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# Meaningful and More Meaningful

## A Modest Measure

Peter Baumann\*

### Abstract

We often describe lives (or parts of lives) as meaningful or as not meaningful. It is also common to characterize them as more or less meaningful. Some lives, we tend to think, are more meaningful than others. But how then can one compare lives with respect to how much meaning they contain? Can one? This paper argues that (i) only a notion of rough equality can be used when comparing different lives with respect to their meaning, and that (ii) the relation of being more meaningful is not transitive. It follows that all attempts to rank different lives in terms of meaning can at best lead to partially indeterminate and incomplete rankings. One should also give up on the idea of “maximizing” meaning. I will use Thaddeus Metz’s important recent book *Meaning in Life. An Analytic Study* as a foil for my discussion.

### 1. Introduction

We often describe lives (or parts of lives) as meaningful or as not meaningful.<sup>1</sup> It is also common to characterize them as more or less meaningful. Some lives, we tend to think, are more meaningful than others. For instance, in his important recent book *Meaning in Life: An Analytic Study* Thaddeus Metz puts his basic claim in the following way: “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.”<sup>2</sup> This remark implies that there are degrees of meaningfulness, as Metz confirms in other parts of his book.<sup>3</sup> According to him there is intrapersonal comparability of meaning: “... the goods of pleasure and meaning can be ordered in the sense that some parts of a life are more pleasant and more meaningful than others.”<sup>4</sup> Metz adds a claim of intrapersonal aggregation: “... it appears that pleasure and

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<sup>1</sup> See for overviews on the recent discussion about the meaning of life: Metz 2002, 2007 and 2008.

<sup>2</sup> Metz 2013, 222; see also, with more detail, 233 and 235; see also, e.g., Joske 2000, 290-294; Schmidtz 2001, 172; Mawson 2010; Kauppinen 2013.

<sup>3</sup> Metz 2013, 4, passim.

<sup>4</sup> Metz 2013, 63.

meaning are intrapersonally aggregative, i.e., are amenable to rough judgments of how much of these goods there are in a given life overall. ... Given these kinds of roughly cardinal measurements of particular times in a life, one could conceivably add them up to inform an estimation of whether the life has enough pleasure in it to count as pleasant overall or period. Similar kinds of claims apply to meaning, even supposing ... that it can include whole-life elements.”<sup>5</sup> Finally, Metz goes even one step further and accepts the claim of interpersonal comparability: “... pleasure and meaning appear to be interpersonally comparative, which means that we can compare different lives with regard to amounts of these goods. For all I know, my life is, so far, more pleasurable than Emily Dickinson’s was, but less meaningful than Albert Einstein’s.”<sup>6</sup> Even if one does not interpret Metz – and there is no reason to do so – as saying that we can measure meaning by counting “units” of meaning and then adding up the units, he is still making a very strong claim here: that meanings can be compared across persons.<sup>7</sup> There has been and still is a long and controversial discussion in economics about the possibility of interpersonal comparison of utility,<sup>8</sup> and analogous claims about meaning deserve much more scrutiny than they seem to have deserved so far.

How then can one compare and rank lives with respect to how much meaning they contain? Can one? I will argue that Metz’ strong claims about comparability and rankability of meaningfulness cannot be upheld.

## **2. Incomparability or Indeterminate Rankings**

It is tempting to take one’s lead from value theory and the orthodox view that there can be exactly three comparative evaluative relations between any two evaluated items A and B: A being better than B or A being worse than B or A and B being equally good. Similarly, one could assume that there are exactly three ways in which any two lives (or parts of lives; from now on I will focus on whole lives) can compare with respect to meaning: One life could be more meaningful than or less meaningful than or equally meaningful as the other life. Different lives (or parts thereof) are comparable with respect to meaningfulness

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<sup>5</sup> Metz 2013, 63.

<sup>6</sup> Metz 2013, 63.

<sup>7</sup> See also Metz 2013, 39-40, 158, 236.

<sup>8</sup> Robbins 1938 is one of the classic contributions to this debate.

