



## A Critical Study of Subjective and Objective Components of Thaddeus Metz's Theory of Meaning in life

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Received: 2022/09/02 | Revised: 2022/11/30 | Accepted: 2022/12/14

### Abstract

Thaddeus Metz, by developing a non-consequentialist theory on meaning in life, has tried to provide a relatively complete explanation of the meaning of most people's lives. Metz's theory is based on two components: 1) "rational nature" as a subjective component and 2) "the fundamental conditions of human existence" as an objective component. This article through an analytical-critical approach, first examines Metz's argument and its components, then explains some important objections raised against the components of Metz's theory, that is, :1) defending the meaning-conferring of the consequentialist view of the meaning in life, 2) the incompatibility of Metz's theory with human intuition, 3) lack of attention to the role of emotional aspects, 4) meaning-conferring of some necessary conditions, 5) the problem with the sufficiency of fundamental conditions for meaning, 6) the inability of fundamental conditions to explain the meaning of some works of art, and 7) ignoring the meaningfulness of an artificial intelligence's actions. Although Metz's theory is considered defensible to most of the objections, it has been shown that his theory in the subjective aspect is problematic. Based on the Robot Problem, it can be argued that without the need for transcendence and going beyond the animal nature, meaningfulness is possible. If it is possible to regard the computational aspect of artificial intelligence as a part of the rational nature of humans, the subjective component of Metz's theory cannot be defended.

**Keywords:** Thaddeus Metz, meaning in life, Non-Consequentialist Theory, rational nature, fundamental conditions of human existence.

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▣ Pakdel, M. & Bayat, M.R. (2023). A Critical Study of Subjective and Objective Components of Thaddeus Metz's Theory of Meaning in life. *Journal of Philosophical Theological Resear*, 24(94), 31-52. <https://doi.org/10.22091/jptr.2022.8559.2758>

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## Introduction

Thaddeus Metz proposes a principle that captures, under naturalist and non-consequentialist assumptions, the way in which the good, the true, and the beautiful are able to confer great meaning on life. He also shows how previous attempts to do so have failed.

His criticism of other theories and his replies to possible objections to his own, improved theory suggest that he is an objectivist. Metz's theory has two main components, which might be called the subjective component and the objective component.

Metz's proposal is probably the best theory available today of the meaning of life as self-transcendence under naturalist and non-consequentialist assumptions, and there are good reasons to prefer his suggestion to others. His theory, however, has been between criticism and defense.

In this paper, while acknowledging the importance of the contribution of Metz's theory to the literature, only the objections against two components of his theory will be explained. Iddo Landau, Stephen Kershner, and Minao Kukita are critics whose objections are examined in the present paper.

In addition to the most important critiques, this paper has posed another challenge to the subjective component of Metz's theory and also provided an answer for it, yet it contends that his theory requires further critical attention to this aspect.

## Metz's theory

The most basic statement of the fundamentality theory of meaning in life is:

A human person's life is more meaningful the more that she employs her reason and in ways that positively orient rationality towards fundamental conditions of human existence.

Thus, Metz's theory is based on 1) the subjective component, a matter of positively orienting one's rational nature towards objective values, and 2) the objective component, the fundamental conditions of human existence.

Metz also explains the way of identifying meaningful objective values. That is, with respect to the good, the true, and the beautiful, Metz's account in virtue of when and why they confer great meaning in life is that they involve substantial exercises of human intelligence directed towards fundamental conditions of human existence.

The way he construes 'rational nature' as a subjective component is broad. What Metz means by such a phrase, signifies not merely cognition and intentional action, but also any 'judgment-sensitive attitude' that includes a variety of propositional attitudes.

Metz also argues that the basic idea of fundamental conditions of human existence is that of conditions that are largely responsible for many other non-fundamental conditions. He notes that a fundamental condition should not be conflated with a necessary condition. A necessary condition of an object is something that is required for that object to obtain, whereas a fundamental condition is something that is responsible for that object. Not every necessary condition is a fundamental condition. Likewise, a condition could be fundamental and yet not be a necessary one.

More specifically, he suggests the relevant conditions of human existence are those of 1) a typical human person's life, 2) the life of our species, or 3) the environment in which we live. Hence, Metz by distinguishing between fundamental conditions and non-fundamental conditions suggests that firstly, the meaningfulness of people's life can be explained only by appealing to "fundamental conditions of human existence" and secondly, people, by orienting their rational nature, positively and substantially, towards fundamental conditions of human existence, can achieve a meaningful life.

## Objections to the theory's components

Some objections have been raised against Metz's theory: The incompatibility of Metz's theory with human intuition and lack of attention to the role of emotional aspects are critiques about the subjective component, and meaning-conferring of some necessary conditions, the problem with the sufficiency of fundamental conditions for meaning and the inability of fundamental conditions to explain the meaning of some works of art, are among the objections to the objective component.

### 1. Objections to the subjective component

a) Landau's major objection to the subjective component is that contouring rationality towards fundamental conditions is not always enough to obtain great meaning. He points out that those 'who just study or understand' the works of Einstein are positively orienting their intelligence towards fundamental conditions, but are not intuitively obtaining great meaning thereby.

b) Since reasoning is at the center of the theory, Kershner believes Metz's theory is over-intellectualized. He suggests reasoning instrumentally helps people connect to reality and what makes people's life meaningful is not merely deliberation and reasoning.

### 2. Objections to the objective component

a) According to Landau, on some occasions, orienting one's intelligence towards merely necessary conditions for human existence can confer great meaning on a person's life. Landau contends that the meaningfulness to be found in these cases is not fundamental.

b) Minao Kukita also believed Metz's theory does not work for a work of art to confer meaning and fundamentality is not essential as Metz is claiming.

Metz in reply to these objections provides some answers and this paper has tried to defend Metz's theory against the mentioned objections.

Notwithstanding some answers, the subjective component of the theory cannot be defended. Because it has been argued without the rational orientation of humans, meaning is possible. As the computational aspect of artificial intelligence is identical to a human's, if a robot based on its program helped people enjoy autonomy, this robot's life would be meaningful. If so, meaning can be realized without requiring to go beyond animal nature.

## Conclusion

Metz's theory is invulnerable to the disadvantages of the previous theories and is thus a significant contribution to the literature on the meaning of life. Although his theory in facing most critiques is defensible, it has ignored the meaningfulness of the actions of artificial intelligence.

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