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Mattering to Others

A Philosophy of the Meaning of Life

(Original German title: Anderen wichtig sein.
Eine Philosophie des Lebenssinns)

346 pages, Clothbound

Publication date: 14 October 2025

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Introduction

"At any street corner," it is said, the question of all questions may suddenly seize a person. At any moment it may arise unexpectedly and plunge one into profound existential distress – sometimes even to the brink of suicide. And if it does not arise? Then one has merely succeeded in repressing it. For in truth it is inescapable: everyone, each and every one, will be confronted with it. Whoever refuses to face it is simply fleeing from their own life – and thereby risks missing it. For this reason, it is better to confront the question, even if doing so is painful.

The question of all questions is the question of the meaning of life. Yet however grave and existentially urgent it may appear, it does not enjoy a good reputation. Even in everyday life, anyone who dares to raise it risks sceptical or astonished looks, mocking smiles, or sheer incomprehension. The topic is regarded as too intimate, but also too elevated, to be discussed in public; in truth, people are embarrassed by it. At most, among close friends late at night – and usually after a few glasses of wine – it may be discussed somewhat, though seldom with much result.

Within philosophy, too, the question – although often described as the philosophical question *par excellence* – has long occupied an uneasy position. It is frequently regarded as a topic more suited to enthusiastic spirits than to scientific minds. It is said to resist rational analysis, to admit only arbitrary subjective or religious answers, and, in an age of pluralism, to be in principle unanswerable. Indeed, according to a long-standing prejudice inherited from logical

empiricism, the question may be meaningless altogether.[1] It is therefore hardly surprising that the topic has led a marginal existence within academic philosophy. Whoever devotes serious attention to it risks leaving the domain of "serious" philosophy and drifting into the hazy territory of dusty dogmatics, obsolete metaphysics in the service of religion, philosophically embellished self-help literature, or even outright esotericism. In a scientifically oriented philosophy, so the prevailing view has long held, the question has no place.[2]

Nor can the question appeal to an especially venerable history. Unlike the question of the good life, which in the West reaches back to the pre-Socratic origins of philosophy, the question of the meaning of life emerges only in the late eighteenth century. At first glance this may seem surprising, but upon reflection it becomes readily intelligible. As long as it is beyond doubt that there exists a metaphysical order with God at its summit, it is equally clear that human beings – and everything else that exists – are determined by this reality and derive their meaning from it. As long as God is certain, the question of the meaning of life does not arise at all, because it is already answered from the outset. What may arise are only regional or limited questions of meaning, above all the question of the meaning and purpose of suffering.

This first stage, in which the question is effectively a non-question, is followed by a second stage that begins at the cultural-historical moment when belief in God becomes fragile and loses its unquestioned self-evidence. It is above all the early Romantics – Novalis, Friedrich Schleiermacher, and Friedrich Schlegel – who, in the wake of the critical upheavals initiated by Immanuel Kant and in the face of a God who can no longer be grasped by reason, begin to raise the question of the "meaning," the "purpose," or the "value of life," or – within an Idealist variant – the "vocation of the human being" (Johann Gottlieb Fichte).[3] This is also the moment when the question of the meaning of suffering expands from an accusatory question directed at God into a question about the existence of God itself. "The only excuse for God is that he does

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1 Cf., for example, Alfred Jules Ayer, "Human Aims and Ultimate Aims" [1988], in: Christoph Fehige et al. (eds.), *Der Sinn des Lebens*, Munich, 3rd ed. 2000, pp. 189–194; idem, "Unanswerable Questions" [1947], in: Christoph Fehige et al. (eds.), *Der Sinn des Lebens*, Munich, 3rd ed. 2000, pp. 34–36; Fritz Mauthner, "'Sinn des Lebens'" [1924], in: Christoph Fehige et al. (eds.), *Der Sinn des Lebens*, Munich, 3rd ed. 2000, pp. 29–33; Frank P. Ramsey, "There Is Really Nothing to Discuss" [1931], in: Christoph Fehige et al. (eds.), *Der Sinn des Lebens*, Munich, 3rd ed. 2000, pp. 37–39; Walter Terence Stace, "Man in Darkness" [1948], in: Christoph Fehige et al. (eds.), *Der Sinn des Lebens*, Munich, 3rd ed. 2000, pp. 66–71.

2 Cf. Thaddeus Metz, "Recent Work on the Meaning of Life," *Ethics* 112 (2002), pp. 781–814, here p. 782, and Christian Thies, *Der Sinn der Sinnfrage. Metaphysische Reflexionen auf kantischer Grundlage*, Freiburg i.Br./Munich 2008, p. 83, both of whom note this view as widespread in philosophy.

3 Cf., for example, Novalis, *Werke, Tagebücher und Briefe Friedrich von Hardenbergs*, vol. 2, ed. Hans Joachim Mähl and Richard Samuel, Darmstadt 1999, p. 351; Friedrich Schleiermacher, "Über den Wert des Lebens (1792/93)," *Kritische Gesamtausgabe*, vol. I/1, *Jugendschriften 1787–1796*, ed. Günter Meckenstock, Berlin/New York 1983, pp. 391–472; Friedrich Schlegel, *Lucinde*, *Kritische Friedrich-Schlegel-Ausgabe*, First Section: Critical New Edition 5, ed. Ernst Behler et al., Munich et al. 1962, pp. 44, 48; Johann Gottlieb Fichte, *Die Bestimmung des Menschen*, ed. Horst Brandt and Hansjürgen Verweyen, Stuttgart 2000 [1800]; cf. also Thies, *Der Sinn der Sinnfrage*, pp. 70–74.

not exist," runs a bon mot attributed to Stendhal and envied by Nietzsche.[4] That a godless universe might also be an irrational and wholly meaningless universe – one in which the human being is entirely thrown back upon himself – was first grasped by Arthur Schopenhauer and, above all, by Friedrich Nietzsche, in whose work the question of meaning erupts in its full existential drama.

Since then, the question of meaning has remained a recurring theme – always somewhat marginal yet repeatedly resurfacing – both in philosophy and in philosophically inclined literature. It reached a life-philosophical peak in the 1930s and an existentialist one in the 1960s.[5] However different the individual proposals may be, they share the attempt to develop answers to the question of meaning against the background of the doubtful or denied existence of God. They represent, in different ways, a struggle with the metaphysical homelessness of the human being.

