

## **Fundamental conditions of human existence as the ground of life's meaning: reply to Landau**

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**Abstract:** Taking the good (generosity), the true (enquiry), and the beautiful (creativity) as exemplars of what can make a life noticeably meaningful, elsewhere I have advanced a principle that entails and plausibly explains all three. Specifically, I have proffered the view that great meaning in life, at least insofar as it comes from this triad, is a matter of positively orienting one's rational nature towards fundamental conditions of human existence, conditions of human life responsible for much else about it. Iddo Landau has raised important objections to this principle, arguing in particular that contouring one's rationality towards fundamentality is neither necessary nor sufficient for great meaning in life. In this article, I reply to Landau's objections to the fundamentality account of what makes life very meaningful. I thereby aim to enrich reflection about what it is about the lives of Nelson Mandela, Mother Teresa, Albert Einstein, and Pablo Picasso that made them so significant as well as to indicate how fundamentality implicitly plays a key role in theistic conceptions of meaning in life.

## Introduction

In a previous issue of this journal, I published an article purporting to present a new and promising unified account of what confers great meaning on life (Metz 2011), by which I roughly mean those contingent facets of an individual human person's existence that merit emotional reactions such as substantial pride, admiration, and perhaps even awe (Taylor (1989), 3–90; Kauppinen (2012), 352–355; cf. Metz (2013), 24–35). Taking the classic final values of the good (generosity), the true (enquiry), and the beautiful (creativity) as exemplars of what can make a life noticeably meaningful, I sought a principle that would entail and plausibly explain all three. Specifically, I advanced the view that great meaning in life, at least insofar as it comes from this triad, is a matter of positively orienting one's rational nature towards fundamental conditions of human existence, roughly, conditions of human life responsible for much else about it. In a subsequent issue of this journal, Iddo Landau (2013)<sup>1</sup> critically engaged with this view, raising important objections to it that have advanced debate about the nature of what makes life meaningful. In this article, I intend to take the dialectic another step or two further by replying to Landau's objections to the fundamentality theory of great meaning in life.

Happily for me, Landau claims that I have succeeded in showing how the fundamentality theory avoids problems facing other, salient accounts of life's meaning to be found in the literature (505) and that it is 'much more attractive than others' (512) for that reason. However, he launches new criticisms of my view, namely, that contouring one's rationality towards fundamental conditions of human

existence is neither necessary nor sufficient for great meaning in life. With respect to the former, Landau points out, plausibly, that it appears that supporting merely necessary conditions for human existence, such as saving people's lives, can be one substantial source of meaning in life. And in terms of the latter, Landau contends that it follows from my principle that merely understanding physical laws or works of art could confer great meaning on a life, whereas his hard to question intuition is that discovering or creating them, respectively, would be a much better candidate for that.

These are the two claims of Landau's that I am most concerned to address in this article, although I also take up some less urgent concerns of his, e.g. to the effect that it could be more clear what I mean by 'fundamental' conditions and that my account appears neither non-consequentialist nor essentially a matter of self-transcendence, as I had initially characterized it. Although I am naturally keen to clarify the nature of my account to readers, my ultimate purpose is to enrich reflection about what it is about the lives of Nelson Mandela, Mother Teresa, Albert Einstein, and Pablo Picasso that puts them on the higher end of the spectrum with regard to amount of meaning in life, as well as to indicate how fundamentality implicitly plays a key role in theistic conceptions of it.

In the next section, I provide a brief overview of the fundamentality theory, sketching enough of it and its motivations to enable the reader to adjudicate the debate between myself and Landau. It is here that I explain more fully what I mean by 'fundamental', 'non-consequentialism', 'self-transcendence', and related terms that I had used to label the theory and why these terms still strike me as apt. Then, I take up Landau's objection that positive orientation towards fundamental conditions of human existence could involve states that, while meaningful to some degree, are not to a great one. In the following section, I reply to Landau's thoughtful criticism that

positive orientation towards necessary, but not fundamental, conditions of human existence could be meaningful to a great degree. I conclude by indicating how an appeal to fundamentality grounds a promising account of why, if God existed, devoted religious figures would have substantially meaningful lives, a view that secularists and naturalists have no reason to reject, but that they rarely acknowledge.

