

# The Relational Nature of the Meaning of Life in Nozick

MIRELA OLIVA

**W**HEN INQUIRING INTO THE MEANING OF LIFE, one strategy is to start with a preliminary, meta-theoretical elucidation of the expression itself<sup>1</sup>. Before we explore the conditions for a meaningful life, we first clarify what we mean by "the meaning of life" and, eventually, what "meaning" itself means. This clarification is crucial for the subsequent work of discovering what the meaning of life is. Such strategy has several advantages. First, it does justice to the novelty of the expression "meaning of life", which was coined in modern times. Second, it provides a unifying metric for all conditions of a meaningful life. In this paper, I defend Nozick's account of the meaning of life based on a definition of meaning as a relational dimension of reality. His position is different from many recent accounts of the meaning of life, which simply identify it with a value to be realized. The meaning of life is not one value among many but rather represents the connectedness of human life. Living a meaningful life requires to transcend limits, to grasp and realize relations between values, personal goals and actions, social interactions, events, and our entire existence from birth to death. This account leads Nozick to a theistic conclusion: the ultimate meaning of life can be only something that has no further meaning and is its own meaning, namely the Unlimited (Ein Sof in the Kabbalist tradition). The first part of this paper analyzes Nozick's definition of meaning as well as the relation between meaning and value. The second part examines the various modes of life's meaning as they emerge from the use of "meaning" in everyday language. I end with the discussion of the self-relationality of the Unlimited, which grounds the relationality of meaning.

1 This paper is an extended version of a talk I have given at the conference "The Meaning of Life" at the University of Haifa in June 2019. I am grateful to the conference participants for their feedback.

M. Oliva (✉)  
University of St. Thomas, Houston, USA  
e-mail: olivam@stthom.edu

Disputatio. Philosophical Research Bulletin  
Vol. 8, No. 11, Dec. 2019, pp. 469-494  
ISSN: 2254-0601 | [EN] | **ARTICLE**

## §1. What is the meaning of meaning?

Many approaches to the meaning of life use the notion of "meaning" in a generic sense, without tackling its entire significance. They usually break down this expression into more familiar concepts following two modalities. They identify the meaning of life either (1) with one issue regarding life's worthiness (purpose, achievement, fulfillment, or satisfaction) or (2) with a place-holder for a series of questions: Why are we born? Why do we have to die? What can we do to make our life meaningful? What is the story of our life? However, neither (1) nor (2) do justice to the meaning of life insofar as they do not manage to account for the originality of this expression in contrast with other philosophical concepts.

Both modalities are vulnerable to several objections. First, there are classic terms that could have been used instead of "meaning of life", for example, "telos", "last end", "happiness", "purpose", etc. What is the point in using the expression "meaning of life" just as a synonym for purpose or happiness? If we already have a term available for expressing what we now mean by the "meaning of life", it does not make much sense to replace it with a new word. Classic concepts such as "time" or "causation" maintain their actuality and universality, and nobody is thinking of replacing them with new terms. Thus, identifying the meaning of life with one item such as purpose or achievement defies the linguistic novelty of this expression. The meaning of life must be something different, or at least much more than purpose or achievement.

A slightly different objection to the first modality has been raised by scholars who accept the synonymy but reject the use of the expression "meaning of life". Joshua Hochschild thinks that "the meaning of life" is indeed a modern synonym of happiness and purpose, but the synonymy is rather infelicitous (Hochschild 2017, p. 6). The classic concepts of happiness and purpose were rooted in a metaphysical soil that linked human existence with the overall intelligibility of the universe. On the contrary, the meaning of life emerged from the modern context of nihilism, subjectivism, and existential angst. It replaced "happiness" and "end/purpose" but only as a poor surrogate, a mere simulacrum. If one wants to understand human life, one should go to the real thing (happiness), not to its second-hand synonym. Thus the synonymy is not simply superfluous, as in the first objection, but downright harmful. We should not use this expression anymore.

However, the idea that this expression emerged from modern negativity is only partially right. It is true that Nietzsche, for instance, is one of the first philosophers to use the expression. But a majority of thinkers who adopted this expression at the end of the 19<sup>th</sup> century and the beginning of the 20<sup>th</sup> century

(Dilthey, Husserl, Heidegger) have seen the concept of “meaning” itself as a marker of the intelligibility of the world (Oliva 2018 a). I will not address here in detail this matter. The merit of Hochschild's objection is to show how misleading the mere synonymy can be, especially if one detaches this expression from the very concept of “meaning”.

The second modality is, in this sense, better than the first one, because it avoids sheer synonymy. Unlike (1), it does not break down the question to one familiar concept. It points to a multiplicity of problems covered by the question of the meaning of life. These problems have been treated separately in classic philosophy; they are now coming under the same umbrella called “meaning of life”. The difficulty with this modality resides, first of all, in its lack of a unifying metric. For what reason are all these classic questions coming together in one expression? Is it simply because they are all questions about human life? This does not seem to offer enough unity, at least not in the sense of an organic philosophical conception. It is as if we would explain a cake from various perspectives: who baked it, for what reason, what is the chemical composition, what is the visual aspect, is it delicious for those who eat it, etc. But when we ask about the meaning of life, we do not only want to have an idea about life from different perspectives. We are looking for a response that saturates our need to understand the significance of life and to live well. The status of place-holder does not account for how all those questions are linked together. A second difficulty with the modality of place-holder is the risk of a deflationary account. For instance, one version of such a deflationary account is Julian Baggini's move from the big and mysterious question “the meaning of life” to smaller, un-mysterious questions about various meanings in life: helping others, love, etc. (Baggini 2005, p.3).

A similar problem pertains to the selectivity of some accounts. Many naturalists suspend some of the questions that lie under the umbrella “meaning of life”, such as the cosmic question about why we are born and why we have to die. As a result, some of these accounts might end up with the first modality. They also modify the expression, preferring to talk about “meaning in life” rather than “meaning of life” (Metz 2013; Wolf 2010). This version seems to be a reasonable and honest attempt to acknowledge the limits that a scholar might encounter in her reflection. Contra Hochschild, it sees “the meaning of life” not as an impoverishing expression, but rather as too ambitious in its scope. One should surely care about living a meaningful life but under certain parameters defined by naturalistic limitations. For those who ask about the meaning of life, meaning in life might be a good consolation prize. But still: what do we seek when we ask about the meaning of life?

To answer this question, Nozick claims, we have first to understand what "meaning" means. He starts by noting that various formulae for the meaning of life leave us unsatisfied. Seeking union with God, having a productive life, love, spiritual perfection — all these attempts to define the meaning of life somehow miss the mark. They are not wrong, but they don't mitigate the thirst for a meaningful life. If it were so, we would never look further. We would achieve a meaningful life as soon as we realize the formula. But believers in God, high achievers, lovers, and wealthy hedonists still struggle. This sort of frustration is apparent in the well-known story of a person who travels from Los Angeles to India to meet a sage and to ask him about the meaning of life. He could not find in the available literature a suitable answer to his search for meaning and hopes to obtain it from a sage who has wisdom and an intense life experience: "No one undertakes the trip to the sage who hasn't already encountered all the known formulas and found them wanting" (Nozick 1981, p. 572). When he meets the sage, the traveler asks simply, "What is the meaning of life?". The sage answers, "Life is a fountain." This answer does not seem much different from the formulae that left the seeker unsatisfied and propelled him to travel. He responds, indeed, irritated: "What do you mean, life is a fountain?... I have just traveled thousands of miles to hear your words, and all you have to tell me is that? That's ridiculous." The sage then replies, "You mean it's not a fountain?" (Nozick 1981, p. 571). This formula encounters the same problem as the others because it does not seem to offer a complex path to a meaningful life. Second, the choice of the object that represents the meaning of life seems rather arbitrary, leaving room for choosing a different object.

