

[Essay]

## A Psychological Model to Determine Meaning *in* Life and Meaning *of* Life

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### Abstract

Thaddeus Metz's *Meaning in Life* (2013) offers considerable insights into previous philosophical theories and psychological research. It inspired aspects of this study, which presents a psychological model for the meaning of life that is grounded in a investigation of philosophical theory and psychological research. In this paper, I introduce three models: Model I (Framework), Model II (Elements), and Model III (Composition). Model I was a theoretical framework model based on philosophical, anthropological, and psychological theories. Model II was constructed using categorized data on the meaning of life drawn from various previous studies. Model III was constructed by integrating Models I and II. These models proposed four fundamental principles underlying meaning of life concepts: personal, relational, social/universal, and religious/spiritual. These principles formed a "nested" structure that unfolded from personal to relational to social/universal to religious/spiritual. Finally, I address differences between Metz's theory and my model and suggest another approach to the meaning of life.

### 1. Psychological approach to the meaning of life

As Metz notes, many modern theorists take the view from naturalism, whereas some philosophers still adopt the view from supernaturalism when tackling the meaning *of* life (Cottingham, 2003; Craig, 2000; Davis, 1987). Similarly, psychological research shows that people often associate meaning in their lives through a belief in the religious or spiritual realm (Debats, 1999; Ebersole & DePaola, 1987; Reker, 1996; Schnell & Becker, 2006). Religion and spirituality may serve a crucial function in restoring both the what and the why of our global sense-making assumptions, especially when unexpected traumatic events (e.g., sudden loss of a loved one, natural disasters) happen (Proulx, Markman, & Lindberg, 2013). Psychologists argue that supernaturalism affects behavior and attitudes irrespective of whether it is true or philosophically coherent. Therefore, it is an important issue in the psychology of meaning from

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the implicit theories approach. Implicit theories are laymen's beliefs regarding psychological constructs such as personality, intelligence, love, and meaningful life (Wong, 1998). They are numerous in the literature. They identify structures underlying conceptions of meaning by asking people to describe what is meaningful in their lives (e.g., Ebersole & DePaola, 1987; O'Connor & Chamberlain, 1996; Schnell & Becker, 2006). From this point of view, I established psychological models that adopt implicit theories.

## **2. Psychological model about the meaning of life**

There are two methods for academically examining the meaning of “the meaning of life”: review philosophical theories, as attempted by Metz and/or review psychological research. I pursue both methods in a model that mediates theory and research. Predominantly, I construct three models: Model I (Framework), Model II (Elements), and Model III (Composition).<sup>1</sup>

Model I (theoretical framework) is based on philosophical, anthropological, and psychological theories. Many philosophers and psychologists discern two or three fundamental meanings of life (Tables 1 and 2). Their categorizations generally distinguish concrete, terrestrial, subjective, and natural meanings from abstract, global, objective, and supernatural meanings as categorized by Metz. Some theorists distinguish “created or invented” meaning from “discovered or found” meaning (e.g., Baird, 1985; Frankl, 1963; Singer, 1992). Others distinguish objective from subjective meaning (e.g., Klemke, 2000; Smith, 2000; Markus, 2003; Metz, 2002). Metz also differentiates “part-life” from “whole-life” in thinking about the meaningful life. According to Metz, part-life means that only segments of a life in themselves are what can be meaningful, and whole-life means that only the narrative relationships among the parts of life are what can be meaningful (Metz, 2013a, pp.9-10).

These categorizations are parallel and categorical relations, but they include the relations indicated in Figure 1, which differentiates the meaning *of* life from meaning *in* life.<sup>2</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Yamada (2002) developed this method of constructing models to integrate abstract configurations and concrete arrangements of qualitative data.

<sup>2</sup> Metz (2001, 2013) also distinguishes meaning in life from meaning of life and focuses on the former.