### **The fundamentality theory**

The debate between me and Landau, and indeed between a large majority of contemporary theorists about what makes a human life meaningful, takes as relatively uncontroversial that certain lives have had great meaning in them in contrast to others. Most have presumed that the likes of Mandela, Mother Teresa, Einstein, and Picasso had particularly meaningful lives, even if they also had flaws, as human beings characteristically do. Their lives suggest that good deeds, insights, and artworks can confer great meaning on a life, or, more broadly, that moral action, intellectual reflection and aesthetic creation can do so. What, if anything, do these (along with other intuitive sources of meaning in life) have in common?

A large majority of contemporary reflection among Anglo-American philosophers with respect to life's meaning has been a search for a plausible answer to this question.<sup>2</sup> Supernaturalists about meaning in life of course are inclined to call the good, the true, and the beautiful 'spiritual' (e.g. Steiner (1923); Cottingham (2005)), but on occasion one even finds a secularist doing so in light of their intuitively higher status, as ones beyond our own bodily pleasure (e.g. Gewirth (1998), 174–189). What property might unify this classic triad? My initial answer to this question was the following principle:

(FT<sub>1</sub>) The good, the true, and the beautiful confer great meaning on life insofar as we positively orient our rational nature in a substantial way towards

fundamental conditions of human existence (Metz (2011), 401).

I briefly explain what this initial version of the fundamentality theory says and then indicate why it is promising as a way to capture the great meaning one can obtain from generosity, enquiry, and creativity.

One can think of fundamentality in either metaphysical or epistemic terms, and I tend to switch back and forth between them, as they normally track each other. Metaphysically fundamental conditions are those (mainly, causally) responsible for a wide array of other conditions in a given domain, while epistemically fundamental propositions are those that explain a wide array of other propositions in a given domain.

Let me set aside issues of meaning in life briefly, in order to illustrate with some intuitive examples. With regard to water,  $H_2O$  is fundamental to it, whereas the facts that it is wet, tasteless, odourless, and the like are not. A given one of the latter might well be a necessary condition of water and its other properties; a substance probably could not be water if it lacked such a property. However, the fact that water is tasteless is responsible for, or explains, very little else about water, whereas the fact that water is  $H_2O$  accounts for much, including the others mentioned above, making the  $H_2O$  fact fundamental and the others more surface.

For another example to illustrate the distinction between fundamental conditions and ones that are not, consider the respective contributions of a janitor and a CEO to the operations of a business. Both are necessary tasks, in that the firm would cease to function, or at least efficiently, if no one were to undertake them.<sup>3</sup> However, only the role of the CEO is fundamental to a firm, for that position determines much else about the firm, unlike the position of the janitor. In explanatory terms, the actions taken by a CEO are an independent variable for a wide array of

dependent variables with respect to the company, including the janitor's position, whereas that is not the case for the janitor in respect of others, such as the CEO.

These examples should begin to suggest that we prize fundamentality; it tends to be what we seek out theoretically and what we reward practically. However, when it comes to great meaning in life, I submit that we seek out fundamentality in particular domains regarding human life as such. Specifically, my suggestion is that a large part of what makes a person's life particularly meaningful is that it positively orients her rational nature towards fundamental conditions of either a typical human person's life, or the life of our species, or the environment in which we live.

As per the above examples, a necessary condition of any of these domains is not essentially a fundamental one. To use a case that will be salient in the next section, the fact that an asteroid has not struck the earth is a necessary condition for much about human existence, but it is not fundamental, roughly because it causes and accounts for little of it.<sup>4</sup>

In his critical discussion, Landau points out that I have not used a term to pick out conditions that are not fundamental (508). However, simply speaking, as Landau often does, of 'non-fundamental' or 'derivative' is fine, although sometimes talk of 'surface' as opposed to 'deep', 'disposable' versus 'irreplaceable', and 'trivial' as against 'significant', will be apt, too. My hunch has been that such linguistically recurrent ways of speaking about meaningfulness point to something revealing about its nature *qua* positive orientation towards what is fundamental to human existence.