The failure of punctual definitions of the meaning of life should push us to move the discussion on different soil, namely on understanding what meaning itself means and how that significance carries over in the expression. For Nozick, meaning is a dimension of reality defined by relational integration. In short, meaning is relation. The use of "meaning" in everyday language confirms this definition. When we ask about the meaning of something, we don't find in that thing a sufficient explanation and need to move beyond it. For instance, if we see a crowd in front of the university, we wonder what's the meaning of it, why are there so many people? Merely looking at the crowd does not provide us with a complete answer, and we need more data besides the sheer image we have in front of our eyes. Similarly, when asking about the meaning of a word, we indicate its relation with other words or with an object: "We can understand the question of something's meaning, roughly, as the question of how it connects up to what is outside it. Not all ways of connecting need be of interest, but for the ways that are, something's meaning is how it connects in these ways with what is external to

it. /.../ The question of the meaning of something is: given what is external to it, how does it connect (in the preferred ways) with that” (Nozick 1981, p. 601).

Integration brings meaning close to value. Both meaning and value are dimensions of reality that represent an integration of diversity into unity. While meaning entails a relational integration, value entails an inherent integration. Something has intrinsic value insofar as it is organically unified, namely, has a high degree of unity in diversity (Nozick 1989, p. 164). For example, the aesthetic value of a painting resides in the capacity of the painting to integrate a diversity of material (colors, shapes) into a tight unity. The greater the diversity, the higher the organic unity. A monochromatic painting would have a high degree of unity, but not a high degree of organic unity. Similarly, a regimented society has lesser value than a free society, which benefits from the unity of the largest diversity of activities.

Unlike value which obtains through intrinsic integration, meaning requires surpassing boundaries: "Value involves something being integrated within its own boundaries, while meaning involves its having some connection beyond these boundaries" (Nozick 1989, p. 166). That said, value and meaning can cross paths. Meaning is often gained by linkage with something of value, especially in the case of the meaning of life. Intuitively, our life is more meaningful if it connects to justice, truth, or beauty; the stronger the linkage, the greater the meaning. One example is living a meaningful life by advancing justice in the world. This connection can be obtained, at a low level, by simply reading newspapers every day and being concerned with justice or injustice in the issues reported. However, by simply reading the newspapers, we do not fully advance justice; we have to do more than that. A stronger connection requires committed involvement, taking action, etc. "The tighter the connection with value, the greater the meaning. This tightness of connection means that you are interrelated with the value in a unified way; there is more of an organic unity between you and the value. Your connection with the value, then, is itself valuable; and meaning is gotten through such a valuable connection with value" (Nozick 1989, p. 168).

One could object that meaning and value do not necessarily obtain through integration. For instance, Thaddeus Metz takes issue with the definition of value as intrinsic integration. There are cases in which value obtains without strong unity. For instance, surrealist art displays random diversity without unity; minimalist art reduces diversity to simple lines or repetition. These forms of art are still appreciated as beautiful. Similarly, in the realm of knowledge, we may still attain truth without having an organic unity. Certain objects of knowledge are not organic unities: for instance, quarks, time, action at a distance etc. (Metz

2013, p. 208). We could slightly revise Nozick's thought to accommodate these counterexamples by seeing the process itself directed towards these objects as an organic unity. For instance, although quarks do not display an organic unity, a theory about quarks does, insofar as it synthesizes diverse data under a single principle. But by this token, a theory about anything at all would be valuable and confer meaning on life. Thus integration does not seem to be necessary for meaning and value.

Nozick addresses this kind of problem by qualifying integration as a process in which value and meaning are constantly alternating each other. For instance, if we compare Greek art and Romantic art, we see two different types of art. Greek art has order and balance. In contrast, Romantic art breaks with the existing order and organic unity and seeks new modes of unification. It transcends limits and is oriented towards a new and higher degree of organic unity (Nozick 1981, p. 613). Greek art has thus a focus on value, namely on intrinsic unity, whereas Romanticism has a focus on meaning, on change, and transcending boundaries. This contrast reveals a pattern of movement from one unity to another, which is realized by change and transgression. We can find it not only in art but also in science and human life. Nozick classifies four stages of this movement: (1) Diverse materials are organized in an order, structure, theory, style, hierarchy, and unity; (2) The content of this order is extended, and new material is introduced (while some old material may be rejected or ignored); (3) A new organization of the material is introduced, with new modes of patterning and unification. The new material and much of the old is combined into a new unity; (4) This unity is then disrupted by the introduction of further new material. The odd numbers represent value, and the even numbers represent meaning. There are three possible views on this pattern. In the classic view, the goal of the pattern is to achieve better stages of the unification of diversity (the odd-numbered steps). The even-numbered steps are only transitions to the odd ones. In the romantic view, the goal is the even stages, the destruction of unities rather than their creation. This primacy of change is based on the assumption that the "reality of the self or whatever is too protean to be encompassed" (Nozick 1981, p. 614). In Nozick's view, each stage is equally important. To achieve unity and to transcend it constitute a process that is valuable in itself.

However, this begs the question: what is the point of the alternation, what is its direction? Does it differ from a mere repetitiveness that is doomed to meaninglessness as in the case of Sisyphus? Nozick compares the whole process to a sine curve (wave), a smooth periodic oscillation. In the sine wave, the movement "up and down" does not remain on the same line. The alternation unfolds in undulations, which move further and further from the initial point of

departure, having a specific directionality. The direction is not given asymptotically through an asymptote that the curve approaches, but through the rhythm of the process itself (Nozick 1981, p. 617). This process shows why we talk about "meaning" in addition to "value", and why we ask about "the meaning of life" rather than about "the value of life". The issue of a meaningful life is not only to realize certain values but also to be able to connect a wide variety of human activities: "This process is valuable because, in addition to containing valuable unities as its stages, it itself constitutes a pattern which unifies the widest diversity of human activity. Into this patterned process fall our hopes and activities, our desires to attain and to transcend, our search for value and meaning. Processes as well as resulting end states, becoming as well as being, can have value and can provide the context in which meaning is embedded" (Nozick 1981, p. 616).

This pattern also works in the case of human life. The relational nature of "meaning" carries over in the expression "meaning of life". In the case of life, meaning has to do with the transcending of our limits. The need to transcend our limits is especially visible in the challenge posed by death. Our mortality is indeed one of the reasons why we even ask about the meaning of life. What is the significance of a life that is doomed to disappear? The badness of death consists in abruptly ending our life, as well as in depriving us of new possibilities that we might have had if we continued our life. Furthermore, if we consider the eventual extinction of the universe, this question becomes even more pressing. All traces that our life could leave through our children, our legacy, our work will eventually disappear in a cosmic cataclysm.