**Table 1**

## Conceptions about the Meaning of Life in Philosophy

Conceptions	Author
metaphysical / religious, secular / humanistic, pessimistic / nihilistic	Sanders & Cheney (1980)
ultimate, terrestrial	Edwards (1981)
discovered, created	Singer (1992)
intrinsic, extrinsic	Wiggins (1988)
pre-meaning, super-meaning, trans-meaning	Yamada (1999)
physical, moral, esthetic, religious	Hick (2000)
intrinsic, derivative	Joske (2000)
objective, subjective	Klemke (2000a); Smith (2000); Markus (2003)
individual, cosmic	Quinn (2000a)
axiological, teleological, complete	Quinn (2000b)
from within, from without	Taylor (2000); Aoki (2004)
meaning of life, meaning of a life	Adams (2002)
supernaturalism, naturalism	Metz (2001,2002,2007)
coherence, purpose, value	Markus (2003)
purpose, value, intelligibility / coherence	Thomson (2003)
answerable, ineffable	Cooper (2005)
subjective, intersubjective	Levy (2005)
teleology, hermeneutics, empiricism	Murayama (2005)
meaning of human life as such, meaning of an individual's life	Metz (2007)
whole life, part life	Metz (2013a)

**Table 2**

## Conceptions about the Meaning of Life in Psychology

Conceptions	Author
cosmic, worldly/personal	Frankl (1963)
ultimate, terrestrial	Yalom (1980)
discover, create	Baird (1985); Kenyon (2000)
purpose, efficacy and control, value and justification, self-worth	Baumeister (1991)
objective, relative, subjective, appellative	Längle (1992)
meaning of life, meaning in life	Ebersole & DeVore (1995)
ultimate, provisional	Farran & Kuhn (1998)
self-glorification, self-transcendence	Hermans (1998)
importance, value-congruency, self-identity, absorption, enjoyment	Little (1998)
relational, personal	Wong (1998a)
ultimate, specific	Wong (1998b)
interpretive, directional	Dittmann-Kohli & Westerhof (2000)
implicit/definitional, existential meaning, meaningfulness	Bar-Tur, Savaya, & Prager (2001)
situational, global	Folkman & Moskowitz (2000); Park (2005)
events, experience, existence	Bering (2003)
work/achievement, intimacy, relationships, spirituality, self-transcendence/generativity	Emmons (2003)
purpose, value, foundation	Kameda (2003)