With respect to the good, the true, and the beautiful, my account of in virtue of when and why they confer great meaning in life is that, at least in part, they involve substantial exercises of human intelligence directed towards fundamental conditions of human existence. Like many in the field, and with those inspired by Aristotle,

Aquinas, and Kant in particular, I take the exercise of our rational nature, as something distinct from what we share with the mineral, vegetable, and animal kingdoms, to be central to what makes our lives important. According to me, for great meaning to accrue, one's rationality must be substantially engaged, e.g. by working hard and in a sophisticated manner, and it must be contoured towards a particular object, namely, one fundamental to human life.

For example, what is responsible for much of a given person's life are the choices she has made in light of reflection informed by the norms and values of the community in which she been reared. Mandela's life was great insofar as he struggled in largely just ways for more than 30 years to overcome apartheid, which had greatly stunted and more generally degraded these conditions on the part of many black people. His life would have been much less important had he, say, instead trimmed many of their toenails or rescued them from chronic halitosis, conditions that have little import for other facets of a characteristic human life.

For another example, what accounts for much about the human environment are space and time (among many other conditions). Einstein's life was significant to the extent that he discovered how these operate with respect to the universe in a way it would not have been had he instead apprehended the number of redheads in Beiseker, Alberta, a proposition that would have explained few other propositions with regard to the place in which human beings live.<sup>5</sup>

For a last illustration, *Guernica* conferred notable meaning on Picasso's life insofar as it is about war, a condition that explains much about the development of the human species. One could not apprehend much about human history were one to leave out discussion of large-scale conflict, quite unlike, e.g. facts about the

number of nostrils or toes we have, which, again, account for little of our characteristic experience.

At this point, consider why I had labelled these explanations 'non-consequentialist' and ones that involve 'self-transcendence', both of which construals Landau doubts are apt. Although I do not believe much hangs on these characterizations and I would not want to grasp onto too them too firmly, I do suspect that they are fair and useful ways to differentiate my view from at least large classes of rivals.

Landau maintains that my view is in fact consequentialist insofar as I clearly do maintain that the actual consequences of one's actions are directly relevant to the amount of meaning conferred on one's life (511–512). I maintain that success matters for meaning in a way that it does not for morality. Trying to make an innocent person's life better and employing a strategy that is likely to be successful is sufficient in my view for permissible, and perhaps morally praiseworthy, action. In contrast, while I agree that this would confer some meaning on one's life, much more meaning would accrue, I submit, insofar as the other person were in fact benefited thereby. So, I readily accept that part of what explains the great meaning to be found in Mandela's and Mother Teresa's lives is the fact that they succeeded in improving others' lives. And this leads Landau to question my 'non-consequentialist' label for the fundamentality account.

There are at least three respects in which (FT<sub>1</sub>) indeed falls under the heading 'non-consequentialist', despite implying that, *ceteris paribus*, the better the consequences one has produced (at least in certain ways), the more meaningful one's life. First, the relevant consequences must be those caused by one's rational nature, and by its intense exercise; the results must at least be foreseen (if not

intended) as well as hard to achieve, for substantial meaning to accrue. Unlike the 'good cause' theory of meaning in life recently introduced to the literature (Smuts (2013)), utterly accidental benefits would not count. Nor would the benefits of merely using a 'result machine' (Nozick (1974), 42–45), or at least not much.

Second, the fundamentality theory is meant to include 'constraints' on the production of good consequences, something I did not emphasize in the article Landau discusses (but see Metz (2013), 187–191). Many intuitions indicate that using particularly degrading actions as a means undercuts the ability of improved long-term well-being one has brought about to confer meaning on one's life. For a doctor intentionally to kill someone with a cold in order to save five other good lives with his organs confers no, or very little, meaning, in contrast to the views of a classic consequentialist who, again, cares not about the means employed to bring about the good. Consider, for instance, a plain reading of Peter Singer's account of how to maximize meaning in life ((1993), 314–335).