A theory of the meaning of life has to provide a way to transcend this limit. Intuitively, transcending limits through negative connections does not provide meaning. For instance, transgressing the interdiction to steal does not make my life meaningful. Rather, the meaning of life is a transcending of our limited value through a connection with an external or wider value. Nozick distinguishes here between the value of life and the meaning of life: "The value of a person's life attaches to it within its limits, while the meaning of his life attaches to it as centered in the wider value context beyond its limits" (Nozick 1981, p. 611). Life is, in itself, valuable, but it is meaningful only insofar as it connects to a wider context of value. It follows from here that life's meaning comes in degrees dependent upon the hierarchy of values and the nature of connections to these values: "This meaning will depend upon the array of external or wider values connected with it, and upon the nature of the connections, their strength, intensity, closeness, the way his attachment unifies those wholes. The meaning of a life is its place in a wider context of value" (Nozick 1981, p. 611).

This position raises several questions. The first question regards internal goods. Metz notes that Nozick's view restricts a meaningful life to external goods, thus excluding internal goods (such as virtue, integrity, authenticity etc.) or the care of one's soul. We commonly view such goods as being markers of meaningfulness. Overcoming addiction or displaying courage are instances that still make a life meaningful although they are intrinsic to a person and do not refer to anything beyond her. Metz recommends that the transcendence analysis be modified to include both internal and external goods. Besides, it must also differentiate meaningful internal goods from pleasure. He proposes the following modified version: "The concept of meaning is the idea of connecting with final goods beyond one's animal self" (Metz 2013, p. 29).

One can answer that personal growth is meaningful also by Nozick's standards because it entails transcending limits. Overcoming addiction is such a case, in which one can defeat one's weakness. Furthermore, virtue connects with extrinsic persons or objects. Contemporary accounts of narrative argue that virtue indeed is exercised within a narrative context shaped by causal relations. As Alasdair MacIntyre shows, the unity of virtue in a person's life depends on the narrative unity of the whole life. Virtue is always embedded in a set of narratives, which includes causal relations between personal intentions, but also relations with the narrative setting: the immediate environment, the family, community, history, etc. (MacIntyre 2007, p. 206). MacIntyre gives the example of a man who works in the garden. Various intentions can prompt his gardening: he might work to exercise or to prepare the garden for winter or to please his wife. It is also possible that all three intentions are valid but in different degrees: one could do the gardening mainly to preserve the garden, but also to exercise and finally to please his wife. In such a case, we need to know if only one or two or all are causally effective. Would he, for instance, continue gardening if he would stop believing that gardening is healthy? Or that gardening pleases his wife? Besides, his intentions are embedded in a narrative setting: the history of his health, the history of his garden, the history of his marriage. The meaningfulness of virtue can never fully dispense of relations with extrinsic persons and events.

Consequently, we need to qualify the relationship between meaning and value further. On the one hand, meaning is always oriented towards value. Every transcending of limits has its telos in a positive value. Transcending the moral norm of not killing does not bring any meaning to the table. On the other hand, it seems that for Nozick value must always be reached through a transcending of limits, although it is by definition different from meaning. In other words, value needs meaning. This also applies to internal goods. The pattern of alternation between meaning and value exemplified by art is at work also in the case of

internal goods. Furthermore, this relation should be understood in a non-instrumental way. Nozick takes meaning to be a dimension of reality in its own right. By that token, meaning can not be just instrumental to value. This non-instrumentality of meaning is not fully apparent in Nozick's account. Perhaps some ways of transcending limits do not have value as their main target; causal relations, for instance, are types of relations that yield value but have as their main target the producing of an effect.

The relational account has the merit to accommodate both the volitional and the cognitive sense of the meaning of life. For some scholars of the meaning of life, be they naturalists or supernaturalists, the meaning of life is something that we need to realize through our actions. We can do it either through realizing fundamental conditions of human life (Metz 2013), engaging in projects of objective value (Wolf 2010), pursuing activities that give us personal satisfaction (Frankfurt 1988), or realizing God's purpose for us (Mawson 2016, Goetz 2012). For others, the meaning of life is something that we understand and contemplate. It has to do with the intelligibility of our personal lives and with the intelligibility of the whole universe. In this sense, it entails a sense-making process (Seachris 2019; McGrath 2014), an explanatory analysis of information (Thomas 2019), and detecting and interpreting signs (Repp 2019). The current scholarship is dominated by the volitional account (Metz 2019 b), partly because of both academic and non-academic growing interest in well-being and good living. Relation lends itself to both accounts. Transcending limits can be understood in terms of personal agency, but also in terms of receptivity and responsiveness. Realizing value through actions that overcome one's internal limits or reach outside of oneself is part of Nozick's account. At the same time, relation also makes things intelligible in a wide context. The narrative of life, for instance, is made up of relations (such as causal ones) between events, persons, intentions, and so on. It is, in this sense, no coincidence that Nozick sees a continuity between the linguistic meaning and the meaning of life, both based on a relation with something else. While the proponents of the volitional account fully separate the two kinds of meaning, the proponents of the cognitive account take the meaning of life to be a "rational extension of our talk of meaning in language and related phenomena" (Repp 2019, p. 416).

As we will see in the next section, this blend of volitional and cognitive approaches on meaning is apparent also in Nozick's analysis of modes of meaning, which culminates with the ultimate meaning, the Unlimited.

## §2. Modes of meaning and the Unlimited

Nozick classifies eight modes of meaning in the human life, each defined by a certain type of relation: (1) external causal relationship; (2) external referential; (3) intention or purpose; (4) lesson; (5) personal significance; (6) objective meaningfulness; (7) intrinsic meaningfulness; (8) the total resultant meaning (i.e., the sum of 1–7). These modes emerge from the use of "meaning" in everyday language. Nozick is simply looking at the occurrences of "meaning" (and its correlate, the verb "to mean"), which show that "meaning" is used not only in the sense of semantic meaning but also in other senses, related to situations, events, etc.

### (1) Meaning as external causal relationship

"Meaning" often signifies in our everyday language an external causal relationship. It points a) to the cause and then to the effect. For instance, in the statement "This means war", "means" refers to a causal consequence ("This", for instance, the refusal to free a prisoner, is the cause of "war"). It also points b) from the effect up to the cause. In these cases, meaning refers to causal antecedents or causal concomitants: "Those spots mean measles, smoke means fire, red sky at night means fair weather".

A human life can have meaning in this causal sense. Various causal relations give its meaning: (1) causal antecedents: there are causal relations that precede a life and make it possible. For instance, the sexual relationship of our parents is the cause of our life. (2) causal concomitants: there are causal relations that run through the stretch of our lifetime and impact our lives. Our life is shaped by causal relations between our intentions and our actions, by causality of events, or by causality of persons. The teleology of our intentions is fundamental for tracking the narrative of our actions. A historical event such as the 2008 recession can cause somebody to become a politician. A child can change a person's life in many ways: one becomes more emphatic, has more energy, is more stimulated to follow one's dreams, etc. (3) causal consequents: there are causal relations that mark the significance of life even beyond its time. Our life causes the life of our beloved ones or the life of the community beyond our death. We leave a trace in our children's life or perhaps in our society.