– where comparability is a reflexive, symmetric and transitive relation.<sup>9</sup> I take it that Metz adheres to this orthodox view: Even though he does not seem to say so explicitly, there is no trace of adherence to any of the alternative views discussed below (which are the main options I can think of). Is this the correct way to look at lives, meaning and meaningful lives?

Two ideas should be put aside from the start. First, there is no common scale on which different lives can be measured and compared with respect to their meaning. The attribution of meaning to lives is in this respect not like the attribution of length to material objects. In a certain sense of the word “incommensurable” – one in which commensurability requires a common scale – lives are incommensurable. However, this does not mean they are incomparable. To be sure, Metz sometimes talks of “scales” when he talks about comparisons of meaningfulness<sup>10</sup>; however, as already pointed out above, there is no reason to take this in the very strong sense of a ratio scale which would allow the counting and adding up of units (like, e.g., in the case of length measurements). – Second, there is only so much “precision” in comparisons between lives (with respect to their meanings). There is certainly some amount of vagueness but also a certain roughness of the degree of granularity of comparison. But this alone does not speak against the possibility of comparison. Comparison need not be ideally “precise” (more on this below).<sup>11</sup>

So, is it true that for any two lives either one is more meaningful than the other or they are (roughly) equally meaningful? Consider the life of Picasso and the life of Euclid (or, alternatively, Einstein and Dickinson). Is one more meaningful than the other? It seems we are at a loss if we try to answer this question in the positive; the question is even somewhat suspicious and might involve basic misunderstandings. Should we then rather judge that Picasso’s life and Euclid’s life are equally meaningful (roughly)? To deal with this latter question, consider a third life, the life of a painter which was not quite as glorious and meaningful as Picasso’s but still pretty meaningful. We would say that in that case Picasso’s life was more meaningful than the other painter’s life. If Picasso’s and Euclid’s lives were equally meaningful, then it seems that we should also say that Euclid’s life was more meaningful than the other painter’s

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<sup>9</sup> Given any three relata  $x$ ,  $y$  and  $z$ :  $x$  is comparable to itself; if  $x$  is comparable to  $y$ , then  $y$  is comparable to  $x$ ; if  $x$  is comparable to  $y$  and  $y$  to  $z$ , then  $x$  is also comparable to  $z$ .

<sup>10</sup> See, e.g., Metz 2013, 63-64.

<sup>11</sup> See also Metz 2013, 63 where he talks about “rough” aggregation. I take him to mean lack of precision as mentioned in the text above.

life (if  $P=E$  & if  $P>O$ , then  $E>O$ ). But this judgment seems as problematic as the judgment about Picasso's and Euclid's lives. Should we then conclude that Picasso's and Euclid's lives are incomparable with respect to meaning because neither is more meaningful than the other nor are they equally meaningful?<sup>12</sup>

This suggestion can be understood in more than one way. First, as the idea of incomparability in the strict sense: Some lives can in principle not be compared with each other (with respect to meaning) because neither is one more meaningful than the other nor are they equally good, and there are only these three possibilities: *quartum non datur*. Incomparability in this sense amounts to an analogue of the failure of completeness of the *better than*-relation.<sup>13</sup>

Second, there is the idea that *quartum datur*: that there is a fourth comparative relation besides *more*, *less* or *equally meaningful*. One could call it "in the same league (as far as meaning is concerned)".<sup>14</sup> If two lives are in the same league, then neither is one more meaningful than the other nor are they equally meaningful. They are not comparable in the sense allowed for by the first, orthodox, view. But according to this second, less orthodox view they still can be compared with each other: Being in the same league is a relation *sui generis*.

Third, there is the idea of indeterminacy and truth-value gaps. Not only is it not true (as in the case of incomparability) that Picasso's life is more meaningful than or less meaningful than or as meaningful as Euclid's life but it is also not false that Picasso's life is more meaningful than or less meaningful than or as meaningful as Euclid's life.<sup>15</sup> It is simply indeterminate how some lives compare with respect to meaning (more on this below).