To the extent that humanity, contrary to earlier expectations, gradually begins to feel at home in this metaphysical homelessness – so that the questionability of God is no longer experienced as a loss and the prospect of a meaningless universe no longer appears scandalous – a third stage in the history of the question of meaning emerges: that of the post-metaphysical inquiry into the meaning of life. Anticipated already in some of the invectives of the logical empiricists against the question of meaning, the metaphysical question of the meaning *of* life has increasingly, especially since the 2010s, been replaced by the ethical question of meaning *in* life. Instead of seeking meaning in transcendence, it is now sought in immanence.

In recent years, a certain – albeit hesitant – return of the question of meaning within academic philosophy can therefore be observed. On the one hand, this development represents a delayed consequence of the return of genuinely practical-ethical questions to the center of philosophical inquiry since the late 1970s, following the collapse of the program of logical empiricism, which had regarded questions of value as unscientific.[6] It is also connected with the renaissance of

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[4] Cf. Friedrich Nietzsche, *Ecce Homo. Wie man wird, was man ist* [planned 1889], *Kritische Studienausgabe*, vol. 6, ed. Giorgio Colli and Mazzino Montinari, Munich et al. 1988, p. 286 ("Warum ich so klug bin," §3). The bon mot cannot be verified in the works of Stendhal and is probably based on an oral remark. Nietzsche most likely encountered it in Paul Albert's book on nineteenth-century French literature; cf. Paolo D'Iorio, "Beiträge zur Quellenforschung," *Nietzsche-Studien* 21 (1992), pp. 398–400, here p. 400.

[5] While the existentialist debate is still well known today, the debate within the *Lebensphilosophie* has left comparatively few traces, although it was conducted quite broadly at the time. The most popular work from this now largely forgotten debate is by the philosopher and Nobel laureate in literature Rudolf Eucken (*Der Sinn und Wert des Lebens*, Leipzig, 5th ed. 1917).

[6] In 1971 John Rawls published *A Theory of Justice* (German: *Eine Theorie der Gerechtigkeit*, trans. Hermann Vetter, Frankfurt a.M. 1979), which marked the return of ethics—after a period dominated by metaethics—to practical life-questions and normative ethical issues. In 1979 three classics of applied normative ethics appeared: Peter Singer, *Practical Ethics* (German: *Praktische Ethik*, Ditzingen, 3rd ed. 2013); Hans Jonas, *Das Prinzip Verantwortung*, Frankfurt a.M., 9th ed. 2003; and Tom L. Beauchamp and James F. Childress, *Principles of Biomedical Ethics* (German: *Prinzipien der Bioethik*, trans. Julia Pelger, Baden-Baden 2024).

philosophical anthropology that began during the same period.[7] On the other hand, philosophy's renewed interest is likely due in part to psychology's growing engagement with the meaning of life and its empirical investigation.[8]

Strikingly, this "small renaissance of the question of meaning"[9] has occurred primarily among analytically oriented philosophers in the Anglophone world. Among the most prominent contributions are Susan Wolf's Tanner Lectures, published in 2010 under the title *Meaning in Life and Why It Matters*,[10] and the work of Thaddeus Metz, particularly his 2013 monograph *Meaning in Life*.[11] Since then, the topic has secured a firm place within analytically oriented philosophy, as evidenced by the enormous increase in publications, the ever greater differentiation of the debate, and the fact that introductory textbooks and even a comprehensive handbook on the subject have appeared.[12] In the German-speaking world, too, this renewed interest has begun to make itself felt.[13]

Unfortunately – as is not uncommon with the approach characteristic of analytic philosophy – the effort involved often stands in a somewhat questionable relation to the results achieved. The analyses are extensive, the degree of differentiation considerable, the distinctions introduced both numerous and fine-grained, and the arguments ingenious and exceedingly subtle. Yet one does not necessarily emerge much wiser; the central question itself often seems somehow to

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7 Cf., for example, Elif Özmen, "The Anthropological Turn: On the Difficult, Mutable, Yet Close Relationship between Philosophy and Anthropology," in: Jan-Christoph Heilinger and Julian Nida-Rümelin (eds.), *Anthropologie und Ethik*, Berlin/New York 2015, pp. 19–35; see also Gerhard Gamm et al. (eds.), *Zwischen Anthropologie und Gesellschaftstheorie. Zur Renaissance Helmut Plessners im Kontext der modernen Lebenswissenschaften*, Bielefeld 2005; Anita Horn et al. (eds.), *Die anthropologische Wende – Le tournant anthropologique*, *Studia philosophica* 72 (2013).

8 Cf., for example, Tatjana Schnell, *Psychologie des Lebenssinns*, Heidelberg et al., 2nd ed. 2020; John A. Hicks and Clay Routledge (eds.), *The Experience of Meaning in Life: Classical Perspectives, Emerging Themes, and Controversies*, New York et al. 2013; Keith D. Markman et al. (eds.), *The Psychology of Meaning*, Washington 2013. In psychotherapy—especially in the logotherapeutic and existential-analytic traditions—the question of meaning has of course been a topic for much longer.

9 Cf. Markus Rüther and Sebastian Muders, "Die Frage nach dem Sinn des Lebens in der gegenwärtigen Philosophie: Eine Topographie des Problemfeldes," *Zeitschrift für philosophische Forschung* 68/1 (2014), pp. 96–123, here p. 97.

10 Susan Wolf, *Meaning in Life and Why It Matters*, Princeton 2010.

11 Thaddeus Metz, *Meaning in Life: An Analytic Study*, New York 2013.

12 Cf., for example, Alfred Jules Ayer, "Human Aims and Ultimate Aims" [1988], in: Christoph Fehige et al. (eds.), *Der Sinn des Lebens*, Munich, 3rd ed. 2000, pp. 189–194; idem, "Unanswerable Questions" [1947], in: Christoph Fehige et al. (eds.), *Der Sinn des Lebens*, Munich, 3rd ed. 2000, pp. 34–36; Fritz Mauthner, "'Sinn des Lebens'" [1924], in: Christoph Fehige et al. (eds.), *Der Sinn des Lebens*, Munich, 3rd ed. 2000, pp. 29–33; Frank P. Ramsey, "There Is Really Nothing to Discuss" [1931], in: Christoph Fehige et al. (eds.), *Der Sinn des Lebens*, Munich, 3rd ed. 2000, pp. 37–39; Walter Terence Stace, "Man in Darkness" [1948], in: Christoph Fehige et al. (eds.), *Der Sinn des Lebens*, Munich, 3rd ed. 2000, pp. 66–71.