Third, and something I also did not mention in the initial article, implicit in the fundamentality theory is the 'agent-relative' idea that *where*, and not merely how (à la the first two points), one realizes the good makes a difference, again *contra* Singer, who is explicit that acting from the 'point of view of the universe' is what makes one's life matter most ((1993), 314–335). To illustrate what I have in mind,<sup>6</sup> think of a married couple, both of whom are talented, indeed so talented that they have precisely calculated that the best results would be produced in the long run if the wife stayed home and supported the husband in his professional career, more than if they both worked and shared the domestic labour. Suppose that the amount of extra excellence or virtue realized by the husband through his work would be marginal relative to the other option. On a consequentialist view, the higher the overall amount

of excellence one has produced, the more meaningful one's life, entailing that, to maximize meaning in her life, the wife ought to stay home and support the husband. But that is counterintuitive, and meant to be ruled out by (FT<sub>1</sub>). Even if the wife had worked hard at home to enable her husband to promote excellence in himself and others, to a slightly higher degree than that of which she were capable, she would have had more meaning in her life if she had instead exhibited quite a lot of excellence *in herself*. (FT<sub>1</sub>)'s emphasis on one's rational nature is supposed to capture that intuition.

However, I worry about the way I initially phrased the fundamentality theory as strictly focused on orienting 'our' rational nature, which might suggest that it is *only* by exercising one's *own* rationality that meaning can accrue. I also want to account for the intuition that helping others to exercise their rationality in the relevant ways can be meaning-conferring. The wife above would obtain *some* meaning by virtue of helping her husband exhibit virtue, and surely being a lecturer can be (very) meaningful, and not merely because one has utilized one's own deliberative faculties, but also because one has enabled (and cajoled) students to use theirs. To make that clear, as well as to make explicit the deontological aspects, I suggest working with the following:

(FT<sub>2</sub>) The good, the true, and the beautiful confer great meaning on life insofar as one, without violating certain moral constraints against degrading sacrifice, employs one's reason and in ways that positively orient rationality in a substantial way towards fundamental conditions of human existence.

This version makes it more clear that meaning comes in the first instance by using one's own intelligence in the relevant ways, and can also come by getting others to do so, ideally consequent to that.

Supposing, then, that the 'non-consequentialist' label is reasonable, what about 'self-transcendence'? By the latter I had had in mind views according to which one's life is more meaningful, the more one goes beyond some feature of one's nature, either by actualizing some other feature in oneself or connecting up with something outside of oneself. Views associated with Aristotle, for example, are called 'self-realization' accounts, according to which one's basic justificatory reason for action is developing one's higher nature or moving away from one's lower. I had something similar in mind with the fundamentality theory. By this view, one's life is more meaningful, the more one employs one's rational nature in a vigorous and intense manner and does so in relation to fundamental conditions of human life, a view that contrasts with, say, getting one's own desires satisfied (Taylor (1970), 319–334; Trisel (2002)) or maximizing others' pleasure in the long run (see also Irving Singer (1996), 101–140), theories that are salient in the literature.

Landau notes I am implicitly committed to the view that creating a work of art or discovering a new fact is a greater instance of self-transcendence than is merely apprehending one of these existents, and he is not clear how that might be the case (507–508). My response is two-fold. First, exercising one's rationality in original ways is intuitively to get farther away from one's animal or lower nature than is merely using it to copy what someone else has done. In addition to the process, there is, second, the product. The formation of something that had not existed before, consequent to the use of imagination, is to change the environment in ways that nothing else on the planet can and so is also intuitively higher. However, if these explanations seem forced, I would not mind dropping the title of 'self-transcendence'.