The first idea, the idea of strict incomparability (a relation which is irreflexive, symmetric and not transitive), is not easy to understand: Why should it not be possible to compare two lives with respect to meaning, especially since not all lives would be incomparable? One might suspect that Picasso's life was too different from Euclid's life to be comparable. But why should the "size" of the difference matter? And how do we determine size of the difference anyway?

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<sup>12</sup> See for this type of idea as applied to the *better than*-relation or the relation of strict preference: Raz 1985/86, 121; Raz 1986, 325-326, and Chang 1997.

<sup>13</sup> See, e.g., Luce & Raiffa 1957, 23, 25; Sen 1985, 177-181; see also von Neumann & Morgenstern 1953, 26.

<sup>14</sup> See for the analogue in the case of value relations, e.g., Chang 1997, 25-27 and Chang 2002; Chang uses the terms "parity" and "on a par".

<sup>15</sup> See Broome 1997 for the parallel case of the *better than*-relation.

There do not seem to be answers available to these questions. As long as there aren't convincing answers one should remain skeptical of the idea of meaning incomparability (I don't want to argue so much against this view but rather propose and defend an alternative view here).

The third idea, though apparently more radical than the first one (not only is it not true to state certain comparative relations but it is also not false), seems to make more sense. There does not seem to be a good reason to think that our notion of meaning is so much "spelled out" that it would allow for a verdict about comparative meaning in every actual or even possible case. One should rather expect the notion of meaning to be somewhat "open" in the sense that its criteria of application do not determine a verdict in all possible or even actual cases.<sup>16</sup>

Some examples and cases from the more recent discussion of personal identity, for instance, are so far-fetched that one is tempted to say that our ordinary notion of personhood is not "built" for these kinds of cases and does not allow for a verdict about personal identity through time.<sup>17</sup> Similarly in the case of meaning: This notion, one could suspect, is not "built" for applications to cases like the Euclid-Picasso case; it would be too much to expect that the notion determines a verdict in such cases. For instance, one major problem is that one would have to weigh different criteria against each other and the notion of meaning might not determine how to do that.<sup>18</sup> Indeterminacy, openness and vagueness seem ineliminable. However, this third view is compatible with the orthodox view that there are exactly three comparative relations; it is just a general claim about the semantics of the relevant notions, not a metaphysical claim about what relations there are. So, this third view is not in competition with the other views.

As far as substantial ideas concerning comparative relations are concerned, this seems to leave us with the second idea, the idea of there being a fourth relation of being in the same league. Applied to the example above, we get the verdict that even though Picasso's life and Euclid's life are not equally meaningful and even though it is also not the case that one is more meaningful than the other, they are in the same league with each other. The life of "the other

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<sup>16</sup> See for semantic openness in general, e.g., Waismann 1945, 121-126, and, more recently, Ludlow 2006.

<sup>17</sup> See, for instance, Parfit 1984, part 3.

<sup>18</sup> See Mawson 2010 who emphasizes this point.

painter” could also be in the same league with Euclid’s life – even though Picasso’s life and the other painter’s life are not in the same league (in the sense of the word as used here: being in the same league with some X rules out standing in one of the other comparative relations with X) but the former is more meaningful than the latter. The relation of being in the same league is reflexive (because every life is exactly as meaningful as itself), symmetric (consider Picasso and Euclid) and not transitive (the other painter’s life is in the same league with Euclid’s life and Euclid’s life is in the same league with Picasso’s life but Picasso’s life is not in the same league with the other painter’s life). The set of lives with which a given life is in the same league are “centered” in the following sense: Every life has its own set of lives with which it is in the same league, and typically some of the other lives in the set have a different such set of their own.