13 Cf., for example, Matthias Hoesch et al. (eds.), *Glück – Sinn – Werte. Metaethische, ethische und theologische Zugänge zur Frage nach dem guten Leben*, Berlin/New York 2013; Michael Kühler et al. (eds.), "Schwerpunkt: Das Schöne, das Wahre und das Gute. Das sinnvolle Leben in der Diskussion," *Zeitschrift für Praktische Philosophie* 5/2 (2018), pp. 41–282; Bernulf Kanitscheider, *Entzauberte Welt. Über den Sinn des Lebens in uns selbst. Eine Streitschrift*, Stuttgart 2008; Markus Rüther, *Sinn im Leben. Eine ethische Theorie*, Berlin 2023; from the perspective of the art of living: Wilhelm Schmid, *Dem Leben Sinn geben. Von der Lebenskunst im Umgang mit Anderen und der Welt*, Berlin, 2nd ed. 2014; popular-scientific: Christian Uhle, *Wozu das alles? Eine philosophische Reise zum Sinn des Lebens*, Frankfurt a.M. 2022. An important German-language anthology predating the current renaissance, which also contains many translated classic English-language contributions, is Christoph Fehige et al. (eds.), *Der Sinn des Lebens*, Munich, 3rd ed. 2000.

vanish from view. Detached from the existential dimension of the problem, the discussion frequently becomes entangled in highly abstract and highly theoretical analyses of preliminary and peripheral questions. At times it even relies on thought experiments that appear almost absurd, whose significance is accessible only to philosophically initiated insiders – as though the topic were merely another arena for exercises in theoretical acrobatics, pursued with solemn seriousness.

Whether such analysis can do justice to the phenomenon itself – to what we vaguely understand, or rather sense, in everyday life as the meaning of life – often appears to be of only secondary importance. The discussion is content to reduce the phenomenon to a few artificial and schematic examples: the supposedly extraordinarily meaningful lives of figures such as Pablo Picasso or Paul Gauguin, Mother Teresa or Albert Einstein. That the painter Paul Gauguin – of whom, among many other troubling aspects, it is now widely known that he sexually abused and exploited minors – can still serve as a paradigm of an exceptionally meaningful life says much about the phenomenological sensitivity of this philosophical approach.[14]

There are therefore more than enough reasons to be dissatisfied with the current state of the debate – as will become even clearer in what follows. None of the answers proposed so far are entirely convincing. There are thus ample grounds for attempting a new beginning and for developing a new answer – one with greater depth and greater existential force than those offered thus far. Unfortunately – and this must be acknowledged from the outset – such an undertaking cannot succeed without some rather dry conceptual clarifications and detailed analyses.

The ultimate aim of this book, therefore, is to develop a new answer to the question of the meaning of life; it seeks to articulate a theory of what ultimately matters in life. Because this is to be done with the seriousness and thoroughness appropriate to the weight of the question, the third part of the book – in which the new answer is developed – is preceded by two preparatory parts.

In the first main part, several preliminary issues are clarified in order to enable a treatment of the question of meaning that is as free from misunderstandings as possible. This occurs in two respects. First, it is shown why engaging with the question of meaning is not only worthwhile but necessary. Although the question has by now found a place within analytic philosophy, it is

[14] For example in Markus Rüther, *Sinn im Leben*, pp. 133 ff.; and also in Thaddeus Metz, *Meaning in Life*, pp. 190 f. Paul Gauguin was introduced into the philosophical debate by Bernard Williams, for whom he served as an example of "moral luck." Williams was presumably aware of Gauguin's familial misconduct but not of his sexual relations with minors; cf. Bernard Williams, "Moral Luck," in: *Moral Luck. Philosophical Papers 1973–1980*, Cambridge et al. 1981, pp. 20–39.

still not truly taken seriously by the philosophical mainstream. It must therefore be shown explicitly that the topic is not merely one for psychology but also demands philosophical attention. The urgency of the question is not only individual and existential but also – something almost entirely neglected in the debate thus far – political and social.

Second, the first part undertakes essential conceptual work. What exactly do we mean when we speak of the meaning of life? If we are to ensure that we mean the same thing when we use the same linguistic expressions – and to prevent the apparent simplicity of the word "meaning" from obscuring the enormous complexity of the phenomenon it denotes – a comprehensive analysis is required. This analysis breaks the concept down into its various facets and clarifies a number of widespread misunderstandings and fallacies.

Equipped with this more precise conceptual framework, the second main part turns to the four major philosophical families of theories within which a wide range of answers to the question of meaning have been developed. In four subsections, metaphysical, nihilistic, subjectivist, and objectivist answers are presented in detail, critically analyzed, and – largely – rejected.

In the third main part, the new answer is then developed – one that takes up what is most plausible in the fourth family of theories but moves decisively beyond it. Its central thesis can be stated as follows: a person lives a meaningful life if, for the right reasons, they are important to others – for their own sake.

Part III: The Participation Theory of Meaning

The Trace of the Others

Let us begin by briefly taking stock of what has been established so far. The question of the meaning of life is not only existentially significant for individuals but also politically relevant. For this reason, a philosophical clarification of what actually generates meaning in life remains an important desideratum. In contrast to psychological approaches – which can determine only what *subjectively* generates a sense of meaning – a philosophical clarification aims to identify what *objectively* generates meaning. Its task, therefore, is to answer the question under what conditions the subjective feeling of meaningfulness is justified.

Among the various answers that have been developed in philosophy, the deontological account ultimately proves – according to the results of the preceding analysis – to be the most convincing. The metaphysical and nihilistic responses are epistemologically problematic; the latter also often fail to take the seriousness of the question sufficiently seriously. The various subjectivist theories, by contrast, do not satisfy the requirement of providing an objective justification of meaningfulness and are furthermore based on a mistaken conception of value. Among the objectivist accounts, consequentialism renders the meaning of life excessively dependent on contingencies – that is, on the accidental factors that affect the consequences of our actions.