There is much more that could be said to clarify and to motivate the fundamentality theory of what makes life particularly meaningful, at least insofar as

that is constituted by the good, the true, and the beautiful. However, this analysis should be enough for the reader to grasp the import of Landau's two most important criticisms of it.

### **Fundamentality as not sufficient for great meaning**

Landau's first major objection to the fundamentality theory is that contouring rationality towards fundamental conditions is not always enough to obtain great meaning. He points out that those 'who just study or understand' (507) the works of Einstein or Picasso are positively orienting or contouring their intelligence towards fundamental conditions, but are not intuitively obtaining great meaning thereby.

Landau also notes that some people, with somewhat lesser native abilities or education, might be working very hard indeed simply to grasp the basics of what these giants have accomplished, and so could count as exercising their rationality 'in a substantial way' as per the theory. But, again, Landau maintains, it would be only Einstein or Picasso who has the great meaning, not the average Joe or plain Jane trying to make sense of their accomplishments.

I do not at all question Landau's intuitions,<sup>7</sup> and so must either clarify or revise the theory in order to account for them. As Landau notes (507), I have been aware of this issue and initially suggested the strategy of construing the fundamentality theory to require an *advancement*, so as to differentiate the great meaning from the not so great (Metz (2011), 404–405). That would seem to distinguish Einstein and Picasso, on the one hand, from the first-year physics or art student, on the other.

And here is where things get particularly interesting. Landau objects that such a reply is inadequate for failing to capture the respects in which great meaning can come from preventing a decline. Preventing an asteroid from striking the earth, curing HIV/AIDS, stopping global warming, and myriad other ways of reducing the bad

would be no less meaning-conferring than producing the good. However, speaking of an 'advancement' as the key to great meaning to Landau suggests only the latter condition.

As a first response, it is worth considering whether I may plausibly understand the concept of advancement to include the idea of preventing a decline. In particular, one might suggest that one makes an advancement insofar as the state of affairs of which one is the (proximate) cause is much better *than what would have obtained in the absence of one's intervention*. Just as without Picasso, we would not have had *Guernica* and other masterpieces, so without the cure for HIV/AIDS, we would not have had many more (good) lives.

However, this principle entails that one would get no credit for doing something that someone else would have done had one not. It is no defence against murder to say that if you had not killed the innocent person for the insurance money, someone else would have. One can be liable for blame for an action, even if someone else would have performed the same type at about the same time. Similarly, one can be liable for praise for an action, even if someone else would have done it. An inventor can be rightly admired for (and proud of) being the first to have created an ingenious gadget, even if someone else was hot on her heels. It is therefore a strike against my suggested understanding of advancement that it entails that a person's life would be no more meaningful for curing HIV/AIDS, if someone else would have done it soon after.

It is natural at this point instead to propose the following: one makes an 'advancement' in the relevant sense if and only if one is the proximate cause of a state of affairs that is much better *than what would have obtained in the absence of the type of one's intervention*. This construal of advancement avoids the problem

facing the initial version, while also capturing Landau's solid intuition that preventing a decline can make one's existence significant.

However, as it stands, this principle appears to have the odd implication that one could obtain great meaning in life merely by pressing a button that diverts an incoming asteroid, even in the case where a billion other people would have readily pressed the button had you not. Although some meaning might accrue for being the button-presser, it would be a stretch to say that it was great meaning, here.

As a final response, I believe that the problem is probably resolved upon considering in more detail not what 'advancement' means, but rather what is involved in speaking of exercising reason 'in a substantial way', both of which are plausibly essential for great meaning in life. Landau, as I indicated above, reads the latter phrase as relative to the capacities of a specific individual, so that someone who is on the dull and uneducated side can be said to have exercised her intelligence 'substantially' if she struggles a lot. However, I mean to exclude such a relativist sense, for it instead appears to be the difficulty of a project not merely for the one engaging in it, but also for characteristic human beings<sup>8</sup>, that is relevant to whether an action can confer great meaning or not.

