

Meaning in Life as the Right Metric: A Key Value beyond Happiness and Morality

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Abstract In “Happiness Is the Wrong Metric,” Amitai Etzioni largely argues that human beings are motivated by more than just their own happiness, whether conceived in terms of pleasant experiences or fulfilled preferences, and that the state should attend to more than merely people’s happiness. He contends that we are often disposed to seek out, and that public policy ought to promote, what is morally right and good for its own sake. While not disagreeing with this thrust of Etzioni’s position, I maintain in my contribution that it is too narrow. There is a large range of goods that people tend to pursue, and that social and political institutions should plausibly foster, which are reducible to neither happiness nor morality. They are values that are instead well captured by the concept of what makes a life meaningful. If Etzioni is correct that the state ought to enable people to live morally upright lives, then it has no less reason to enable them to live meaningful ones, too.

Meaning in Life: Black Sheep of the Normative Family

For about 200 years in English-speaking normative philosophy, the field was dominated by egoism, utilitarianism, social contract theory, and Kantianism. Adherents to those perspectives tended to divide norms about how to live into two: happiness, usually construed in terms of either pleasant experiences or fulfilled preferences, on the one hand, and morality, a function of distributing people’s happiness in certain ways, on the other.²

Much of Amitai Etzioni’s “Happiness Is the Wrong Metric” follows suit. In it he posits a fundamental contrast between an orientation towards what he calls “satisfaction,” one that seeks out happiness, and an orientation towards “affirmation,” pride in oneself consequent to having lived up to moral values. The main aim of Etzioni’s article is to argue that, *contra* those who seek to reduce all motives to satisfaction, satisfaction and affirmation are two irreducible motivations that are not only characteristic of human nature, but also plausibly warrant attention from public institutions. He suggests that a revealing way to evaluate a society is in terms of whether it has obtained a proper balance between happiness (self-interest) and morality (the common good), and claims that most Western societies “have yet to achieve this balance.”

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² This and a few other sentences in this article have been cribbed from Thaddeus Metz, “Life: Meaning of,” in Henk ten Have (ed.), *Encyclopedia of Global Bioethics* (Dordrecht: Springer, 2015).

I accept much of Etzioni's big picture. I agree with him that a lot of human behavior involving sacrifice, donation, and beneficence is best explained by a moral motive of wanting to do the right thing or to be a good person, one that is distinct from a motive of wanting to be happy *qua* feeling good or satisfying desires. Although that might not be the dominant view among economists, it has been among moral psychologists and philosophers in the post-war era.³

I also agree with Etzioni that the state has a legitimate interest in upholding the moral lives of its residents, at least in ways that are neither grossly paternalist nor too contested (or "thick") when it comes to conceiving of the moral. For example, enabling people to fulfill their obligations to vote, to look after their elderly parents, and to uphold their marriage vows would be fair, whereas forbidding people from eating meat, or requiring them to pray to a certain god, on pain of flogging or several years in prison would not be.

Where I differ from Etzioni concerns his implicit suggestion that satisfaction and affirmation are exhaustive, or at least are the only major normative orientations such that "much of the dynamic of human behavior reflects this conflict between the quest for pleasure and the quest for affirmation." There are occasions in his essay when he discusses values that, on the face of it, seem distinct from either happiness or morality. For example, he considers intimate ties, religious communion, and self-actualization (the latter particularly as conceived by Abraham Maslow). However, to my mind, Etzioni does not give these kinds of values a fair shake as being independent ones; he analyzes them as mere means to the production of a higher or more reliable form of happiness, recommending that developed societies "can increase their overall satisfaction by pursuing higher needs."