However, there is another and even better way of describing the relation between Picasso’s and Euclid’s life. Instead of saying that they are in the same league as far as meaning is concerned one could rather say that they are equally meaningful. This might seem very puzzling or implausible at first, given the remarks above, but this impression changes quickly if one reminds oneself of the relativity to varying degrees of granularity (or standards of precision) which characterizes at least many judgments of equality.<sup>19</sup>

Consider measurements of the length of ordinary objects. It might be true to say of two boards for a bookshelf that they are equally long, say, e.g., both 1 meter long. This is, however, compatible with the one being one millimeter longer than the other. There is no contradiction here if (as seems plausible) the following is true. When we say of the two boards that they are “equally long” we use the term “equally long” with a certain not too fine degree of granularity (1 centimeter difference counts but we’re neglecting anything less than half a centimeter difference). If we wanted to be pedantic we could indicate the degree of granularity  $db$  (or the standard of precision  $sb$ ) and use the term “equally long<sub>db</sub>” (or “equally long<sub>sb</sub>”) instead.

In other judgments of length different degrees and standards are in force. A watchmaker might truly say that one replacement piece for a watch is equally long as the original piece, namely .3 centimeters. This is compatible with one of the pieces being a tenth of a millimeter longer than the other. Again, there is no

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<sup>19</sup> See, for a related idea and one concerning value relations, Benbaji 2009.

contradiction if the watchmaker is using the term “equally long” with a somewhat finer but not excessively fine degree of granularity or standard of precision (half a millimeter does not count but one millimeter counts). Again, if we wanted to be pedantic we could say that the watchmaker is not using the above notion of being equally long<sub>db</sub> but rather the notion of being equally long<sub>dw</sub>. Judgments of equality show this implicit relativity to varying degrees of granularity. The idea of perfect precision does not even seem to make any sense: The notion of being equally long, as applied to ordinary objects, loses its sense when we go down to the scale of nanometers; at this order of “magnitude” the notion of length is not defined anymore for ordinary objects. One might be tempted to think that the expression “equally long” thus invites a contextualist semantics according to which speakers in different contexts of use might mean different things when they use this term, depending on the relevant degree of granularity.<sup>20</sup>

Something similar happens with our judgments about lives being “equally meaningful”. When we compare Euclid’s life with Picasso’s life and judge that their lives are equally meaningful we use a very rough degree of granularity. We think about them as extraordinarily creative people in general who have made an important contribution. However, when we compare Picasso’s life with the other painter’s life we do in addition think of them as painters, perhaps even as painters of the same period. Our degree of granularity is much finer here. There is a hidden relativity to degrees of granularity in our judgments of equality of meaning (of lives). Judgments of equality (of meaning), again, might invite a contextualist semantics according to which different pairs of lives trigger different degrees of granularity for judgments of equality (of meaning). This notion of “relative” equality is different from the orthodox notion of “strict” equality (see above). Both relations are reflexive and symmetric but strict equality is transitive while relative equality isn’t.<sup>21</sup>

Insofar as this context-sensitivity and relativity is implicit and thus hidden, we can easily get puzzled or even confused when thinking about and comparing different lives with each other with respect to meaning, like the lives of Picasso,

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<sup>20</sup> See, e.g., Stojanovic 2008 for the basic semantic options; see also Benbaji 2009, 325-327; I won’t pursue such semantic questions here.

<sup>21</sup> Assume that stick I is 9.5 inches long, stick II 8.8 inches long and stick III 8 inches long. Given a relation of being equally long<sub>stick</sub> with a degree of granularity or precision which does not distinguish between differences smaller than 1 inch, we would have to say that I is equally long<sub>stick</sub> as II and II is equally long<sub>stick</sub> as III but that I is not equally long<sub>stick</sub> as III (but longer<sub>stick</sub> than III).



Euclid and the other painter. As we go from one comparison (Euclid – Picasso) to another (Picasso – the other painter) we change the degree of granularity and switch to a more fine grained notion of equality; as we go from the latter comparison to the third one (the other painter – Picasso) we return to a rougher degree of granularity and a less fine grained notion of granularity. Each such notion of equality is reflexive, symmetric and not transitive. However, the problem is that we're using different notions of equality for different comparisons of meaning.