In rough summation, neither hard work that fails to advance, nor advancement without hard work, is sufficient for great meaning. The fundamentality theory should be understood to require both, this way:

(FT<sub>3</sub>) The good, the true, and the beautiful confer great meaning on life insofar as one, without violating certain moral constraints against degrading sacrifice, employs one's reason and in ways that positively orient rationality well beyond characteristic human functioning towards fundamental conditions of human existence and thereby make an advancement compared to what would have

obtained in the absence of the type of one's rational engagement (cf. Metz (2013), 235–237).

The principle is losing any hope of becoming a slogan, but is gaining in precision and plausibility. (FT<sub>3</sub>) can now be seen to provide a plausible sufficiency condition for great meaning, at least in relation to the reasons Landau has given for doubting that.

### **Fundamentality as not necessary for great meaning**

Landau's second major criticism of the fundamentality theory, and one that still *prima facie* applies to (FT<sub>3</sub>), is that one can obtain great meaning in life by directing one's rational nature (or that of others) towards objects that are not fundamental in the sense I have expounded. According to him, at least on some occasions, contouring one's intelligence towards merely necessary conditions for human existence can confer great meaning on a person's life.

Here, Landau again uses a clever dialectical manoeuvre, invoking some of my own examples against me. In particular, Landau contends that the meaningfulness to be found in the cases of the incoming asteroid and of Mother Teresa are best explained by the bare fact of saving human life (509–510). Life is obviously a necessary condition for a wide array of aspects of human existence, but I, with Landau, deny that it is a fundamental one, for it causes or explains very little of them.

Landau readily agrees that not every advancement consequent to the intense positive orientation of one's intelligence towards necessary conditions for a variety of facets of human existence is a good candidate for great meaning, and he concludes merely that both fundamental conditions and at least some, as yet unspecified, necessary ones are the relevant objects of rationality (510–511). In the following, I aim to provide good reason to stick with my simpler formulation, which appeals to fundamentality alone.

Let us think more carefully about Mother Teresa. Consider, first, Mother Teresa\*, who prevents a great many human beings from dying, but foresees that they will merely remain comatose for the rest of their lives. Second, think about Mother Teresa^, who again prevents a great many human beings from dying, but does so in the awareness that they will consequently suffer excruciating torture for the rest of their lives. My intuition is that there is no meaning here, or at the very least no great meaning.

These cases strongly suggest it is not the bare fact of saving life, a necessary condition for a wide array of facts about human beings, that is meaning-conferring in the original case of Mother Teresa; for, if it were, then we would judge there to be great meaning in the above two permutations, but we do not. Saving lives that one knows will suffer a fate worse than, or even no better than, death does not confer much, if any, meaning on one's life.<sup>9</sup>

There is clearly more that is required, which, I believe, is enough to rebut Landau's motivation for postulating the idea that contouring intelligence towards what is merely necessary for many aspects of human existence can constitute great meaning in life. However, while that negative rebuttal is welcome, so far as it goes, it is not yet to provide positive reason to think that fundamentality is doing the explanatory work, a claim I now seek to buttress.

What I propose is that what differentiates the original case of Mother Teresa from Mother Teresa\* and Mother Teresa^ is that only the former is protecting conditions that are responsible for much else about a characteristic human person's life. What are those? Moving beyond what I had to say in my initial article, I have come to believe that they are centrally a matter of choosing in light of reflection on the norms salient in one's context (cf. Metz (2013), 227–228, 236–237). What is

causally responsible for a large degree of the course of a representative person's life? Roughly, the answer is: her acting on the non-derivative principles and values that she has adopted consequent to engagement with her community. Such end-pursuit is what is missing in the cases of being comatose and tortured, and what is present in the case of our stereotypical understanding of Mother Teresa, who does not merely save many lives, but saves many lives that are reasonably expected to go on their merry way, as it were.