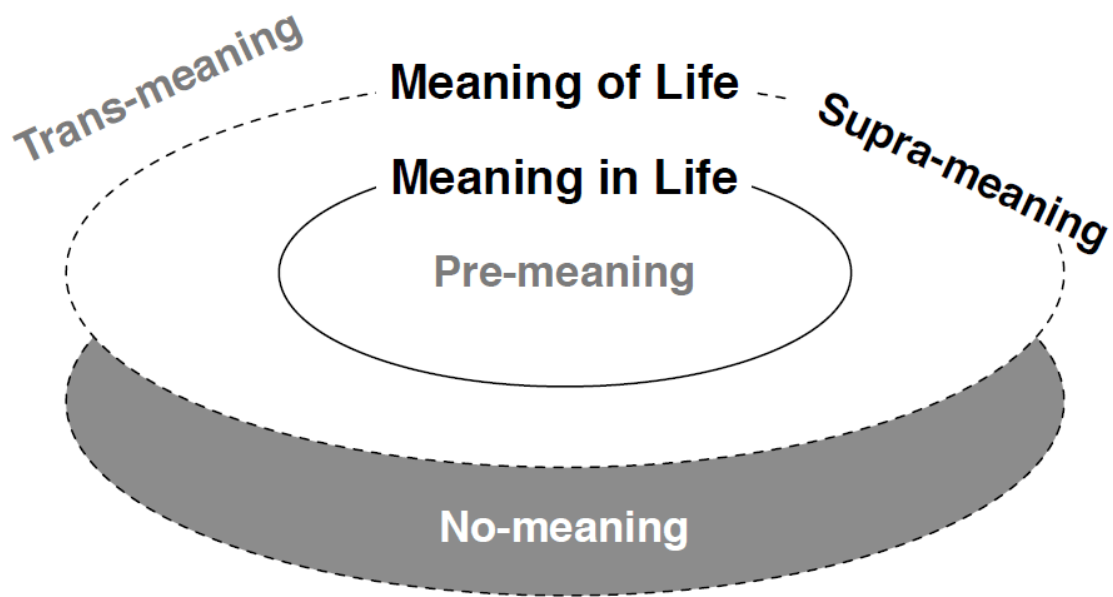
**Table 2 (Continued)**

Conceptions	Author
belonging, doing, understanding self and world semi-religious, religious, humanistic	King (2004) Laverty, Pringle-Nelson, Kelly, Miket, & Jenzen (2005)
ultimate, personal, provisional phenomenological dimension, behavioral dimension, ontological dimension	Auhagen & Holub (2006) Leontiev (2007b)
high-order, low-order determinate, indeterminate	Orbach (2007) Peterson (2007)

**Table 3**

## Categorization of Meaning (Model II)

Principle	Value orientation	Elements of meaning	Description
Personal	Subjective well-being	Health	Maintaining physical or mental health.
		Appearance	Smarten one's appearance
		Obtaining	Obtaining materialistic/monetary things
		Hedonism	Obtaining hedonistic pleasure
		Happiness	Feeling of pleasure and contentment
		Experiences	Experiencing various things
		Aesthetic	Giving oneself beautiful esthetic things
	Self-actualization	Self acceptance	Accepting one's limits and feeling fulfillment
		Life itself	Belief that life itself has meaning
		Goal attainment	Making an effort to attain one's goal
		Responsibility	having a responsibility and autonomy
		Growth	Developing one's competency and skills
		Actualizing potential	Identifying one's potential and trying to actualize it
		Creativity	Creating something
Relational	Interpersonal relationships	Lifework	Engaging occupation, job
		Understanding	Having a wider sense of judgment and understanding many things
		Family	Maintaining good relationship with family
		Approval/Respect	Being recognized from others and respected
		Friendship	Keeping good relations with a close friend
Social/ Universal	Collective/ Universal values	Romantic relationship	Having the intimacy in romantic relationships
		Service	Helping other people who are socially troubled
		Morality	Considering justice and morality to be important
		Truth	Seeking after the truth
		Contribution to society	Having the social/political belief
		Flame keeping	Following a tradition of the culture and maintaining a valuable thing
		Relationship with nature	Recognizing that mankind is a part of the nature and feeling connected to it
Religious/ Spiritual	Self-transcendence	Evolution/Generativity	Passing on one's genes and contributing the human existence and evolution
		Religious belief	Finding faith in God and connecting to God
		Spirituality	Keeping the connection with spiritual and higher being



**Figure 1** *Theoretical Model of Meaning of Life*

This distinction is common among professional philosophers as Metz notes:

The former [meaning in life] concerns a desirable, higher property that a person’s life can exhibit to a certain degree, whereas the latter [meaning of life] is a feature of the human species as such or of the universe in toto, e.g., a source of these wholes (having sprung from God) or a pattern they could exhibit (developing toward a telos) (Metz, 2013b, p.406).

Psychologists also suggested similar distinction:

“Meaning in life” must be differentiated from “meaning of life.” The latter refers to the metaphysical question of why the human race in general exists. Meaning in life is concerned with the most central, personal, individual values of people. The majority of empirical investigations of meaning in life, or a more commonly used phrase, “purpose in life”, have explored the relationship of other variables to differing degrees of intensity or depth of meaning in life (Ebersole & DeVore, 1995, p.41).

With reference to Metz (2013a), meaning *in* life includes subjectivism, and meaning *of* life includes subjectivism, objectivism, and supernaturalism. Meaning *in* life is subsumed under meaning *of* life in the model.

