## Thaddeus Metz: *Meaning in Life: An Analytic Study*, Oxford, Oxford University Press, 2013.

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Thaddeus Metz is an influential Research Professor of Philosophy at the University of Johannesburg, the author of many incisive philosophical texts, and an authority on issues of transitional justice and reconciliation. His book on *Meaning in Life* is a natural continuation of his applied work in philosophy in the analytic tradition, and the way in which he captures philosophical theories of meaning in life is both original and practically exceptionally helpful to an array of applied fields in the humanities, including philosophical practice and philosophical counseling.

Metz's central question in the book is whether life as a whole can be said to be meaningful as opposed to more or less 'meaningless', or whether it is specific parts of its, experiences, attitudes, events and relationships which are meaningful and, by extension, make one's whole life meaningful. He examines various philosophical theories which he divides into 'part life' and 'whole life theories', critically and, in a number of places in his argument, touches key general philosophical questions such as that of coherence versus substantive quality of our beliefs as criteria which bestow quality on those beliefs, whether it is truthfulness or meaningfulness. For example, Pedro Tabensky's 'coherence view' of the meaning of life suggests that it is the way in which our particular attitudes, values and beliefs are unified in a single subjecthood which allows us to say that, whatever we do, believe or experience, in an important sense, 'we are one'. This view is similar to a coherence theory of truth, which implies that a proposition is true if it convincingly fits with the other accepted truths in a single worldview or a view on a particular matter of fact. Metz rightly points it out that coherence in one's beliefs and attitudes is an important element of one's overall rationality, and the more rational one is the more likely one is to find ways to make one's life meaningful, however Metz notes that the coherence view omits a crucial element of meaning which arises from the substantive value of specific beliefs and propositions one holds or adopts. At least theoretically, it is possible to hold an array of mutually highly coherent, yet dysfunctional, depressing or destructive views, just as it is theoretically possible to hold positive, energizing and optimistic beliefs which, while insufficiently systematically organized, make one's life relatively meaningful. Metz thus suggests a kind of balance between the various extreme positions on the matter, suggesting that all the various elements of the proposed

sources of 'meaning in life' have relative value to our overall quality of life and thus should be factored in a sound philosophical conceptualization of 'the good life':

> It is fair to think that the content of ends is a different dimension by which they admit of rational appraisal, one logically distinct from the way in which ends are organized in relation to one another. For instance, I have suggested that at least some ends are meaningful and give us good reason to pursue, merely insofar as they involve the exercise of intelligence with regard to the good, the true, and the beautiful. It would follow, then, that insofar as a life is rational, it, at least to some degree, realizes ends with a certain content, independent of how these ends bear on the realization of other ends. (Metz 2013: 57)



Metz's own theory of meaning of life is what he calls 'the fundamentality theory of meaning', namely the view that what confers meaning on our lives is our search for meaning: the more critically and with greater focus we search for meaning, our life becomes more sharpened through the values which become crystallized in the process: it becomes clear what is the most important to us through the sacrifices we are willing to make to realize those values: the family, justice, beauty, etc. Our search for meaning extends beyond the realm of immediate satisfaction and typically includes a desire to 'leave a mark' after we are no longer alive. Metz points it out that some of the greatest human achievements in history have been motivated by thus conceptualized search for meaning, but also some of the most abhorrent projects in history, such as the racist, supremacist or genocidal projects we are only too aware of. Most of these projects were motivated by a projection of an idea: one people, one leader, equality and justice (as in Marxist revolutions), etc. It seems that what drives our search for meaning is a zeal for the transcendence of our immediate existence.

A consequence of Metz's fundamentality theory is that philosophy has a highly practical role in helping us shape and manage our search for transcendence: by employing philosophical concepts and tools, one' s search for meaning may become a better life, a happier one, and one which more successfully develops one's sensibilities and values, as well as one's ability to appraise one's own life. All of this together, according to the fundamentality theory, makes life more meaningful.

Metz's theory is unpretentious and exceptionally well argued based on existing philosophical theories of meaning in life; it is a simple theory with wide-ranging ramifications for the future development of philosophy as a practical discipline able to bring its enormous theoretical legacy to bear on helping concrete individuals achieve higher quality of life by developing more meaningful lives.