusion we challenge in this section and in Section 4 below.

[14] Weinberg, Ultimate Meaning, 7, fn. 23.

[15] WEIRD stands for Western, Educated, Industrial, Rich, and Democratic. See further Henrich, J., Heine, S. J., and Norenzayan, A. 2010. The Weirdest People in the World? *Behavioral and Brain Sciences* 33(2–3): 61–83.

[16] Weinberg, Ultimate Meaning, 4.

[17] Ibid., 6.

[18] Ibid., 7, fn. 23.

[19] Ibid., 7.

further object or set of objects Y, Z, etc. For example, Anne being the smartest person in the room depends on who else is in the room, her being a sibling depends on the existence of her sister, and her being an elected representative depends, inter alia, on the mental states of her electorate. Being the smartest person in the room, a sister, or an elected representative are extrinsic, relational properties. Such properties can change despite Anne's intrinsic properties remaining unchanged. Following Geach, these purely relational changes are sometimes called "Cambridge changes."[20]

There is room for debate as to whether relational properties and Cambridge changes are fully real or have some sort of second-class metaphysical status.[21] What is not debatable is that relational properties, such as being-the-sister-of-X or being-the-elected-representative-for-Y, are routinely predicated of lives and taken to partly constitute a person's identity. Indeed, looked at globally, the view that relational properties are to be disregarded and that a person's life is to be understood as a separate, distinct unit of analysis (biological or otherwise) is atypical or WEIRD.[22] This is strongly suggested by findings from cultural anthropology:

> The Western conception of a person as a bounded, unique, more or less integrated, motivational and cognitive universe; a dynamic center of awareness, emotions, judgement and action, organized in a distinctive whole and set contrastively both against other such wholes and against a social and natural background is, however incorrigible it may seem, a rather peculiar idea, within the context of the world's cultures.[23]

A less culturally and historically contentious way of thinking takes a person's life to be essentially porous and relational—the self is defined in reference to others' thoughts, feelings, and actions, rather than just internal states.[24] Lives are thus co-constructed, developed through interpersonal interactions; the self *is* "Josh's dad," "Mike's partner," "Amelia's tutor." On this view, lives extend well beyond the boundaries of the empirical, biological self. Furthermore, relational properties are, prima facie, more plausible candidates for conferring the sort of intrinsic value that might give meaning to life—relationships are the kinds of things that we often value for their own sakes.

Moreover, there are narrative notions of the self, according to which activities within our life make sense because they are part of some larger story that includes others.[25] If we take this seriously, then it is false that our lives extend no further than our biological

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[20] E.g., Scarre, G. 2007. *Death*. Stocksfield, UK: Acumen, 105–110.

[21] E.g., Weberman, D. 1999. Cambridge Changes Revisited: Why Certain Relational Changes are Indispensable. *Dialectica* 53(2):139–149; Lowe, E. J. 2002. *A Survey of Metaphysics*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 238.

[22] Henrich, J. 2020. *The Weirdest People in the World: How the West Became Psychologically Peculiar and Particularly Prosperous*. London: Allen Lane, 24–31.

[23] Geertz, C. 1974. "From the Native's Point of View": On the Nature of Anthropological Understanding. *Bulletin of the American Academy of Arts and Sciences* 28(1): 31.

[24] Markus, H. R. and Kitayama, S. 1991. Culture and the Self: Implications for Cognition, Emotion, and Motivation. *Psychological Review* 98(2), 224–253; Flanagan, O. 2017. *The Geography of Morals*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 242–248.

[25] Velleman, D. 2005. The Self as Narrator. In John Christman and Joel Anderson, eds., *Autonomy and the Challenges to Liberalism*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 56–73; MacIntyre, *After Virtue*.Weinberg acknowledges these accounts and emphasizes our typical concern with the "shape" of our lives, citing Velleman's claim that a life is "a story we tell ourselves" with approval (Ultimate Meaning, 8). We discuss her response in Section 4 below.

existence. For our stories include and depend on the stories of the lives of others, and active engagement with an external world. Our life oeuvre, which we construct through collaborative engagement with other people and the world, extends beyond our biological self, and perhaps even beyond our physical death.