I argue that there is a third major category of human motivation, one that also has a reasonable claim to influencing public policy. Specifically, what Etzioni tends to call "higher needs" are ones that many contemporary philosophers would describe as sources of meaning in life.⁴ The category of life's meaning is, despite its popular association with philosophy, an under-developed normative perspective in English-speaking academic philosophy. It is literally only in the last 30 years or so that it has emerged as a distinct field among Anglo-American philosophers. Many ethicists now maintain that meaning in life is something that is good for its own sake, that cannot be reduced to happiness or morality, and hence that merits systematic investigation in its own right. I draw on their works to support the claim that even a society that properly balanced satisfaction and affirmation could be unattractive for lacking a third kind of value,⁵ which, as I explain below, one might call "admiration."

Meaning in Life as a Distinct Value

Etzioni comes closest to acknowledging meaning as an independent normative category when discussing intimacy and spirituality. From what I know of the literature, he is correct that those with friendly and loving bonds, and those who are members of a religious community, tend to be happier than others. However, that does not mean that the *point* of having such

³ At least since the work of Lawrence Kohlberg, John Rawls, and Jürgen Habermas appeared.

⁴ See especially the book-length treatments by Charles Taylor, *The Ethics of Authenticity* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1992); John Cottingham, *On the Meaning of Life* (London: Routledge, 2003); Garrett Thomson, *On the Meaning of Life* (South Melbourne: Wadsworth, 2003); Susan Wolf, *Meaning in Life and Why It Matters* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2010) and Thaddeus Metz, *Meaning in Life: An Analytic Study* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2013).

⁵ One prominent social theorist who has in effect made this claim is Michael Lerner. See especially his *The Politics of Meaning* (Reading, MA: Addison-Wesley, 1996).

relationships is (merely) happiness. Although those who get married or enter into a church are likely hoping for more happiness, it does not follow that this is what primarily moves them to do so. Instead, a natural thing for many to say would be that they are searching for meaning.

Consider a wide array of other activities at least one major point of which is to make life more meaningful. First off, consider those in caring professions such as medicine and education. Many nurses and high school teachers aim to help others, but not so much out of a sense that they would be immoral were they to choose a different career. Instead, they are, to borrow a phrase from Etzioni, “prosocial but amoral.” Often their thought is that helping others is meaningful.

Next, think about athletes who labor arduously so as to develop their physical skills, or chess grandmasters who refine their intellectual ones. There is at least as much pain in the former case as there is in seeking affirmation as Etzioni describes in his article. And yet the aim is not solely to benefit the common good by displaying one’s talent, though that might be part of it. Another part is the sense that there is something significant about working hard to hone an ability and being successful at it. There is some real significance simply in finally having made that high jump or beaten that computer, even if no one else saw it.

Consider now scientists and other researchers and why they are moved to discover facts about the nature of human beings, their societies, and their environment. Was Darwin morally obligated to prove the theory of natural selection, or did Einstein have an obligation to come up with relativity? We do not celebrate their accomplishments for having done their duty, or even for having gone beyond the call of duty. Instead, the straightforward thought is that certain kinds of knowledge are intrinsically important and confer importance on the lives of those who discover it.

And then think about the value of art. A work of art counts as great not merely for having contributed to the common good, for it might have gone unrecognized in the way that Picasso’s paintings did for so long. Nor is it something to be valued simply as a means to the happiness of the artist; *vide* Picasso again. Instead, a great artwork is a function of various combinations of properties such as form, purity, subtlety, complexity, creativity, insight, narrative, and profundity, where, like knowledge, the greatness of the work confers some on its source.

Although high achievers are the focus of many of the above examples, more mundane illustrations of the salience of the search for meaning in life are readily available. When someone has superseded many obstacles, of poverty or a crazy family, to obtain that undergraduate degree, we congratulate her neither because she was made happy thereby, nor because she has made a moral contribution. Instead, our sense (and hers) is typically that her life is more meaningful for having obtained an education. And when someone has overcome a drug addiction and then become a rehab counsellor, the typical thought is that there is meaning in making good come from the bad in one’s life.