Deontologism, by contrast, locates the meaning of life in striving for what is objectively valuable – the good, the true, and the beautiful – and holds that such striving generates meaning even when it produces no consequences. It is true – and here deontologism incorporates elements from both subjectivist and consequentialist approaches – that meaning is enhanced when an intrinsically valuable action also produces valuable consequences and when such an action is experienced as subjectively fulfilling. According to the deontological view, however, neither of these conditions is necessary.

Among the theories examined so far, the deontological account therefore appears to be the most promising. Yet the existing deontological theories of meaning exhibit – alongside their often noticeable elitist tendencies – four significant shortcomings.

First, they fail to provide a convincing positive explanation of the connection between the meaning of life and objective values. In particular, they cannot adequately explain why engagement with objective values should generate meaning in life at all. The connection is

established primarily in a negative way – through the failure of non-deontological alternatives – while positively it tends simply to be presupposed rather than demonstrated.

Second, deontological approaches – especially those that exclude subjective factors – fail to do justice to the individuality and uniqueness of persons. As Susan Wolf's well-known intuition suggests, objective values can generate meaning only if engagement with them arises from genuine conviction, indeed from the depths of one's heart. If this subjective dimension is omitted, it would be possible to live a meaningful life even if one experienced it as profoundly alienated, as not truly one's own. This conclusion, however, is deeply counterintuitive. For this reason, the deontological theories commonly proposed today often fail to capture the existential dimension of the question of meaning; their answers lack depth.

Third, although deontological theories generally concede that subjective and hedonistic elements can enhance meaning, the theoretical basis for this claim remains largely unclear. The meaning-enhancing effect of such elements is therefore accepted primarily on grounds of plausibility; what exactly this effect consists in, and how it fits within a deontological conception of meaning in life, remains obscure.

Fourth, it is theoretically unsatisfactory that prevailing deontological theories acknowledge a plurality of meaning-generating values but are unable to derive them from a single underlying principle. The difficulty may lie in searching for a principle that explains the *value* of values – or in assuming that such a principle cannot exist – instead of seeking the principle that explains the *meaning-conferring power* of values, however diverse they may be in themselves. Such a principle would be compatible with genuine value pluralism, since it would remain neutral with respect to whether values are irreducibly plural or ultimately grounded in a deeper unity.

These deficiencies can be illustrated by returning once more to the example of the unfortunate Sisyphus. According to the dominant deontological interpretation, Sisyphus's life is meaningless primarily because the activity he performs – rolling a boulder up a mountain – is intrinsically worthless. If the meaning of life consisted in engaging in intrinsically valuable activities, Sisyphus could easily transform his life into a meaningful – perhaps even a supremely meaningful – one.

He could, for example, devote his time to performing complex mental calculations in order to produce mathematical insights, or he might immerse himself in philosophical reflections on the meaning of life – in that case striving for something valuable because it is true. Alternatively, he could attempt to roll the boulder up the mountain in aesthetically pleasing patterns, or descend again in increasingly refined sequences of steps while whistling ever more intricate

melodies. According to the deontological view, such secondary activities would confer meaning upon his life – even if he were to detest them.

But is this plausible? Hardly. Even if Sisyphus took pleasure in these activities, his life would not thereby become meaningful simply because he realized certain values. At most, it would become more bearable, since these activities might allow him to escape the presumably crushing boredom of his existence. Indeed, even if Sisyphus – contrary to the myth – managed eventually to keep the rocks atop the mountain and to construct from them an unimaginably beautiful temple, would his life thereby become meaningful?

If Sisyphus's life is to become truly meaningful, it seems that something decisive is still missing. The mathematical and philosophical theories he devises in our thought experiment, the aesthetically pleasing patterns in which he rolls the rock, the refined sequences of steps he performs, the heartrending melodies he whistles – even the magnificent temple he erects on the summit – would acquire meaning only if someone else were present to admire them. Something valuable – something good, true, or beautiful – that one creates becomes meaningful only when someone else can perceive and appreciate it.

This observation applies even to the rebellion that Albert Camus attributes to his Sisyphus. The silent protest, the inner rebellion becomes meaningful only in relation to humanity, on whose behalf Camus's Sisyphus rebels.

Here we arrive at a point that may appear obvious but has rarely been noticed during the many decades in which Camus's Sisyphus has been repeatedly discussed: Sisyphus is alone – and perhaps this is the true source of the meaninglessness of his existence. If he had someone at his side to whom he could lament his fate and whose fate he in turn could pity; someone with whom he could exchange thoughts about his philosophical reflections; someone who would listen with pleasure to his whistling and encourage him to take the next step – would his life not become not only more bearable but also far less meaningless?

The observation that the presence of others may play a meaning-constituting role should not tempt us to revert prematurely to consequentialism. Instead, we must pursue this trace further and attempt to clarify more precisely whether—and if so in what way—the presence of others contributes to the meaning of life.

To this end, we will now turn away from the life of Sisyphus and consider instead the life of the comatose Paul.

The Comatose Paul, or: Being Important to Others

The contemporary debate about the meaning of life typically begins with rather superficial examples of especially meaningful lives. We will proceed differently. Instead of starting with paradigmatically meaningful lives, we will consider the extreme case of a life that at first glance appears particularly devoid of meaning and ask what might nevertheless still confer meaning upon it.

This approach rests on several considerations. First, it avoids the danger of slipping into elitism. Those who inquire not into the maximal but into the minimal conditions under which a life becomes meaningful are more likely to focus on what should, in principle, be attainable for everyone under all circumstances. Second, by probing the deepest roots rather than the highest peaks of meaning in life, one increases the likelihood of identifying the factor that lies at the very core of meaningful life and that may therefore also be the factor common to the various forms of meaning-conferral. Third and finally, by examining borderline cases of meaningless life in order to determine what might still generate meaning under extreme conditions, we trace what is genuinely capable of sustaining us and thus possesses the highest existential relevance. This insight accords closely with the well-known formula of Viktor Frankl – already cited earlier – which summarizes his experience as a psychologist and therapist: “He who has a why to live can bear almost any how.” What we can learn from this is that extreme situations of human life reveal what can still sustain existence even when it has become scarcely bearable, and thereby perhaps also what might, under certain circumstances, even be worth dying for.