One could argue that the case of being in the same league (see above) collapses into the case of equality of a given degree of granularity. If this should turn out not to be so and if being in the same league is not the same as being equal given a certain degree of granularity, then I would have problems understanding what could be meant by “being in the same league”. What makes a lot of sense, however, is the granularity-relative notion of equality.

However, there is a price to pay: Things are in some respects more complicated with “relative” equality, as we could call this, than with “non-relative” equality. If the degree of granularity for the notion of being equally meaningful is rougher (or more fine-grained), then the degree of granularity for the notion of being more meaningful is also rougher (or more fine-grained). There is then not just one ranking of lives with respect to meaning but several which differ as to the degree of granularity. Consider a rougher ranking and a finer-grained ranking of lives with respect to meaning. Even if all the lives considered should have a definite position in the rougher ranking (e.g., Picasso, Euclid, the other painter and some others all equally high up while some others have less meaningful lives and still others perhaps even more meaningful lives; the position in the ranking would be determined by all the relations between the different lives), they might not all have a definite place in the more fine-grained ranking. For instance, while Picasso's life is, according to our example, more meaningful than the other painter's life it is not clear where Euclid's life is located on the finer-grained ranking: above, below or at the side of Picasso or the other painter. Some more fine-grained rankings will thus be “incomplete” in the sense that for some pairs of lives it will be indeterminate whether the one life is more meaningful (given the relevant degree of granularity) than the other or equally meaningful (again, given the relevant degree of granularity) as the other. There can be an interval of locations on the finer-grained ranking but no precise location. Indeterminacy (see above) comes

into play here.

One interesting implication of all this is that even though rankings of lives are still possible they will be limited given certain degrees of granularity (or standards of precision). The above remarks suggest that there are some uses of “more meaningful”, “less meaningful” and “equally meaningful” which do not allow for complete ranking of lives. This does, however, not mean that no or only very few comparisons of lives with respect to meaning are possible but only that there is a certain element of indeterminacy involved here. If one does not acknowledge this, one risks falling for misleading and overstretched ideas about comparing and ranking lives with respect to meaning.

All this goes against Metz’ much more “orthodox” views<sup>22</sup> according to which parts of lives allow for both intra- and interpersonal comparison and whole lives for interpersonal comparison. These kinds of comparisons are supposed to allow even for some kind of additive aggregation of meaning. Given the remarks above, this kind of “measurement” of meaningfulness just isn’t possible. I do not see this at all as a reason to reject Metz’ view on meaning as a whole; rather one would have to modify it in certain ways in order to take into account the element of indeterminacy and the relativity to granularity in our judgments about comparative meaningfulness.

### **3. Non-Transitivity and Collapses of Rankings**

If several items have determinate positions on some ranking and if item A is higher up on the ranking than item B while item B is higher up on the ranking than item C, then item A has to be higher up on that ranking than item C. This is due to the transitivity of the relation of being higher up on some ranking. This much seems pretty uncontroversial. However, it is not so clear whether we should think that lives can be ranked in such a way that there are more meaningful lives higher up and less meaningful lives lower down on the ranking. This kind of ranking requires transitivity but the crucial question is whether the relation of being a more meaningful life (or a less meaningful life) is transitive.<sup>23</sup> Is it? It seems that Metz is committed to a positive answer; I see no hints in his

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<sup>22</sup> See, again, Metz 2013, 222, 233 and 235; see also 39-40, 63-64, 158, and 236.

<sup>23</sup> For the role of the assumption of transitivity of strict preference or of the *better than*-relation in classical decision theory see Ramsey 1990, 78, 75; von Neumann & Morgenstern 1953, 26; Savage 1972, 18, 21.

work to doubts concerning transitivity.