Philosophers disagree about how to understand what most of us have in mind when thinking about meaning in life, beyond sharing the judgment that it is equivalent to neither satisfaction nor affirmation. According to some, to enquire into the meaningfulness of a person’s life is to ask whether it serves some inherently worthy purpose beyond making herself happy. For others, meaning-talk connotes ideas of a positive relationship between the individual and something else that is valuable, such as another person, an artwork, or a theory. For still others, meaningfulness is a function of narrative, say, a matter of composing one’s life story, maybe one that includes redemption. Finally, perhaps when thinking about meaning in a life, one is considering what about it might deserve certain emotional reactions such as love or admiration.

Notice from these characterizations that what is meaningful is not simply what people *find* meaningful, or whatever is “meaningful *to*” someone, or what happens *in fact* to be loved or admired. Although some philosophers do advocate such subjective approaches, they are in a clear minority. Instead for most in the 21st century, there are certain ways of being, acting, and relating that are objectively meaningful, forms of living that it would be desirable to pursue even if one currently fails to appreciate them. Suicide bombing innocents and manipulating people to become hooked on cigarettes simply do not count.

Meaning in Life as Ground of Public Policy

Suppose I have made a *prima facie* case that there is indeed a third value beyond happiness and morality, namely, one of meaning in life, pursuit of which is also a major facet of human nature. Even if many of us would like to have lives that merit admiration, as something distinct from seeking satisfaction or affirmation, it does not yet follow that the state or other institutions ought to help us do so. I now make a brief case for that; a state that did not ensure that people could obtain meaning in their lives would intuitively be failing its people.

First off, note the demand for what is revealingly often called “meaningful work.” Performing repetitive tasks that require little thought and over which one has no control does tend to make people unhappy. However, the problem would not be resolved if the state provided, or required firms to provide, hypothetical “happy pills” (cf. soma in *Brave New World*) to those who had to undertake such labor. Instead, the nature of the activity is what needs to be changed, so that people’s creativity, autonomy, and sense of community are enhanced.

Think next about a state that did not support the arts or knowledge for its own sake. Suppose the National Endowment for the Arts and the National Endowment for the Humanities were shut down. And imagine that public universities were funded only insofar as their activities would be expected to foster economic growth. Although there is a sense of the “common good” that would plausibly be threatened, the natural thing to say is that people’s lives would be less meaningful for the likely damage done to the aesthetic and the epistemic.

Another implication of funding a university only to the extent that it would enhance the economy would be undercutting its athletic programs. In addition to that, reflect on a state that did nothing to help its people participate in the Olympic Games, and broadcasters that did nothing to enable people to watch them, instead offering sit-coms, game shows, and reality TV. The inability to develop and behold such excellence would be damning.

Suppose a state sold off its parks and wilderness areas to the highest bidder. People might get lucky in that a business could wish to maintain a natural setting and charge them a reasonable price to experience it; then again, they might not. Intuitively, the state ought to make sure that people can partake of natural beauty, the sublime, and of what is truly old and other, and a good explanation of why is the sense of the sacred that attends such.

Finally, for now, consider the common complaint that medical insurance fails to cover psychotherapy adequately. People need help in understanding themselves, sorting out their emotional conflicts, and consequently being better able to sustain close relationships. They find themselves unable to rear their children in ways that will avoid inflicting damage and will make them self-confident and compassionate. They also find themselves unclear about how to love their partners in ways that are sustainable. They further find themselves behaving in ways that foster conflict in the workplace and with their neighbors. Insurance companies and public hospitals and clinics have reason to enable to people to form “prosocial but amoral” bonds.

Reflection on these kinds of cases suggests that public policy ought to be informed by more than just satisfaction and the affirmation that would come with undergoing sacrifice in order to satisfy others. In addition, certain types of labor, art, knowledge, skills, engagement with nature, and relationships warrant social and political support, and plausibly do so because they would facilitate more meaning in life. Amitai Etzioni is correct that happiness is overrated, but it's not merely morality that also warrants our attention; meaning in life, too, is part of the right metric for appraising a society.

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