With this in mind, we can sharpen the question of meaning as follows. Let us imagine a young man – Paul – who, after a motorcycle accident, has suffered severe brain damage and now lies irreversibly in a deep coma, kept alive only through artificial means. Can such a life – let us focus, for the sake of the argument, solely on this tragic final phase – can a human life in this irreversible state of coma still possess meaning? According to all the theories considered thus far, the answer would have to be quite clearly: no. In this condition Paul can neither feel nor experience meaning, nor love or feel passion for anything, nor act in pursuit of objectively valuable goals. His present form of existence would therefore appear meaningless.

But is this really so? Might there nevertheless be a factor capable of conferring meaning upon Paul’s life even in this deplorable condition?

The fact that Paul has declared himself willing, in the event of his death, to donate his organs and make his body available for scientific research does not provide such a factor. Admittedly, through this decision Paul might still realize values: he could save the lives of others or

contribute modestly to scientific progress. Yet these values would be realized only after his death. In doing so he might confer meaning upon his death, but not upon his life.

A more plausible line of inquiry would be to ask whether Paul's life in a coma might remain meaningful so long as someone sits at the edge of his bed holding his hand – someone for whom it matters that Paul is still alive. More generally: might Paul's life remain meaningful as long as there is someone to whom it matters that he continues to live, even in this maximally reduced form – for example because that person still needs time to compose themselves and take leave of him? At any rate, it is conceivable that Paul, if he were capable of reflection and if this other person mattered to him, might say to himself: "Under these circumstances I cannot go just yet – someone still needs me."

Does this imply that love is the meaning of life? In a certain sense, this is indeed the case – and one would thereby find oneself in distinguished company. Almost all theorists of meaning in life attribute a meaning-constituting role to love: whether, as in Harry Frankfurt's subjectivist approach; or, from an objectivist perspective, in the work of Susan Wolf, Thaddeus Metz, and Markus Rüther; or, most radically, in the case of Terry Eagleton, for whom love is in fact the only source of meaning[15]. Empirical research likewise confirms that loving relationships – or, more broadly, successful interpersonal relationships – constitute a central element of subjectively experienced meaning in life.[16]

The prevailing thesis, however, holds that meaning arises when we love (provided, as the deontological qualification adds, that what we love is worthy of love). The thesis proposed here, by contrast, is that meaning arises first and foremost when we are loved – or, more abstractly and more broadly speaking, when we are important to someone else in a non-instrumental sense. For if I am important to someone else, then by that very fact it becomes *objectively* important – and therefore meaningful – that I exist. That is then simply the case.

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[15] Cf. Harry Frankfurt, "The Importance of What We Care About"; idem, *Gründe der Liebe*; Wolf, *Meaning*; Metz, *Meaning in Life*, pp. 201ff.; Rüther, *Sinn im Leben*, pp. 167ff.; Eagleton, *Sinn des Lebens*, pp. 137ff.; further Louis Van Schaik, "The Concept of Care," in: Michael Macnamara (ed.), *Meaning in Life*, Cape Town 1977, pp. 139–150; Garrett Thomson, *On the Meaning of Life*, South Melbourne 2003, pp. 128–131; Julian Baggini, *What's It All About? Philosophy and the Meaning of Life*, London 2004, pp. 181ff.; Schmid, *Dem Leben Sinn geben*.

[16] Cf., for example, Maeve O'Donnell et al., "You, Me, and Meaning: An Integrative Review of Connections between Relationships and Meaning in Life," in: *Journal of Psychology in Africa* 24/1 (2014), pp. 44–50, https://doi.org/10.1080/14330237.2014.904097; Olga Stavrova/Maike Luhmann, "Social Connectedness as a Source and Consequence of Meaning in Life," in: *The Journal of Positive Psychology* 11/5 (2016), pp. 470–479, https://doi.org/10.1080/17439760.2015.1117127; Hong Zhang et al., "Threats to Belongingness and Meaning in Life: A Test of the Compensation Among Sources of Meaning," in: *Motivation and Emotion* 43 (2018), pp. 242–254, https://doi.org/10.1007/s11031-018-9737-8; Nathaniel Lambert et al., "To Belong Is to Matter: Sense of Belonging Enhances Meaning in Life," in: *Personality and Social Psychology Bulletin* 39/11 (2013), pp. 1418–1427, https://doi.org/10.1177/0146167213499186; Tyler Stillman/Nathaniel Lambert, "The Bidirectional Relationship of Meaning and Belonging," in: Joshua Hicks and Clay Routledge (eds.), *The Experience of Meaning in Life*, Dordrecht 2013, pp. 305–315, https://doi.org/10.1007/978-94-007-6527-6_23.

From these reflections a first rudimentary thesis may be formulated: the meaning of life consists in being important to someone else. This thesis, however, requires further specification.

First: The mere fact that Paul is important to another person is not sufficient to generate meaning in the relevant sense. Paul must be important to that person *for the right reasons*. If he were important to them merely because they could continue to benefit from his salary payments for as long as he lived, this would be the wrong reason. In that case Paul would matter only instrumentally and would moreover be replaceable.

For the relationship truly to generate meaning, Paul would have to be important to that person (a) as the person he is, (b) in a non-instrumental way, and (c) in an emphatic sense. The latter condition means that the other person must take a genuine interest in Paul. It is meaningful to matter deeply to another person and, in that sense, to be needed by them.

Paul must therefore be important to the other person for his own sake – but in such a way that this person also has an interest in him, so that Paul matters to them also for their own sake. Paul would thus have to be important to the other person *for her own sake for his own sake*. For example, the other person would have to take a sincere and deeply felt interest in Paul's well-being and flourishing. Correspondingly, one would also expect that, when the time came, she would – in knowledge of Paul's presumed wishes and in his interest – consent to the discontinuation of life-sustaining treatment and allow him to die, even if doing so broke her heart.