Consider three lives (more precisely: very partial sketches of three lives) and let us make the very plausible assumption that more than one factor contributes to the meaning of a life.<sup>24</sup> For instance, as one factor to be considered here we can choose engagement with personal projects of value.<sup>25</sup> As the second factor to be considered here we can choose the making of positive contributions to the lives of others.<sup>26</sup> If one does not agree that these two factors contribute to meaning one can easily replace them by others – these kinds of details don't matter here. Metz himself advocates a family resemblance view about the notion of a meaningful life and mentions three different aspects of meaning in passing: purposiveness, transcendence and esteem.<sup>27</sup>

The two factors just mentioned are not completely independent from each other and they do often overlap; however, all that is needed here is the realistic assumption that one factor cannot be reduced to the other and that they can vary against each other. Suppose for example that a chess player has had a life rich of engagement with the playing of the wonderful game of chess but that he has not made that much of a positive contribution to the lives of others. Compare this first chess player's life with the life of a second chess player who hasn't gotten quite as much out of playing the game as the first chess player but has made more of a contribution to the lives of others because he taught little children how to play the game. Finally, consider the life of a third chess player who was not as engaged with the game as the other two but who started a very successful social program in troubled neighborhoods of his home town which would bring the game to teenagers and thus keep them off the streets and give them some perspective which they would otherwise have lacked. Suppose for the sake of the example that this is all that matters to the meaning of these lives.

It might then well be that the first chess player's life is more meaningful overall than the second chess player's life: Even though the second had a bit

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<sup>24</sup> See in general Mawson 2010.

<sup>25</sup> See, e.g., Schlick 1979; Taylor 1981, 1987, 1999, and 2000; Nozick 1981, 610-619; Sylvan & Griffin 1982; Bennett 1984; Kekes 1986 and 2000; Wisdom 1987; Teichman 1993; Wolf 1997a, 1997b, 2007 and 2010; Joske 2000; Schmidtz 2001; Thomson 2003, esp. ch.4; Cottingham 2003; Audi 2005, 333-334; Levi 2005; Thagard 2010; Metz 2011 and 2013; Smuts 2013; Kauppinen 2012 and 2013; see Wong 2008 on the value of identities; see also in general Wiggins 1987 and Hare 2000.

<sup>26</sup> See, e.g., Cottingham 2003; Audi 2005, 333-334; Kernohan 2006, 135; Wolf 2010; Smuts 2013; on whether morality and certain relations towards others are necessary or sufficient for or contributory to meaning see: Dahl 1987; Wolf 1997b and 2010; Thomas 2005; Landau 2011; Smuts 2013.

<sup>27</sup> See Metz 2013, 34-35.

more of a positive social impact, this is more than compensated for by the richer engagement with the game that the first chess player had. Similarly for the comparison between the overall meaning in the second chess player's life and in the third chess player's life: Even though the third player has made more of a positive contribution to the lives of others, the second player still got so much more out of the game than the third player, – so much more that overall the second player's life would count as more meaningful than the third player's life. But now compare the first chess player's life with the third chess player's life. The alleged transitivity of being more meaningful would ensure, given our assumptions, that the first chess player's life is also more meaningful overall than the third chess player's life.

However, there is a significant problem here. It might well be that the difference between the contribution to the lives of others that the third player has made is not just bigger than the first player's contribution; apart from that, it might also cross a “threshold” such that the difference of contribution between the first player's life and the third player's life weighs more than some “aggregative sum” of the difference of contribution between the first player's life and the second player's life and the difference of contribution between the second player's life and the third player's life. When one compares the first with the third player, the dimension of the contribution to the lives of others counts so much and weighs so heavily that it outweighs the difference between the respective quality of their engagement with the game. Hence, under such conditions we should judge that the third chess player's life is more meaningful than the first chess player's life.

Hence, we have a lack of transitivity for the relation of being a more meaningful life overall. This failure of transitivity – which is not the same as intransitivity (if life A is more meaningful than life B and life B more meaningful than life C, then life A is not more meaningful (or even less meaningful) than life C) – can be explained in a formal way. There are two independent criteria or factors and at least one of them (here the contribution factor) is “non-linear” in the sense that there are thresholds of importance like the one mentioned above built into it. Structurally similar phenomena are well-known from the area of human preferences.<sup>28</sup> I might prefer car B to car A because B has some nice extras for a bit (but not too much) more money.