The causal meaning of life is thus the web of all these causal relations: "On this reading, every life has (multiple) meaning, and if these causally connected things need not be inferable, a life will mean all of its causal antecedents and consequents and concomitants, and perhaps all of theirs as well, in ever-widening circles. The meaning of a life, then, would be the whole causal nexus and flow of

events; the causal nexus is meant by the life's place in it" (Nozick 1981, p. 575). When one tries to understand one's own life in terms of change, one must indeed resort to these causal relations.

This mode of meaning is however not sufficient, *per se*, for the meaningfulness of life because not all causal relations are equally significant. In agreement with Nozick, T.J. Mawson shows that it must be associated with positive and significant effects (Mawson 2016, pp. 61–66). Causal relations need a positive value to be markers of meaningfulness. There are cases in which causal links do not necessarily yield a meaningful life. Mawson gives two kinds of examples, one referring to causal consequences, the other to causal antecedents. He construes them by adding causal relations to situations that are standard examples of meaninglessness. For instance, in the case of Sisyphus, the causal consequences of his actions in a given day disappear at night, because the rocks that he brings at the top of the hill fall back. The lack of causal consequences is certainly a part of the meaninglessness of his life. What if the rocks would not fall? Would that make his life more meaningful? Mawson imagines the case of an immortal person Andy, who rolls rocks up the hill building a constantly increasing pile of rocks. Andy would have causal consequences that Sisyphus does not have. However, although his life would be slightly more meaningful than Sisyphus', we would still not appraise it as an exemplary meaningful life. We would, intuitively, not trade places with Andy. In the second type of example, the lack of any kind of causal antecedents for our life would seriously diminish its meaningfulness. If our life emerged just by accident, it would lack a significant causal antecedent. However, also adding causal antecedents might still yield similar results. If human life would be the result of blind material causal forces in the universe, that would give us causal antecedents, but would still not increase much of life's meaningfulness. The causal antecedents need to be positively significant, as it is the case with the religious explanation of the origin of life as part of a larger scheme of things planned by God. We need thus causal relations that yield positive value. The requirement of positive value is apparent in the second mode of meaning.

## (2) Meaning as external referential or semantic relation

In everyday language, meaning also represents various semantic relations: synonymy ("brother" means "male sibling"), reference ("the man in the corner" means him), standing for a fact (a white flag means they surrender), or symbolizing (the bald eagle on the US seal symbolizes strength and determination). The referential relation can accommodate stipulative definitions, which can give the word new or altered semantic meaning. For

instance, by "smink," we can decide to mean a ridiculous example to illustrate a point. Once we stipulate it, we have to use it consistently with this meaning.

Similarly, life refers to values through a semantic relation, which can indicate a real but also a fake connection with value. The referential relation can accommodate stipulative definitions, which establish very impressive semantic meaning to our lives (Nozick 1981, p. 575). We can stipulate that our life means the triumph of justice or goodness in the universe, although our life is not engaged in any efforts of justice or good deeds. The referential meaning raises thus the problem of authenticity. An authentic life has a referential meaning in a non-arbitrary way. Following Nelson Goodman's *Languages of Art*, Nozick argues that our life exemplifies a property not only if it refers to it, but also if it has it. A person's life can have properties insofar as it is intentionally directed and focused upon realizing them. The semantic meaning is thus not enough for granting meaning to life, and it needs an intentional kind of meaning that guides our action. This brings us to the third mode of meaning.

### (3) Meaning as intention or purpose

In everyday language "meaning" can signify intention or purpose: intending an action ("he meant well", "did you mean to do that?"), purpose ("this play is meant to catch the conscience of the king"), or intending to convey or indicate something via another's recognizing this intention ("by that gesture, he meant to insult us") (Nozick 1981, p. 574).

In the case of life's meaning, the intention must focus upon one's life as a whole. Such focused intention takes the form of a life plan, which is the set of purposes that a person has for her life: her major goals, her conception of herself, her primary interests (Nozick 1981, p. 577). This type of focused intending differs from particular intentions, such as intending to eat vanilla ice cream. Unless I decide that my whole life should focus on eating vanilla ice cream, such intention has no bearing upon the meaning of life, although it is focused.

The life plan is not just a to-do list but entails an active engagement. Unlike particular circumstantial plans, it does not allow for procrastination. I can procrastinate to go on a diet, but I can not postpone engagement into my professional vocation that fructifies my talent, brings up achievements, and improves the lives of people who work with me, for instance, my students or my colleagues. My life can have a property in the mode of intentional meaning if and only if it engages in activities exhibiting or conducing to that property: "Using this notion of a life plan, we can say that a person's life refers to a property if its having that property is a (weighty) part of the life plan he is engaged in putting

into effect" (Nozick, p. 577).

A life plan can sometimes be actively pursued, but not visibly manifested. When the property exemplified is negative, the life plan often remains hidden. For instance, the life of a thief means stealing without being caught. This purpose is, of course, not manifested. Thieves do not usually disclose their stealing habit. Also, when the property of life and the life engagement are not fully cohesive, the life plan is not manifested. In such cases, the activities in which one is engaged do not fully reflect the property that grounds them. For instance, the work of academics can sometimes be so impersonal that it completely effaces their purposes. Such people "devote enormous energy to work in which nothing of themselves or their important goals shines forth, not even in the way their work is presented" (Nozick 1981, p. 578). The disconnect is so big that upon their death, their children could not recognize or relate their parent's work with their parent's persona and goals.

In the opposite case, people make efforts to render their life plan transparent. When they enact different life plans through the same actions, people take pains to explain the intentions behind their actions. Furthermore, when people want to underline the difference between their life plans and other life plans, they perform actions that mark this difference. They actively delineate themselves from other life plans.

Intentional meaning obtains when the life plan is manifest in a person's engagements, when its structure and content, its arrangement, and hierarchy of goals are clear and evident. The life plan must be visible in the surface of one's life, in the public face, in what one does or says, up to the point at which our life becomes an open book. A life that is manifested in this way can also acquire the fourth mode of meaning, namely meaning as lesson.

#### (4) Meaning as lesson

"Meaning" can signify in the everyday language a lesson, namely the formative effect that one event can have on its aftermath: "The Nazi period means that even a most civilized nation can commit great atrocities"; "Gandhi's success means that nonviolent techniques sometimes can win over force" (Nozick 1981, p. 574).

The meaning of life as lesson builds upon the manifest character of the intentional meaning. Most of us would like our lives to be a positive lesson for others. Such lesson requires transparent features of our life plan. A plan that is not manifested can not serve as a lesson, cannot teach anything to anybody. Failures and negative experience might provide a lesson insofar as they would warn others about what to avoid or not to do. One can also use one's life to

communicate a lesson to others; in this sense, one's life is not only a lesson because its manifested properties can become a model for the others, but also because one has purposely lived in a certain way as to communicate the others a certain lesson. For instance, Socrates has rejected the possibility to escape his death because that would have contradicted the lesson that he wanted to teach to Athenians.

Many accounts of the meaning of life take the first four modes of meaning to compose a meaningful life. Nozick sums up this composition in the following way: "(1) a life organized according to a plan and hierarchy of goals that integrates and directs the life, (2) having certain features of structure, pattern, and detail that the person intends its life to have (3) and show forth; he lives transparently so others can see the life plan his life is based upon (4) and thereby learn a lesson from his life, (5) a lesson involving a positive evaluation of these weighty and intended features in the life plan he transparently lives" (Nozick 1981, p. 578).