The model is best represented as concentric circles of meaning. If life is meaningful because a deity or soul instills it with purpose or reason, daily life may be meaningful and fulfilling. Having a global purpose (e.g., to do good or to achieve cultural immortality) might make every personal activity meaningful.<sup>3</sup>

Furthermore, in light of other literature, I propose the related concepts of pre-meaning, supra-meaning, trans-meaning, and no-meaning. Victor Frankl explained that supra-meaning is also called ultimate meaning, as follows:

[S]upra-meaning is no longer a matter of thinking but rather a matter of believing. We do not catch hold of it on intellectual grounds but on existential grounds, out of our whole being, i.e., through faith (Frankl, 1988, p.145).

Japanese philosopher Kunio Yamada (1998) defined pre-meaning and trans-meaning. The former is a way of living in which people do not quest after life's meaning or worth because they are callow or unconscious. The latter is "the way of living where he or she transcends the dual view of meaning or no meaning, and does not quest for 'why' question" (Yamada, 1998, p.305).<sup>4</sup> Thus pre-meaning is the fusion or undifferentiated states, whereas trans-meaning transcend both pre-meaning, meaning and no meaning. Therefore, I mapped supra-meaning at the perimeter of the exterior circle, pre-meaning into the center of circle as inherent meaning, and trans-meaning into the outside the meaning of life (and no-meaning) circle.

No-meaning is the experience of emptiness or meaninglessness. It might arise from encountering instances of meaninglessness *in* life or generalized global meaninglessness *of* life, which is similar to the meaning circle. Therefore, I mapped no-meaning as a shadow under the meaning of the life circle.

Model II was constructed from data in previous psychological studies (Table 3). Earlier studies isolated different sources of meaning, but they also identified common sources such as relationships, growth, pleasure, service, and religious

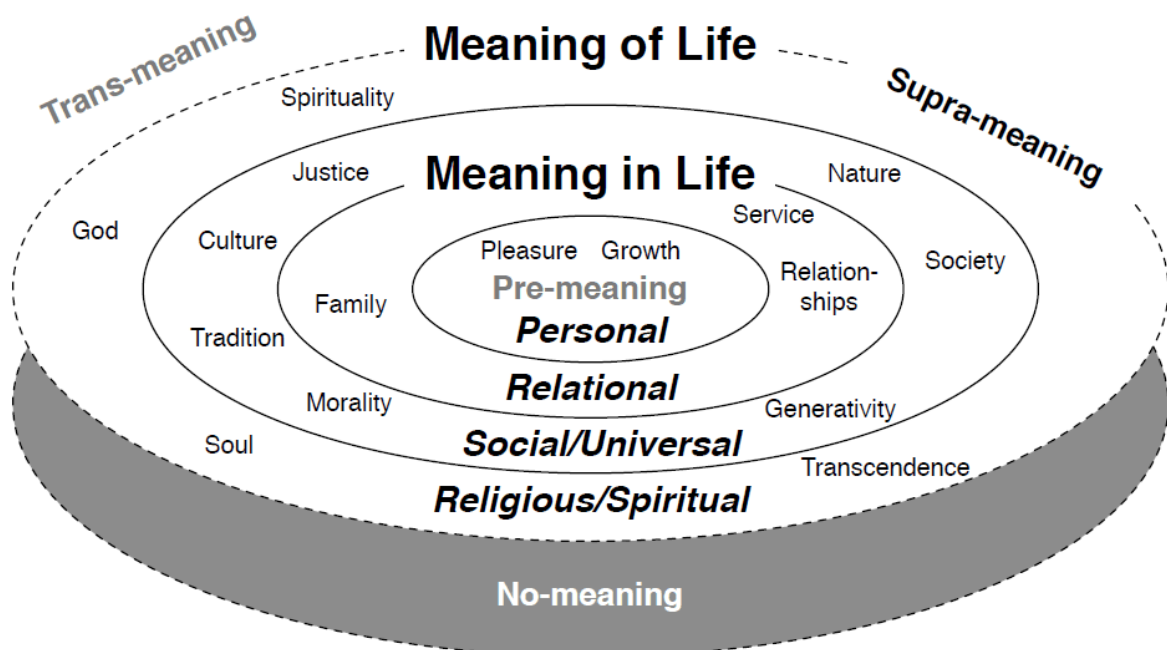
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<sup>3</sup> The same might be said about many forms of absolutism, including totalitarianism and religious cults.