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<sup>28</sup> See Tversky 1969; Fishburn 1991; the discussion between Hughes 1980, Lee 1984, Philips 1989 and Rawling 1990 as well as, more recently, Temkin 2012.

Similarly, I might prefer car C to car B because C has some further nice extras for another additional (but not too substantial) amount of money. However, I might not prefer C to A and rather prefer A to C because now the difference in price has passed some threshold and outweighs the niceties of the additional extras.

A similar point and argument can be made for the relation (whatever the degree of granularity) of being an equally meaningful life overall; I won't go through the parallels here. The overall conclusion here is that both *more meaningful* and *equally meaningful* fail transitivity. For the sake of simplicity, I have focused on the first relation here. Given the complexities of life, it is very plausible to assume that non-transitive cycles of lives like in our example above are pervasive. It doesn't happen all the time but often enough to raise serious questions about the possibility of ranking lives in terms of their "amount" of meaning. Without transitivity there is no ranking. Even though this kind of failure of transitivity does not entail incomparability (see above) between any two lives, it implies that there cannot be complete determinate rankings of lives with respect to their meaning (even given some fixed degree of granularity). In other words, even though there can be more "local" (perhaps "regional") comparisons there can be no "global" rankings.

In his book, Metz gives the following final detailed statement of his theory: "(FT<sub>3</sub>) A human person's life is more meaningful, the more that she, without violating certain moral constraints against degrading sacrifice, employs her reason and in ways that either positively orient rationality towards fundamental conditions of human existence, or negatively orient it towards what threatens them, such that the worse parts of her life cause better parts towards its end by a process that makes for a compelling and ideally original life-story: in addition, the meaning in a human person's life is reduced, the more it is negatively oriented towards fundamental conditions of human existence or exhibits narrative disvalue."<sup>29</sup>

Even this more detailed statement of the theory does not indicate any troublesome multi-dimensionality or non-linearity. There is no threat of a lack of transitivity and orthodox ideas of measurement and ranking seem secure in the case of the meanings of lives (and their parts). However, if the remarks in this section are correct, one would have to modify Metz' view in the relevant ways.

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<sup>29</sup> Metz 2013, 235.

#### 4. Conclusion: How then to Think about the Meaning of Life?

There are thus two basic limitations to the possibility of ranking lives with respect to meaning: one from indeterminacy (section 1) and one from failure of transitivity (section 2). What are the implications of all this for the way we can or should think about the meaning of life?

It is not ruled out in principle by anything said so far that there could still be one maximally meaningful life or one group of lives each of which is more meaningful than any life not in that group. However, one should be skeptical of such an idea and of the idea that this could be the case. Couldn't there always be indeterminacy or a cycle of non-transitivity even among the most meaningful lives? It thus seems like a good idea to give up on the idea of "maximizing meaning". There simply might not be such a thing as a maximum here. Metz, however, seems to accept the idea of a maximum, for instance when he talks about "the most degree of meaning".<sup>30</sup>

However, if the idea of maximizing meaning is as problematic as I am suggesting here, then we should rather take a leaf out of the book of satisficing views.<sup>31</sup> What matters is whether a given life is meaningful, that is, passes the (vague) threshold between meaning and the lack thereof. Enough is enough, and also good enough. The idea of getting more and ever more out of life or the idea of get the most meaning into and out of it are misleading and seriously unrealistic. If acknowledging this makes for modesty, then we are better and best off with such modesty.

Metz points out, again and again, that the notion of a meaningful life is an evaluative one.<sup>32</sup> Different basic axiological views lead to different views about meaning then. I propose to give up on certain ideas implicit or explicit in Metz' account: ideas of strict measurement, unrestricted comparability, additive aggregation, and global rankings. But this does not mean that one would have to give up on Metz' account of meaning as a whole. On the contrary, I would propose to modify the view in the relevant ways in order to make it even stronger.

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<sup>30</sup> Metz 2013, 158.

<sup>31</sup> See in general: Simon 1983; Slote 1989; Schwartz 2004.

<sup>32</sup> Metz 2013, 6, *passim*.

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