This composition is however not sufficient for providing a salient conception of the meaning of life. We can go further and question the meaning of the lesson itself. The issue of lesson thus opens up two other modes of meaning: (5) meaning as personal significance and (6) meaning as objective significance.

#### (5) Meaning as personal significance, importance, value, mattering

In everyday language, we can use "meaning" to designate subjective importance: "You mean a lot to me", "The repeal of that legislature means a lot to them". Personal significance is a subjective notion, designating what a person thinks is important to her. The personal significance is not necessarily opposed to objective significance. One's friend matters more to him than to others in virtue of the bond of love and friendship that has objective value.

There are also cases when the personal significance conflicts with objective meaning. In such cases, one's life is well integrated by plans, goals and purposes, but these goals do not extend to anything beyond the person, which is different from subjective concerns such as pleasure. One can still see his own life as a lesson for the others. For instance, some successful businessmen advertise their party life as a lesson for others. However, such lives fall short to provide a substantial answer to the question: What does that life add up to? How does such a life withstand the test of our mortality?

### (6) Meaning as objective meaningfulness

While Nozick easily retrieved the first five modes of meaning from frequent uses of "meaning" in everyday language, the remaining three seem to be less self-evident. At the same time, they still preserve the relational nature of meaning. Objective meaning is a connection with some things and values beyond itself. When we say that a movie was meaningful, or the contribution of somebody to a community project was meaningful, we refer to objective values that have universal recognition. In the case of life, objective meaning obtains through transcending the limits of oneself: "Children, relationships with other persons, helping others, advancing justice, continuing and transmitting a tradition, pursuing truth, beauty, world betterment — these and the rest link you to something wider than yourself" (Nozick 1981, p. 596). It is possible to live within one's limits, as Sartre's existentialism encourages us to do. Our life can be lived with purpose, forming an organic unity within these limits. Defined by exclusion, such life acquires a greater unified definition. However, what we obtain in this case is not meaning, but value. A life lived within limits can be a valuable one, but does not reach the threshold of meaning. The search for meaning thus entails a transcending of limits.

However, even objective meaning faces the limit of death. What is the point of achievements, sacrifices, justice, if it will all disappear one day? This conduces us to seek (7) meaning as intrinsic meaningfulness, namely objective meaning in itself, apart from any connections to anything else.

### (7) Meaning as intrinsic meaningfulness

This mode of meaning is the core of the question about the meaning of life, its ultimate layer. It has to do not only with transcending our human limits but also with the transcending of natural limits in general, thus reaching a grounding level. When faced with the imminence of personal death and cosmic entropy, many scholars look for a metaphysical foundation that withstands this perishable reality. They identify the intrinsic meaning of life with God's purpose for us and the universe. God's plan transcends our death and bestows meaning upon our life. Nozick thinks that this response does not reach the grounding level necessary for intrinsic meaningfulness. Regardless of the contents of this plan or the possibility we might have to know it, God's plan is not sufficient for bestowing meaning. There are several difficulties with the idea of divine purpose. First, God's plan might be of low importance. What if we are just meant to supply CO<sub>2</sub> to plants? One further condition is required: the purpose itself must be meaningful (Nozick 1981, p. 587). Second, this meaningfulness does not derive

from the status of creator. What makes God's purpose meaningful is not the fact that God is the creator. For instance, if a child from a different, parallel universe, would create our universe as his toy, it wouldn't bestow great meaning upon the created universe. Besides, that would still beg the question whether there is a God over and beyond the creator of this universe. The purpose–theory needs a substantial understanding of God and of how He grounds meaning: "What is it about God, as usually conceived, in virtue of which he can ground meaning? How can there be a ball of meaning? /.../ How in the world (or out of it) can there be something whose nature contains meaning, something which just glows meaning?" (Nozick 1981, p. 593). We need a point where the meaning question stops, namely a point beyond which there is no further meaning. Such point would entail something that is its own meaning, without having one too. If God had a meaning, that meaning would be, in virtue of the relational nature of meaning, outside God. But that would not stop the chain. The fitting stopping point would be something without limits, that has no connection with anything external simply because there is nothing outside itself. Nozick thinks that the Kabbalist concept of the Unlimited — Ein Sof — provides a stopping point. Because Ein Sof is unlimited, there is nothing that stands outside of it. If there would be, Ein Sof wouldn't be unlimited. Thus the question "What is the meaning of the Unlimited?" is not legit, because there is nothing outside of Ein Sof to provide its meaning.

Since Ein Sof does not have any meaning, how does it bestow meaning upon our life? There are two ways to consider the Unlimited as having no meaning. In one alternative, the Unlimited has no meaning, and it surpasses the distinction meaningful/meaningless. It transcends the category of meaning, rather than being itself meaningful. This, however, would imply that also our connection with the Unlimited would make us transcend the distinction meaningful/meaningless. But in this case, the question of the meaning of life becomes obsolete. We would not be able to ask about it anymore. In the second alternative, preferred by Nozick, the Unlimited has no meaning, but is its own meaning. Only an Unlimited can be its own meaning; a limited thing can not. To understand this difference, we can take an analogy with mathematical sets. In the case of finite sets, there can be no perfect one–to–one mapping between a set and a proper subset of itself. There is no full overlapping between the set of all positive integers and the set of even positive integers. One set is left out, namely the odd positive integers. However, in the case of infinite sets there is a one–to–one mapping between a set and a subset of itself. For instance, each positive integer  $n$  overlaps with the even integer  $2xn$ . Similarly, only the Unlimited stands in a relationship to itself, because only an unlimited being can include itself as a

part, only an infinite being can embed itself. There is no wider standpoint that includes Ein Sof but is not included by Ein Sof. This self-relationality of Ein Sof is the model of the connectedness of meaning: "Not only should the meaning relation be specified so as to yield this result, but also this meaning relation should be insecure for things lesser than Ein Sof. Only it fully stands in that relation to itself; and when anything lesser stands in that relation to something else, its so standing is insecure, perhaps because it is a pale version of the relation in which Ein Sof stands to itself" (Nozick 1981, p. 603). Thus Ein Sof is its own meaning because it is self-relational in virtue of being unlimited.

The intrinsic meaningfulness calls for one last mode of meaning, namely (8) meaning as total resultant meaning.

#### (8) Meaning as total resultant meaning

This mode is the sum of the first seven modes. When we ask about the meaning of life, we aim indeed at an all-inclusive answer that covers all sorts of meaning. There is however no formula that would allow us to quantify a sum of all connections and values in a person's life. The ordering along the transcending of limits might be only partial. While for each dimension of our life we can reach some clarity, this doesn't seem to be possible for any two arbitrary points in the space of the  $n$  dimensions along which one can be limited. For instance, my story as a mother and my story as a teacher do not fully add up. Nozick thinks that this is positive: "For that, we should be thankful" (Nozick 1981, p. 595). Perhaps he means that, besides the difficulty of remembering every detail and of evaluating every significant factor, such a formula would actually limit the meaningfulness of my life, as for every kind of sum, I could always ask if there is anything else beyond it. Therefore meaning as total resulting meaning can only be grasped, just like objective meaning, through a relationship with the Unlimited.