<sup>4</sup> Yamada (1998) quotes Meister Eckhart, Hasidism, and Zen Buddhism as exemplars of trans-meaning.

belief. Model II proposes four principles underlying meaning of life concepts: personal, relational, social/universal, and religious/spiritual.

Model III integrates Models I and II. Four principles from Model II form a “nested” structure that unfolds from the personal to the relational to the social/universal to the religious/spiritual (Figure 2). The circle that circumscribes meaning *in* life includes personal and relational meaning, and the circle that circumscribes meaning *of* life envelops all principles.



**Figure 2** *Psychological Model of the Meaning of Life*

### 3. Model as a psychological version of Metz’s theory

My model has many resemblances to Metz’s theory. Both differentiate specific from global meaning and natural from supernatural meaning.<sup>5,6</sup> Both suggest that life has natural meaning without need for a god or soul. Both offer fundamental frameworks for the meaning of life.

However, Metz and I differ in substantial ways. I regard every view of life

<sup>5</sup> I divided questions about the meaning of life into these two dimensions when interviewing research subjects (Urata, 2013).

<sup>6</sup> In my definition, supernaturalism and objectivism may be meaning *of* life and subjectivism meaning *in* life.

as psychologically real and true for people who seek meaning *in/of* life and disregard their philosophical rigor. Unlike analytic philosophers, I do not judge the meaningfulness or meaninglessness of one's life by a final value. I try to understand each person's interpersonal view of life, to see relationships between the meaning of life and other psychological conditions and to find support for people who lose their life's meaning.

Metz and I also differ in our stances regarding transcendental perspectives of meaning (i.e., supra-meaning and trans-meaning). Transcendental perspectives may be naive and might or might not be germane to any meaning of life, but they are motivationally significant in the quest for meaning. It is interesting that since ancient times, similar views concerning trans-meaning emerge in Eastern and Western cultures and are treated as the omega of human existence (e.g., perennial philosophy).

Our third difference is in the distinction between theory and model. Metz developed his theory by presenting desiderata step-by-step. And they were presented as sentences. However, my visual model mediates data from psychological research and frameworks of philosophical theory. A visual model depicts discrete phenomena comprehensively and captures patterns in personal systems of meaning. Recently I apply this model to analyze meaning of life narratives and developed a method to assess the breath, depth, and coherence of meaning (Urata, 2013).

The final difference is in how we examine meaning *in* life and meaning *of* life. Metz sees these two as different categories. I accept those categorizations, but my model suggests additional perspectives and more inclusive relationships. Psychological research suggests that low-level narratives of meaning relate solely to private meaning in life such as pleasure and comfort, whereas, high-level narratives span the range from private meaning *in* life to global meanings *of* life (O'Connor & Chamberlain, 1996). I also found that eminent narratives regarding the meaning of life are elaborately connected to both meaning *in* life and meaning *of* life (Urata, 2013). Thus, it might be better to regard the meaning *in* life as included in the meaning *of* life.

#### **4. Conclusion**

Theorists who consider the meaningful life cannot avoid Metz's work, although other viewpoints (e.g., non-categorical perspectives) deserve



consideration. Laymen seldom have clear answers regarding life's ultimate meaning, and they can be ambivalent about the meaning *of* life and the meaning *in* life (and meaninglessness). An individual could seek multiple levels of meaning and connect them explicitly or implicitly within internal systems of meaning.

Furthermore, as Metz notes, nihilists sometimes presuppose supernaturalism and sometimes undergo conversions to meaningfulness (e.g., Tolstoy) or trans-meaning (e.g., Zen Buddhism). Scholars must acknowledge laymen's mixed or ambivalent views about the meaning of life and suspend judgment about their truth. The model comprising the concentric circles aids understanding of implicit systems of meaning.

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