Our main task here is not to defend either the relational or narrative conception, but to note their availability and the pressure this puts on Weinberg's conceptual analysis. We also want to observe, however, that lives understood relationally or in terms of their narrative structure are, prima facie, better candidates for bearing meaning than lives understood in narrower terms.[26] On this view, meaning depends on extrinsic properties such as those that contribute to our practical identities. These depend on our social roles as parents, professors, students, etc., and the stories we co-construct with others and the world. Of course, lives are empirical, biological states as Weinberg suggests. But, given our concern for meaning, this looks like the wrong level of description. Relationships and stories can be meaningful as biology cannot.

4. Expanding the Self into an Infinite Domain of "Everyday Meaning"

Weinberg would doubtless respond that her argument works no matter how lives are conceived. If points must be external, then conceiving of life in relational or narrative terms merely postpones the problem. Valued ends and ultimate meaning still have to come from something external, and are still unattainable because we cannot obtain what is beyond our lives. But this response concedes too much. Allowing the self to expand beyond its biological boundaries opens up a vast domain of potential meaning, including externally realized projects, such as helping others. While Weinberg argues that such projects are still one's own and therefore sources of mere "everyday meaning," this leads to an over-capacious concept that could include almost everything in the universe for all time. This ultimately robs the distinction between everyday and ultimate meaning of much of its interest, and makes being very, very sad an unfitting response to whatever is lacking.

Let us unpack these claims via a bad argument for psychological egoism, namely that we act only for selfish reasons because all our reasons depend on our desires. Although there's a sense in which all our desires are internal, it does not follow that the *content* of our values and desires, our reasons for action, are either self-interested or even self-involving. We sometimes desire the wellbeing of others for its own sake.[27] Now, think again of Weinberg's claim that life is inevitably pointless because "we cannot have an end outside of life to serve as a valued end for leading and living it."[28] Why? Because "human life includes its entirety, leaving nowhere for us to reach for a valued end as a point for leading and living it."[29] The idea seems to be that because our valued ends are our own they are therefore included in our lives. The bad argument for egoism depends on a structurally similar move: because desires are internal, their valued ends must be one's own.

So, while it is a truism that everything we do within our lives is contained within our lives, it is neither a truism, nor true, that the points of all our projects and activities are

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[26] On narrative and meaning, see further Brännmark, J. 2003. Leading Lives: On Happiness and Narrative Meaning. *Philosophical Papers* 32(3): 321–343, and Kauppinen, A. 2012. Meaningfulness and Time. *Philosophy and Phenomenological Research* 84(2): 345–377.

[27] Cf. Frankfurt, H. G. 2004. *The Reasons of Love*. Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 61–62.

[28] Weinberg, Ultimate Meaning, 5.

[29] Ibid., 4.

realized internally. Moreover, working towards externally realized ends, such as ethical ones, is one apparent source of meaning in life.[30] According to Weinberg, however:

> My life contains the justice in it and that's why justice cannot serve as a point for the all-encompassing effort of leading or running the enterprise of life; it cannot provide Ultimate Meaning.[31]

Weinberg is right that activities in pursuit of justice—organizing protests, sending open letters, giving speeches, etc.—are contained within my life in the sense that they are things that I do. But the end, justice realized in the world, is something external: the point of the political campaign, say, improving the lot of future generations, is something beyond myself, neither coextensive nor coterminous with my life. The same holds true of whole lives as well as their constitutive activities. The main point of a life can be realized externally.[32]

In response to this sort of objection, Weinberg argues that "many projects that seem to extend beyond the self . . . [such as] helping others or trying to improve the world for future generations . . . are just ways of widening and postponing the problem."[33] She also maintains that these "less selfish ends still occur within life."[34] However, it seems she cannot mean that the "less selfish ends" occur within one's *own* life without modifying her account of the self. For, obviously, projects that "extend beyond the self" do not occur within one's own biological life (unless in the sense that they are one's own projects, but this is just the trivial claim embedded in the bad argument for egoism above).