This position has provided the conditions that something has to meet to bestow meaning upon our lives. It has not, however, proved that such an entity or person exists. The question of the existence of the Unlimited is difficult to answer. First, there is no proof that it does not exist. One can, for instance, wonder if the belief that the unlimited does not exist comes inductively from our limited experience. Second, various ways to prove it did not yield substantial results in Nozick's view. Mystical experiences are too contradictory to constitute a solid ground, and the deductive arguments did not convert many people. The issue of the existence of the Unlimited is a matter of receptiveness and responsiveness: "If there did exist a divine being or realm not directly perceivable by the senses, how else would you

come to know it other than by being open to it, allowing it to most deeply touch you?" (Nozick 1989, p. 53; see also Cottingham 2016). Such receptiveness is possible not only in religious faith but also in philosophy and the other humanities. Because it mirrors the self–relationality of the Unlimited, this receptiveness entails grasping relations that carry value. While faith operates with trust, philosophy and humanities work with a non–reductionist understanding. They must, first, recognize valuable human traits as having integrity of their own and not reduced to less valuable metrics. For instance, they must see human creativity not just as an instrument of animal survival but as a spiritual trait. Second, they must reason by analogy, discovering similarities and patterns. The process of patterning unveils meanings through connections and values through unity: "By its placement of each in relation to the others, the patterning will straddle the different dimensions, unifying them by simultaneously showing the meaning of each, and the value (organic unity) of the whole in the largest overall patterning and so the widest explanatory picture" (Nozick 1981, p. 641). For instance, we understand another person by seeing her as similar to us and by imagining how we would behave in her situation.

There are several difficulties with Nozick's position. First, the idea of an Unlimited, which has no meaning at all and is ineffable, runs counter to the monotheistic conception of a divine spiritual person that has maximal attributes (Metz, 2019 a, p. 13). In this sense, Metz doubts that Nozick's relational view of meaning supports standard supernaturalism. Nozick does, indeed, claim that no human terms can apply to the Unlimited; if they would, then the Unlimited wouldn't be unlimited: "To be one way and not another is to have limits" (Nozick 1981, p. 609). In a different context, when he discusses the problem of evil in *The Examined Life*, Nozick accepts the usual definition of God as the most perfect actual being who created this world and who has various attributes: omniscience, omnipotence, and goodness (Nozick 1989, p. 235). But he stresses that issues such as evil fail to find a satisfactory solution when addressed from the perspective of divine attributes. We must, instead, delve into the divine inner life. This step has not been taken by metaphysics, nor by philosophical theology, but by Kabbalist theosophy. For instance, some Kabbalists explain evil in connection with an interactive process within the divine. The expulsion from Spain in 1492 pushed Kabbalists to this kind of explanation. They understood the suffering of the Jewish people in connection with the displacement of the *Schechinah* (an aspect of the divine presence). "A divine trauma corresponded to the exile of the Jewish people; an aspect of God was in exile and not in its proper place. It was thought that the Jewish people had a particular function to perform, that by so doing, they could help the divine *Schechinah* return to its proper place" (Nozick

1989, p. 222). The Holocaust poses the same kind of challenge (if not bigger) and must be addressed through an appeal to the divine internal life: "In any case, the next task of theology (especially of Jewish theology) is to dare to speculate, as the Kabbalists did before, about a divine being's internal existence. A daring theory is needed to drive issues about evil deep within the divine realm or nature in some way, leaving it deeply affected yet not itself evil" (Nozick 1989, p. 235).

This focus on the inner life and processes of God Himself distinguishes Kabbalah from rational Jewish philosophy (Scholem 1978, p. 91, p. 104). At the same time, it also renders Nozick's "ineffabilism" less prone to agnosticism and thus more supportive of standard supernaturalism. The Unlimited is meaningful by way of being its own meaning. Nozick rejects, in this sense, the alternative of an Unlimited situated beyond the distinction meaningful/meaningless. It is worth mentioning how Kabbalists interpret the origin of the term Ein Sof. As Moshe Idel shows, this term is not present in classical Jewish texts (including the Bible) but is embedded in the graphic of Torah's scroll. Kabbalists do not perform a semantic interpretation but a material, graphological examination of the concrete scroll of the Torah. The inked letters on the scroll delineate white aspects or signs that point to the Infinite. Thus the name that refers to God does not refer directly to something outside the sign, independently of the signifier. Here "the inked letters create their signifier, the white letters of the parchment, which point to the divine infinity" (Idel 2002, p. 59).

The self-relationality of the divine is not affirmed only by the Kabbalist tradition. The Christian dogma of the Trinity advances the idea of God's self-relationality, too. According to this dogma, God is triune, namely, is hypostasized in three persons, God the Father, God the Son, and the Holy Spirit. God the Son proceeds from God the Father, and the Holy Spirit proceeds from them both, through innertrinitarian processions that have no temporal or spatial dimensions as the natural changes and generations do. I have shown elsewhere (Oliva 2009) the import of this dogma for a philosophical understanding of the world and human life. Christian philosophy has long relegated the dogma of the Trinity to the domain of theology alone, preferring instead to focus on divine attributes and arguments for the existence of God. As Nozick proposes, divine self-relationality can be approached not only through esoteric mystical experiences but also through an analogical understanding of the world that unveils meanings and values by discovering patterns. This analogical patterning should move up to the inner relationality of the divine, and then from God's inner life back to the relationality of natural meaning. A robust account of meaning should thoroughly work out these dynamics.

Following this issue, the second difficulty lies within the model of analogical understanding. Since meaning is associated with value, it is still necessary to preserve the metaphysics of divine attributes and of the transcendentals of being (good, truth, and beauty). A development of the analogical understanding of meaning should not replace but connect with the standard metaphysical account. This sort of connection is not elaborated by Nozick and, to my knowledge, is underdeveloped in the current scholarship on the meaning of life. At the same time, this inquiry could perhaps address and resolve some pitfalls of theistic perfectionism. Theistic perfectionism entails that meaningful lives need perfection, which can only be granted by God, who is a perfect being. This account can generate several practical difficulties. Iddo Landau observes, for instance, that some perfectionist people can be cruel to themselves or to others (Landau 2017, 40). The relational account might give perfectionism a different flavor, insofar as it would treat perfection not only deductively but also analogically. While the cruel perfectionist might not see the real good in concrete situations because the ideal of perfection blinds him, the relational perfectionist might be more responsive to every instantiation of the good.