From this reflection we can derive three closely related criteria of meaning-conferring relationships to which we will return later: *being an end in oneself, uniqueness, and irreplaceability*. Meaning arises when one matters to others for their own sake and for one's own sake as the person one is – that is, in one's uniqueness and irreplaceability. These criteria help explain, for example, why parents often experience their children as especially powerful sources of meaning. For children, parents – provided they fulfill their role at least reasonably well – are typically important not only in this double sense (out of self-interest and for the parents' own sake), but are also, as numerous psychological studies show, scarcely replaceable.[17]

Second: Even this condition – being important also for one's own sake – is not yet sufficient to explain the objective meaningfulness of such a relationship. We would regard Paul's final phase

[17] Cf., for example, Martha Cox and Kristina Harter, "Parent-Child Relationships," in: Marc Bornstein et al. (eds.), *Well-Being. Positive Development Across the Life Course*, New York 2003, pp. 191–204.

of life as meaningful only if it were also *good for the other person* that Paul is important to them. After all, it might be that the other person – one need only think of toxic relationships – would be far better off if they were finally to let Paul go.
In order to be meaningful, the relationship must therefore contribute to the other person's well-being and flourishing in a broad sense. It is not enough that the person merely believes Paul is good for them; Paul must in fact be good for them. It must be objectively good – and in this sense objectively important – for that person that Paul exists. Likewise, parents must be objectively good for their children if they are rightly to experience their children as giving meaning to their lives. Genuine meaning therefore requires that one be objectively good for the other. This aspect too falls under the qualification *being important for the right reasons*.

Third: By contrast, it is less decisive for the meaning-conferring character of the relationship whether the relationship is good for Paul. In his present condition he cannot perceive it anyway, and in many of our meaning-conferring relationships – especially those involving our children – we are willing to accept considerable sacrifices.
Nevertheless, one limitation must be introduced: the harm incurred must not be disproportionate. The disadvantages one accepts for the sake of another must correspond to the quality of the relationship and stand in reasonable proportion to what is thereby achieved for the other. In standard deontological theories of meaning this requirement appears in the important qualification that what one strives for – or what one accepts sacrifices for – must be objectively worth the effort.

Fourth: It will already have become clear that Paul need not be conscious in order for the person to whom he matters for the right reasons to confer meaning upon his life. His life can be meaningful even if he does not experience it as meaningful subjectively. Two conditions, however, must be satisfied.
First, the significance Paul has for the other person can become meaning-conferring for Paul only if he *would accept it*, were he capable of doing so. It might be that Paul does not even know the person sitting at his bedside – or even despises them. In such a case the significance he has for that person would not become meaning. For it to crystallize into meaning, Paul would at least have to accept it to the extent that he could give it his voluntary – that is, informed and rational – consent.
The *hypothetical voluntary, informed, and rational consent* to the significance one has for another person is therefore a condition for the emergence of meaning in life. This also implies

that the disadvantages one is willing to accept for another must not only objectively be worthwhile but must also be capable of receiving such hypothetical rational consent.
Nevertheless, it must also be acknowledged that the significance one has for someone one does not know – or even dislikes – can still confer meaning in a certain sense: namely as a *potential for meaning* that must first be taken up and realized. It may well happen that the person one initially does not know or even dislikes eventually grows dear to one's heart. In that case the potential for meaning would be transformed into actual meaning in life.

Fifth: In addition to the consent required for significance to become meaning-conferring, a second condition must be met: the person for whom one is important must themselves also be important to oneself *for their own sake*. Paul must therefore also care about the person to whom he matters.
This follows for at least four reasons. First, it is already implicit in the condition that the relationship must be objectively good for the other person: a purely instrumental relationship with Paul would not be good for them. Second, if Paul were conscious and cared nothing for the other person, he could hardly experience the significance he has for that person as genuinely meaningful. Recognition from someone who means nothing to us carries no weight. Third, it is extremely unlikely that someone whom Paul treats merely as an instrument would continue, over the long term, to regard him as important for his own sake. And fourth, it would simply be morally wrong for Paul to maintain a purely instrumental relationship with another person.

Sixth: Since Paul is not conscious, it makes no difference for the meaningfulness of his life whether he is actively involved in anything. It is sufficient that he is alive. Of course, the fact that Paul matters to the person sitting at his bedside probably has much to do with the way he lived before the accident – with the actions through which he became important to that person and remained so. Yet this is not strictly necessary.
One need only think of an infant who, due to severe injury, dies only a few hours after birth. This infant has done nothing except to have been alive for a brief time. And yet it may well be that his life – through the love of his parents, that is, through the fact that he mattered to them for his own sake – was a profoundly meaningful one.
However, the moment a person becomes conscious and capable of action, their actions do become relevant for the generation of meaning. At that point the theory of meaning translates into a practical task: *to cultivate, deepen, or make possible meaning-conferring relationships* –

in other words, to ensure that one becomes, is, and remains important for the right reasons to others who themselves matter to one for their own sake.

The Participation Theory of Meaning I: Core Theory

On the basis of the foregoing analysis, we can now formulate our rudimentary thesis of meaning somewhat more precisely: the meaning of life consists in being important to others, and in striving to become and remain important to others, under the following conditions:

(a) that one is important to others for their own sake—that is, also out of their own self-interest—for one's own sake;
(b) that one, or one's actions, is objectively good for these others;
(c) that one gives, or would give, one's rational assent to the fact of being important to others, and that one's own actions are voluntary;
(d) that the others are, or would be, important to oneself for their own sake as well;
(e) that the others, or one's relationships with them, are objectively worth the disadvantages one accepts for their sake; and
(f) that the actions one performs are not immoral.

All six conditions may be subsumed under the formula "*for the right reasons*." Put briefly, the meaning of life consists in being important to others for the right reasons and in striving toward precisely this through one's actions – for example, through acts of genuine attentiveness. This, the thesis claims, constitutes the core of what we are seeking when we ask about the meaning of life. This is not to say that it is the only way in which meaning may be found in life – more on that later – but it is to say that it is the most fundamental way. For it is capable of sustaining us even in existentially extreme situations.

This theory may be called the *participation theory of meaning*. It bears this name because, according to it, what matters in life is that others participate in one's life in a positive way. Meaning is therefore generated when others participate positively in one's life, and when one strives to allow others to participate positively in it.