### **Conclusion: From the classic triad to the ultimate one**

I close this article by addressing religious issues of a sort more narrow than I have so far. Up to this point I have defended a secular theory of what makes a life (very) meaningful, which is clearly 'religious' or 'spiritual' only in a broad sense of addressing some of the greatest values in human life, namely, the good, the true, and the beautiful insofar as they can merit great admiration and awe. However, I have not spoken of properly supernaturalist themes yet, and I want to draw the attention of readers to the implications of the fundamentality theory for them.

In particular, I conclude by highlighting the respect in which the fundamentality theory can plausibly account for the ability of God as conceived in the monotheistic tradition to confer great meaning on our lives. Unlike nearly all theories of life's meaning in the field, mine occupies what might be reasonably considered to be middle ground. On the one hand, supernaturalist theories typically maintain that if God did not exist, then life would be meaningless,<sup>10</sup> while, on the other, naturalist theories fail to acknowledge the respect in which God could be a source of meaning.<sup>11</sup> My view is different, entailing that a (very) meaningful life is possible without God, while also accounting for the judgement that God could be largely constitutive of a (very) meaningful life, if God were to exist.

The issue is what in our actual world is fundamental to our environment and our characteristic lives as individuals and as a species. If the world is merely physical, then it will be certain physical facts that are causally responsible for much about our existence, and this is the form of the theory that I normally adopt. However, if our world included a person beyond space and time who were the originator and sustainer of the physical universe, then He would count as fundamental to our environment and the course of our lives. God would be the ultimate CEO, one overseeing the operations of all of existence (to return to an analogy I used earlier to illustrate fundamentality), such that orienting one's life towards Him would be the central way to live a profound, rather than trivial, life.

One might wonder how such an account of God's centrality to meaning in life squares with the usual route by which one appeals to theistic considerations about this value, namely, as a perfect being who has laid down moral rules for us springing from His nature. My suggestion is to recall that creativity is a perfection, perhaps the highest one (on which see Morris (1990)). If God existed, He would be fundamental to much (on some views, everything) about our lives, precisely in virtue of having been the creative source of it.

Hence, the fundamentality view should be attractive to both theists and atheists. It can be seen as interesting value-theoretic common ground among those who have deep metaphysical disputes. Although debate continues about what is fundamental to our lives, for all sides, perhaps, fundamentality is what matters.<sup>12</sup>

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## Notes

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<sup>1</sup> All abbreviated citations in the text refer to this one.

<sup>2</sup> So I comprehensively recount and critically address in Metz (2013).

<sup>3</sup> Although notice that the loss of only a single person would be enough to impair the firm at CEO level, but not at the janitorial.

<sup>4</sup> Similar remarks apply to a dreaded ‘constipation theory’ of meaning in life, according to which we could not exist or do much if we could not defecate, advanced as an attempted *reductio* against the fundamentality theory by Anna Alexandrova. In reply, I note that such picks out a necessary condition for human existence and not a fundamental one, which I believe explains why it is not a promising view.

<sup>5</sup> See Hurka (1993), 155 for the example, but not the same explanation of the lack of importance (albeit one worth taking seriously).

<sup>6</sup> This example is taken from Metz (2013), 195–196.

<sup>7</sup> Although some might, particularly those who believe that the amount of meaning in a person’s life is a function of the extent to which she has exercised her particular abilities and opportunities, suggested by Adams (2002).

<sup>8</sup> Cf. James (2005), 437–440, who focuses on the average for human beings, a statistical notion, as opposed to what is characteristic of them, which is a different notion. For discussion of their different implications, see Metz (2013), 150–154.

<sup>9</sup> I first suggested this argumentative strategy in Metz (2013), 237–238.

<sup>10</sup> But see Mawson (2013) for a different interpretation of the literature. I have implicitly already responded to him on this score in Metz (2013), 106–108.

<sup>11</sup> Hooker (2008), 199 is the only exception that comes to mind beyond Metz (2013), 158–160, 220, 232–233.

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<sup>12</sup> I am grateful to Iddo Landau for having composed his article and corresponded with me about it and related topics, as well as to an anonymous referee for *Religious Studies* for written comments.