Another objection regards the regress in the chain of meaning. Nicholas Waghorn objects that Nozick's *Ein Sof* does not stop the reflexive iteration of meaning. As we have seen, Nozick insists on preserving the meaningfulness of *Ein Sof*. Thereby, he excludes the nothingness. But this exclusion offers an implicit limit susceptible to be crossed by a further iteration (Waghorn 2014, p. 188). Beyond *Ein Sof*, Waghorn suggests, there is still nothingness. The regress of meaning ends in nothingness, which can not be characterized at all, thus has no limits that can be crossed. Besides, the intrinsic meaningfulness of *Ein Sof* can not be approached in any way by our natural understanding. If there are no human terms we can apply to it, how can we even glimpse into its inner life? "The problem with this is that his discussion of the properties of *Ein Sof* in virtue of which is intrinsically meaningful runs counter to its nature as beyond the possibility of external standpoint (which we saw was precarious in any case). *Ein Sof* is supposed to transcend meaningful–meaningless, so how can it be its own meaning; how can our discussions concerning meaning apply in any relevant sense to it? It seems here that Nozick is on the verge of admitting how little *Ein Sof* can actually achieve, but backs away at the last minute" (Waghorn 2014, p. 191). We could answer this objection in the following way: the meaning regress stops at the move from "having meaning" to "being meaning". The regress can only take place within the paradigm of "having meaning". Once we are at the level of "being meaning", there is no further regress. The definition of meaning as a relation with something else is still preserved, except that in the case of *Ein*

Sof, that something else is the Ein Sof itself. Waghorn is right that we can not fully experience the self–relationality of Ein Sof: "So, although we can experience meaning up to a certain point, that is to say, partial meaning, we will never experience meaning that can not be improved upon, that is to say *ultimate* meaning" (Waghorn 2014, p. 187). However, the analogical path indicated by Nozick still provides the way to experience the self–relationality of Ein Sof through the relationality of the world.

A similar version of this analogical understanding is proposed by Jean–Luc Nancy, who makes the same distinction between "having sense" and "being sense" in a Christian context (the two thinkers are probably unrelated to each other) (Nancy 1997; Nancy 2013). The analogy is for Nancy not something instrumental, but foundational. The relationality of the world is grounded in the self–relationality of the Triune God. We discover this grounding not through deductive reasoning but through an interpretation of faith: "The mystery of the Trinity strikes this spark: sense is relation itself, the outside of the world is therefore within the world without being of the world." (Nancy 2013, 52) The divine self–relationality makes possible the signifying in the natural world. Distinguishing between sense/meaning and signification, Nancy defines meaning as relation and opening of relations. Meaning is a process of signifying from which all significations emerge; meaning is the very referring toward something else (Nancy 1997, p. 10; Nancy 2013, p. 9) We can experience thus the self–relationality of God through a praxis which reveals meaning as relation. Art, philosophy, and social bonds are forms of such praxis in which meaning can be revealed (Oliva 2018 b).

One could object that this expanded analogical understanding is not necessary for grasping the meaning of life. There are sufficient conditions for meaningfulness which do not make it necessary to look for a wider context. As we have seen above, Metz has brought up the issue of internal goods that point to an intrinsic meaning, not related to something outside the person. His objection also holds for the analogical understanding and the regress of meaning that prompts it. In his eyes, the regress of meaning wouldn't reveal a source of all meaning, but rather the full extent of a thing's meaning: "For one, I have argued that, insofar as meaning is relational, that dimension might be a supplement to some meaning that is intrinsic. From this perspective, there could still be a regress on meaningful relationships, but the terminus would not be a source of all meaning, and instead would be the completion of a series that adds a substantial meaning to a life beyond what the intrinsic dimension provides" (Metz 2016, p. 1255). Here, too, the problem is, as above, the relation between meaning and internal goods, and, more generally, the relation between meaning and value.

Earlier I tried to respond to Metz's objection regarding internal goods by showing that every kind of value, including internal goods, needs a transcending of limits. By that token, the regress of meaning makes sense also in the case of internal goods. But Metz's current objection regarding the regress of meaning offers a new opportunity of questioning. If we accept that meaning and value need each other, what can the self-relationality of the Ein Sof tell us about value? Is this self-relationality a source of value, besides being a source of meaning? Moreover, how does the relation between Ein Sof's self-relationality and the standard divine attributes ground the relation between meaning and value? As proposed, this relational account must join forces with the classic metaphysics of divine attributes.

Finally, Nozick's account begs the question: is the Unlimited a necessary condition for a meaningful life? Would the first modes of meaning (causal relation, personal significance, lesson, purpose, objective meaning) be enough for reaching at least minimally a meaningful life? Some of the recent theistic accounts have accepted a moderate supernaturalism. According to them, also an atheist's life can be meaningful. They lack "only" the ultimate, deep meaningfulness secured by God, who gives humans an important role in the great scheme of things and an afterlife of eternal bliss (Mawson 2016; Williams 2020). I am inclined to believe that Nozick's account leads to a radical sort of supernaturalism, insofar as for him the question of the meaning of life targets the ultimate layer of meaningfulness: "When the concern is the meaning of our life or existence, when X is our life, we want meaning all the way down. Nothing less will do." (Nozick 1981, p. 599) Nozick admits that there are ways in which we naturally cope with this question and transcend limits. However these ways have their own limits and ultimately require a further transcending: "The problem of meaning is created by limits. We cope with this by, in little ways or big, transcending these limits. Yet whatever extent we thereby reach in a wider realm also has its own limits — the same problem surfaces again. This suggests that the problem can be avoided or transcended only by something without limits, only by something that cannot be stood outside of, even in imagination" (Nozick 1981, p. 599). The cognitive dimension of life's meaning seems to be especially relevant here. The regress of meaning and the analogical understanding pertain, indeed, to a cognitive kind of meaningfulness. This confirms Repp's claim that sign meaning is particularly apt to explain the importance of religion for a meaningful life. Religious accounts offer a framework of interpreting all natural phenomena in light of the divine will and intelligence. Unreligious accounts, on the contrary, cannot offer such all-inclusive intelligibility (Repp 2019, p. 415; Oliva 2019, p. 495). The problem is that Nozick didn't work his way from the Unlimited back to

the particular modes of meaning. He did not show how the Ein Sof grounds each mode of meaning, apart from arguing that every kind of relation is so in virtue of the self-relationality of the Ein Sof. A robust relational account of the radical sort should show in which way causal relations, semantic reference, purpose, life lesson, personal significance, and objective meaning are grounded by the Unlimited.

### §3. Conclusion

Nozick defines the meaning of life as a transcending of our limits towards value. His relational account has three justifications: linguistic, existential, and metaphysical. First, "meaning" is used in the everyday language to indicate a relation (a semantic relation with a reference/object, a causal relation, an intentional relation and so on). Second, our quest for the meaning of life is prompted by the challenge of death as limit. Third, the relationality of meaning is an image of the self-relationality of the Unlimited (Ein Sof).

The transcending of limits is realized (a) through personal agency and achievements that have a personal significance but also provide a lesson to others; (b) through receptivity to persons and events that impact our life; and (c) through connecting all values, causes, and significations that underpin our life. The ultimate condition for an intrinsic meaning of life and an integration of all modes of meaning is the Unlimited (Ein Sof). The Unlimited is its own meaning, and its self-relationality grounds the relationality of meaning.

Two issues are open to further discussion. First, the relation between meaning and value as presented by Nozick needs to integrate internal goods fully. In addition, since meaning is a dimension of reality in its own right, it must be more than just an instrumental way of acquiring value. Nozick's account sometimes leaves the impression that meaning is indeed instrumental to value. Second, the relational account would have much to gain if it would examine the self-relationality of Ein Sof in continuity with the standard metaphysical account of divine existence and attributes. It would be misleading, in my view, to play a relational account against the standard account of substance, properties, and existence. Divine self-relationality is an essential part of monotheism, not only in the Jewish tradition but also in the Christian one.