At bottom, then, the most important path to meaning in life lies in successful deep interpersonal relationships: above all in fulfilled romantic partnerships, good friendships, and functioning family relationships, especially intact parent-child relationships, and more generally in every interpersonal relationship marked by profound mutual esteem and deep mutual goodwill. As a near-paradigmatic case of such a relationship – provided, of course, that it succeeds – one may

take the relationship between parents and child. It is surely not by chance that Tolstoy, at a decisive point in his existential drama of meaning, cries out for the mother:

> And again and again, from quite different directions, I arrived at the recognition that I could not have come into the world without any ground, without any cause and without any meaning, that I could not be like a little bird fallen out of the nest, as I felt myself to be. Even if I, the nestling that has fallen out, lie on my back and chirp in the tall grass, I chirp only because I know that my mother carried me beneath her heart, hatched me, warmed me, nourished me, loved me. Where is she, this mother?[18]

Even if one brackets the fact that the mother has extraordinary significance in Russian culture, that for Tolstoy the mother here ultimately functions as a cipher for the meaning-giving God, and that the mother-child relationship cannot, of course, serve as a general model of successful interpersonal relationships, the reference to the mother is nonetheless illuminating. For it likely takes us back to the primal experience of meaning. What could be more meaning-conferring for a small child who has just hurt itself and, seized by what for it is the deepest grief in the world, cries desperately for parental help, than to hurl itself sobbing into the open arms of its mother or father and allow itself to be comforted?

What is meaning-conferring – and not merely soothing – about the parental embrace is precisely that, in the embrace, the parents participate intensely in the child's life and suffering, and that the child, by willingly yielding to the embrace, allows the parents to participate in its life and suffering. In that moment, the child rightly experiences its life as meaningful because it matters to the parents for its own sake – which, incidentally, the child also knows, senses, and experiences in the embrace; because the child is good for the parents – which the child, too, is likely to know, sense, and experience, for instance when it notices that the parents rejoice in the success of their comforting embrace; because the parents are also important to the child for their own sake; and because, finally, allowing oneself to be lovingly comforted in one's parents' arms is in any event worth the effort.

Deep interpersonal relationships may count as the royal road to meaning in life because they exhibit five decisive characteristics.

(1) Unlike the case of the comatose Paul discussed above, meaning-conferring relationships are normally reciprocal – and even in Paul's case we must assume that his relation to the person sitting at his bedside was once reciprocal, for otherwise that person would scarcely be sitting there. To return to the example of the embraced child: the embrace, or the relationship of which it is an expression, is meaning-conferring not only for the child but also for the parents. For just

[18] Tolstoy, *Beichte*, p. 83.

as the child matters to the parents for its own sake, so too the parents matter to the child for their own sake; the parents constantly experience that they matter to the child for its own sake; they are good for the child and constantly experience – again, also in the embrace – that they are good for the child; and the child is in any case worth the effort of the embrace.

This reciprocity characterizes all deep meaning-conferring relationships: the partners matter to one another for their own sake, are good for one another, and are worth the effort for one another. If a relationship is to remain stable, fruitful, and thus meaning-conferring over the long term, all of this must repeatedly be experienced by each in the other.

In deep interpersonal relationships, the event of meaning is therefore mutual, and for that very reason intensified. One receives and experiences meaning by being important to others for the right reasons, but one attains and sustains this over time only by oneself giving meaning to the life of the other person: by letting that person matter to one for their own sake and by repeatedly showing and allowing them to feel this. This giving of love and meaning enables and motivates the other person to love, to show love, and thereby to give meaning in turn, which again enables and motivates oneself to give love and meaning, and so on.

An objection sometimes raised in the literature against treating such love-relationships as central factors of meaning-conferral is that, on this view, it would suffice for the meaning of life to cultivate a single intimate partnership in which two partners mutually supply one another with meaning. But this, so the argument goes, would be absurd; hence something must be amiss with the theory.[19] Yet the theory proposed here does not entail any such conclusion. First, such an exclusive relationship centered wholly on a single partner would, according to everything we know from psychology and psychotherapy, not be good for the partners – and that would already violate a condition of genuinely meaning-conferring relationships.[20] Second, such exclusivity would lead to the neglect of relational obligations toward third parties, which would not only be morally wrong but also destructive of meaning. Third, it would be imprudent to stake everything on a single relationship, or on a single source of meaning, since it may come to an abrupt end through the death of one's partner or through other contingencies.[21] The proposed theory therefore implies not that the meaning of life lies in one exclusive relationship, but that it lies in several good relationships, some more intense and others less so. Since deep

[19] Cf., for example, Wolf, *Meaning*, p. 42.

[20] Cf. Margaret Mahler et al., *Die psychische Geburt des Menschen. Symbiose und Individuation*, Frankfurt a. M., 19th ed. 2008; Franz Ruppert, *Symbiose und Autonomie: Symbiosetrauma und Liebe jenseits von Verstrickungen*, Stuttgart 2010.

[21] This is also evident from the fact that the death of a loved person can plunge the bereaved into a severe crisis of meaning; cf., for example, Golsworthy, Richard/Adrian Coyle, "Spiritual Beliefs and the Search for Meaning among Older Adults Following Partner Loss," in: *Mortality* 4/1 (1999), pp. 21–40, https://doi.org/10.1080/713685964.

relationships are demanding and require, above all, a great deal of time and commitment, no human being can sustain very many of them.[22]

(2) Again unlike the case of the comatose Paul, in which subjective fulfillment of meaning plays no role because he lies in a coma, objective and subjective factors of meaningful fulfillment are inseparably intertwined in ordinary meaning-conferring relationships. This too helps explain why deep relationships are especially rich in meaning.

The objective meaningfulness of one's life consists in the fact that one, or one's actions, is good for others and that one is important to others for one's own sake. To attain meaning, one must therefore be both objectively important to others – in the sense of being good for them – and subjectively important to them – in the sense of mattering to them. The fact that one is subjectively important to others itself constitutes an additional mode of objective importance. For if, for example, I am bound to someone in deep friendship, so that I am subjectively important to that person, then it is generally also objectively good for that person that I do not betray that friendship. The subjective significance one has for someone thus affects whether, and to what extent, one is objectively good for that person.

Whereas objective meaningfulness consists in being objectively and subjectively important to someone else, subjective fulfillment of meaning – which does not stand in the foreground here because it lies more squarely within the domain of psychology – normally arises from experiencing precisely this state of affairs. Subjectively, what is surely most deeply fulfilling of meaning is to know or experience that one matters for one's own sake to others who themselves matter to one for their own sake, and to know or experience that it is good for them that one is there for them. In deep relationships, then, objective meaningfulness and subjective fulfillment of meaning coincide in an unsurpassable way.