Setting aside the boundaries of lives, the possibility of externally realized projects as part of one's life seems to expand the domain of potential meaning enormously. Weinberg's response is to argue that other-involving activities provide mere "everyday meaning," defined as "the value and significance *in* our everyday lives."[35] Again, it is unclear in what sense other-involving activities are *in* one's own life.[36] Let us allow for the sake of argument, however, that other-regarding valued ends such as the pursuit of justice are within our lives and so provide everyday rather than ultimate meaning. On the assumption that life itself (now much expanded) has no external point, Weinberg pushes the argument to its logical conclusion:

> If we extend ourselves or connect ourselves to something limitless, infinite or boundless, all we do is extend the space from which we cannot draw an *answer* (because our enterprise now occupies that space, indeed all space, and seeks a valued end to that whole, now hugely infinite, situation).[37]

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30 See, e.g., Singer, P. 2011. *Practical Ethics.* 3rd ed. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

31 Weinberg, Ultimate Meaning, 17.

32 Viktor Frankl put the idea well: "The true meaning of life is to be discovered in the world rather than within man or his own psyche, as though it were a closed system . . . being human always points, and is directed, to something, or someone, other than oneself—be it a meaning to fulfil or another human being to encounter" (Frankl, V. 1946 / 2006. *Man's Search for Meaning.* Boston: Beacon Press, 110).

33 Weinberg, Ultimate Meaning, 11.

34 Ibid.

35 Weinberg, Ultimate Meaning, 5; italics added.

36 Given Weinberg's biological view of the self, everyday meaning is *in* our lives only in the same way that our desires are *in* us. Externally realized points, such as making the world a better place for years to come, clearly transcend the bounds of our biological lives.

37 Weinberg, Ultimate Meaning, 17.

At this point, Weinberg's argument allows for an infinite space within which we can secure everyday meaning—including, perhaps, all conscious life in the universe that our lives might directly or indirectly affect from here to eternity. This *drastically* diminishes the force of the initial argument with its supposed implication that we should be very, very sad. As the space available for everyday meaning stretches from the "whole damn organism" to "the whole damn universe" our concern for any lack of ultimate meaning tends towards zero. Moreover, the distinction between ultimate meaning and everyday meaning becomes unimportant as the most promising traditional candidates for the ultimate meaning *of* life are hoovered up by everyday meaning—e.g., helping others; improving the world; pursuing truth, beauty, and goodness; filling one's existence with love and joy; carrying out God's will; attaining Nirvana; discovering the secrets of life, the universe, and everything. Weinberg would maintain that there is no ultimate point to any of *this* and that there would have to be an external point to provide ultimate meaning. But, at this stage, it is frankly hard to give a damn. And even if we did care that there is no prospect of deriving meaning from something (whatever this may be) beyond the "limitless, infinite, or boundless," we have already argued against the necessity of externalism.

5. A Final Note on Sadness

We have argued that Weinberg's error theory of ultimate meaning depends on a conceptual analysis that is open to challenge. We have not argued that her concept of ultimate meaning—call this UM_W—is incoherent. For all we have said, UM_W could be both desirable and metaphysically impossible. If so, just how sad should we be? We agree with Weinberg that it makes sense to be sad about the impossible, "bemoaning an incoherence,"[38] raging against the laws of logic. Our sadness, however, is mitigated by two things. First, we have argued that there are nearby concepts of meaning that reject Weinberg's two conditions, positing alternative conceptions of "points" and "a human life." In fact, we have offered reasons to think that these alternatives are independently preferable, even if we have not insisted on it. The availability of alternatives may be a significant consolation to anyone lamenting the unavailability of UM_W.

Second, we note what every advertiser knows, namely that the description of a commodity influences its desirability and regret that it isn't one's own. After all, *ultimate* meaning sounds very much more important and valuable than *everyday* meaning. But we might lessen the FOMO (fear of missing out) by changing the labels. The absence of *pointless, unattainable* UM_W might strike us as no great loss given the availability of *super-duper, ultra-desirable* everyday meaning. Even on Weinberg's account, this includes "values such as beauty, love, and truth" and "the impact we have on others and on the world around us" including "other people, our work, and the health of our planet."[39] In fact, as we have described, it may extend to all life in the universe. Nothing to sneeze at! It is a matter of individual psychology whether such a life would be "more of an effort than a joy,"[40] but we can report feeling rather happy at the prospect.

[38] Ibid., 19.
[39] Ibid., 5.
[40] Ibid., 9.