## REFERENCES

- BAGGINI, Julian (2016). *What's It All About? Philosophy and the Meaning of Life*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- COTTINGHAM, John (2016). "Theism and the Meaning of Life", in *European Journal for the Philosophy of Religion*, 8/2: pp. 47–58.
- FRANKFURT, Harry (1988). *The Importance of What We Care About*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- GOETZ, Stewart (2012). *The Purpose of Life. A Theistic Perspective*. London/New York: Continuum.
- HOCHSCHILD, Joshua (2017). "John Paul II's Gamble with 'the Meaning of Life'". Unpublished Manuscript.
- IDEL, Moshe (2002). *Absorbing Perfections. Kabbalah and Interpretation*. New Haven & London: Yale University Press.
- LANDAU, Iddo (2017). *Finding Meaning in an Imperfect World*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- MAWSON, Tim J. (2016). *God and the Meanings of Life. What God Could and Couldn't Do to Make our Lives More Meaningful*. London/New York: Bloomsbury.
- MCGRATH, Alister (2014). *If I Had Lunch with C.S. Lewis. Exploring the Ideas of C.S. Lewis on the Meaning of Life*. Carol Stream: Tyndale House Publishers.
- METZ, Thaddeus (2013). *Meaning in Life. An Analytic Study*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- METZ, Thaddeus (2016). "Is Life's Meaning Ultimately Unthinkable?: Guy Bennett–Hunter on the Ineffable". *Philosophia*. 44: pp. 1247–56.
- METZ, Thaddeus (2019a). *God, Soul and the Meaning of Life*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- METZ, Thaddeus (2019b). "Recent Work on the Meaning of 'Life's Meaning': Should We Change the Philosophical Discourse?". *Human Affairs*. 29: pp. 404–414.
- NANCY, Jean-Luc (1997). *The Sense of the World*, transl. Jeffrey S. Librett. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press.
- NANCY, Jean-Luc (2013). *Adoration. The Deconstruction of Christianity II*, transl. John McKeane. New York: Fordham University Press.
- NOZICK, Robert (1981). *Philosophical Explanations*. Cambridge: Harvard University Press.
- NOZICK, Robert (1989). *The Examined Life*. New York: Simon & Schuster.

- OLIVA, Mirela (2009). *Das innere Verbum in Gadamer's Hermeneutik*. Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck.
- OLIVA, Mirela (2018a). "Hermeneutics and the Meaning of Life". *Epoché*, 22/2, pp. 523-539.
- OLIVA, Mirela (2018b). "Beauty and Meaning: From Aquinas to Gadamer and Nancy". In *Causality and Similarity. Medieval Ways of Explaining Nature*, edited by Maria Jesus Soto-Bruna. Bern: Olms.
- OLIVA, Mirela (2019). "Meaning: Theism" in *Theism and Atheism. Opposing Arguments in Philosophy*, edited by Joseph W. Koterski and Graham Oppy. Macmillan Reference.
- REPP, Charles (2019). "Life Meaning and Sign Meaning". *Philosophical Papers*, 47, pp. 403-427.
- SEACHRIS, Joshua (2019). "From the Meaning Triad to Meaning Holism: Unifying Life's Meaning". *Human Affairs*. 29 (4): pp. 363-378.
- SCHOLEM, Gershom (1978). *Kabbalah*. New York: New American Library.
- THOMAS, Joshua Lewis (2019). "Meaningfulness as Sensefulness". *Philosophia* 47: pp. 1555–1577. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s11406-019-00063-x>.
- WAGHORN, Nicholas (2014). *Nothingness and the Meaning of Life. Philosophical Approaches to Ultimate Meaning Through Nothing and Reflexivity*. London/New York: Bloomsbury.
- WILLIAMS, Clifford (2020). *Religion and the Meaning of Life. An Existential Approach*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.




---

### The Relational Nature of the Meaning of Life in Nozick

Nozick claims that the quest for the meaning of life entails a relational account of meaning. I defend his claim and show that the meaning of life is not one value among many but rather represents the connectedness of all aspects of human life. The meaning of life is a transcending of our limits towards value. This account leads Nozick to a theistic conclusion: the ultimate meaning of life can be only something that has no further meaning and is its meaning, namely the Unlimited (Ein Sof in the Kabbalist tradition). The paper starts by discussing Nozick's definition of meaning as a relational dimension of reality. I underscore the difference between his approach and other approaches to the meaning of life, and then I examine the relation between meaning and value. The second part analyzes the various modes of life's meaning as they emerge from the use of "meaning" in everyday language. I end with the discussion of the self-relationality of the Unlimited, which grounds the relationality of meaning.

**Keywords:** Meaning of Life · Relation · Value · Ein Sof.

## La naturaleza relacional del sentido de la vida en Nozick

Nozick afirma que la búsqueda del sentido de la vida implica una explicación relacional de lo que significa vivir. Defiendo su aserción y demuestro que el sentido de la vida, su significado, no es un valor entre muchos, sino que representa lo interrelacionado de todos los aspectos de la vida humana. El sentido de la vida es trascender nuestros límites hacia el valor. Este relato lleva a Nozick a una conclusión teísta: el sentido último de la vida puede ser solo algo que no tiene más sentido y es su sentido, es decir, el Ilimitado (Ein Sof en la tradición cabalista). El artículo comienza discutiendo la definición de sentido de Nozick como una dimensión relacional de la realidad. Subrayo la diferencia entre su enfoque y otros enfoques del sentido de la vida, y luego examino la relación entre sentido y valor. La segunda parte analiza los diversos modos del sentido de la vida a medida que emergen del uso de «sentido» en el lenguaje cotidiano. Termino con la discusión de la auto-relacionalidad del Ilimitado, que fundamenta la relacionalidad del sentido.

**Palabras Clave:** Sentido de la vida · Relación · Valor · Ein Sof.

---

MIRELA OLIVA is Associate Professor and Rudman Chair of Philosophy at the University of St. Thomas in Houston, USA. PhD in Philosophy at the University of Freiburg i. Breisgau, Germany. Her main interests are in philosophy of religion and ethics. She has published *Das innere Verbum in Gadamer's Hermeneutik* (Mohr Siebeck, 2009), edited the *Proceedings of the American Catholic Philosophical Association 2014–2018*, edited and translated Paul Ricoeur, *Tradurre l'intraducibile. Sulla traduzione* (Pontificia Università Urbaniana, 2008).

**INFORMACIÓN DE CONTACTO | CONTACT INFORMATION:** Philosophy Department, University of St. Thomas, 3800 Montrose Blvd., Houston, TX 77004, USA. e-mail (✉): olivam@stthom.edu

---

### HISTORIA DEL ARTÍCULO | ARTICLE HISTORY

Received: 28–November–2019; Accepted: 21–December–2019; Published Online: 31–December–2019

---

### COMO CITAR ESTE ARTÍCULO | HOW TO CITE THIS ARTICLE

Oliva, Mirela (2019). «The Relational Nature of the Meaning of Life in Nozick». *Disputatio. Philosophical Research Bulletin* 8, no. 11: pp. 469–494.

© Studia Humanitatis – Universidad de Salamanca 2019