To illustrate once more this intertwining of objective and subjective factors, let us return to the example of the parents. The parents and their actions are objectively meaningful if they matter to the child for their own sake and if they and their actions are objectively good for the child. Merely to know this is already subjectively fulfilling for the parents. But it becomes especially fulfilling when they also experience it – for instance, when they notice that it is good for the child that they are there and that what they do for it, such as comforting it, succeeds. And if the child then lets them know, of its own accord – perhaps by willingly allowing itself to be

[22] On the psychology of friendship see Zara Abrams, "The Science of Why Friendships Keep Us Healthy," in: *Monitor on Psychology* 54/4 (2023), p. 42, https://www.apa.org/monitor/2023/06/cover-story-science-friendship (accessed 28 Jan 2025); further Mahzad Hojjat/Anne Moyer (eds.), *The Psychology of Friendship*, New York 2016.

embraced, or by some small gesture of gratitude – that it is not only good that the parents are there, but that the parents themselves are dear to it, then the parents will likely be overwhelmed by subjective fulfillment of meaning. In a successful relationship, objective meaningfulness and subjective fulfillment of meaning are thus woven together in such a way that they mutually reinforce, and to some extent also legitimate, one another. For the subjective as well as objective happiness that my being and acting elicits in the other person – to whom I matter for my own sake – is at once the source and the legitimation of my objective meaningfulness and my subjective fulfillment of meaning alike.

(3) According to our theory, meaning consists in being important to others for the right reasons, for one's own sake. But what does it mean, in a deep relationship, to matter to someone "for one's own sake"? Above all, it means mattering to the other person as the human being one actually is: in the totality of one's qualities, in one's uniqueness, in one's character traits and personality, in one's strengths and weaknesses, in one's beautiful and ugly sides, in one's history, and also in one's possibilities for development. This does not mean that the other person must appreciate absolutely everything about one, nor that they must know one completely – that would be impossible. It means only that they know one well enough to be willing, in view of the positive sides they do know, to accept along with them both the negative sides and those not yet known to them.

Two aspects in particular are especially meaning-conferring here. First, the phrase "for one's own sake" means precisely that one matters to another as a whole person, and not merely with respect to isolated features – special abilities, particular achievements, and the like. Second, it includes the unfolding and development of one's own self. For one can matter to another as the human being one actually is only if one gives that person the opportunity truly to know one; that is, only if one allows oneself, and finds the space, to unfold and develop in dialogue with the other. In this way, letting the other person participate in oneself gives the relationship depth. And if one truly matters to the other person for one's own sake, then that person will also want to participate in one; they will wish for, call forth, foster, and make room for precisely this unfolding and development – just as good parents wish for, foster, accompany, and delight in the healthy development of their children.

Meaning in life is thus indirectly bound up with the unfolding and development of one's own self. For to matter to others for one's own sake in this deep sense requires the unfolding and development of one's self, so that the person who matters to others for their own sake is really oneself and not merely a snapshot, a mask, a role, or a performance. It is evident that, on this

view, meaning in life does not require self-alienating adaptation to the other, but rather independence, authenticity, and sincerity toward oneself and toward others. It is equally clear that meaning in life demands the work of active self-development toward the good – that is, work on oneself – since this is indirectly an effort to be or become objectively good for the other. What emerges overall is that deep meaning-conferring relationships are generally long-term projects that demand time, devotion, and commitment.

The fact that in everyday life we experience processes of self-unfolding and self-development, as well as processes of self-improvement and healing, as meaning-conferring has its basis not, as some theories mistakenly assume, in the view that these processes are meaningful in themselves – indeed, some theories identify the meaning of life altogether with continual self-perfection – but rather in the fact that such processes are the basis and precondition of being able truly to matter to others for one's own sake as the human being one actually is.

(4) Finally, it must not be overlooked that being important to others for the right reasons provides orientation in a fundamental sense. For where one is wanted and accepted for one's own sake as the human being one actually is, it is good for one to be there. The embrace given by parents to their desperately sobbing child bestows not only comfort but also a basic form of orientation, minimal in one sense yet existentially of the highest relevance: the embraced child feels that where it now is, it is good to be; that here everything is all right; that here it may feel sheltered and secure.

The embrace thus conveys home and belonging: the place where one knows one's way about and where one can dwell well. In this way it restores trust in the goodness, or at least the bearability, of the world as a whole; it helps heal the rupture with the world brought about by pain and injury. To matter for one's own sake to someone else who is deeply familiar to one confers meaning in life in the form of a basic emotional, but also cognitive, orientation and security – an aspect neglected by all the standard theories of meaning.

The orientation bestowed by mattering to someone for one's own sake is one of those magnitudes that remain relatively independent of the overarching frameworks of orientation discussed above. Just as every framework must take into account the fact that the sun rises and sets each day, so too every framework must take into account the fact that it is meaning-conferring and beneficial to matter to someone for one's own sake. Depending on the framework, this fact may be interpreted in one way or another; but it cannot be explained away. The fundamental orientation conferred by mattering to someone for one's own sake is

independent of such frameworks. In the loving embrace of its parents, the child feels secure even if the world around it is collapsing.

To sum up, then: at its core, the meaning of life consists in being important to others for the right reasons for one's own sake, and in striving through one's actions toward precisely this. The meaning of life therefore consists in others participating in one's life in a positive way and in allowing others to participate in one's life in a positive way. Or, stated more poetically, the meaning of life consists in being loved and in loving.

The warm embrace of one's parents – which stands paradigmatically for this meaning-conferring mattering-to-someone-for-one's-own-sake, and which bestows comfort, security, and confidence – is, as it were, the primal act constitutive of the meaning of life. In it all the factors of meaning-conferral isolated in the first main part converge: to be embraced is (a) intrinsically valuable; to allow oneself to be embraced has (b) a valuable purpose, namely to allow and accept that the embracing person shows one love and affection, wishes one well, and does one good, while also signalling to that person that they are doing one good; the embrace confers (c) fundamental existential orientation; and it contains (d) a positive emotional and motivational force.

At bottom, then, this theory merely confirms philosophically what life experience has always taught and what psychology has for some time now been able to support empirically: the most important path to meaning in life lies in successful deep interpersonal relationships. The profound subjective fulfillment of meaning that these relationships bestow upon us is therefore justified from a philosophical point of view, because such relationships are not only subjectively fulfilling but also objectively meaningful.