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THE MEANING OF LIFE *SUB SPECIE AETERNITATIS*

Iddo Landau

Several philosophers have argued that if we examine our lives in context of the cosmos at large, *sub specie aeternitatis*, we cannot escape life's meaninglessness. To see our lives as meaningful, we have to shun the point of view of the cosmos and consider our lives only in the narrower context of the here and now. I argue that this view is incorrect: life can be seen as meaningful also *sub specie aeternitatis*. While criticizing arguments by, among others, Simon Blackburn, Nicholas Rescher, and Thomas Nagel, I show that what determines assessments of the meaning of a life are the standards of meaningfulness one endorses rather than the size of the context in which that life is assessed. Employing non-demanding standards of meaningfulness to assess a life is compatible with examining it in the context of the cosmos at large. That is also the case if we accept Nagel's claim that to examine a life *sub specie aeternitatis* is to examine it externally, impersonally and objectively: life can be evaluated as meaningful also when under these perspectives if the standards of meaningfulness we adopt are not overly challenging. Nor does the contingency of our existence, realized *sub specie aeternitatis*, render our life meaningless. Contrary to a commonly accepted view, then, examining our lives *sub specie aeternitatis* does not necessitate that we see them as meaningless.

1.

Many believe that if we examine our lives in context of the cosmos at large, *sub specie aeternitatis*, we cannot escape life's meaninglessness.¹ Simon Blackburn [2001: 79], for example, claims that 'to a witness with the whole of space and time in its view, nothing on the human scale will have meaning'. Blackburn's solution is to shun the point of view of the whole of space and time, and take on only a narrower perspective that examines life in the context of the here and now. As the perspective that considers the meaning of life in the wider context is avoided, the thought that life is meaningless does not arise. Blackburn quotes Frank Ramsey as presenting a somewhat similar view: 'my picture of the world is drawn in perspective, and not like a model to scale. The foreground is occupied by human beings, and

¹For simplicity's sake, I focus in this paper on the meaning of individual lives, but everything said here applies, *mutatis mutandis*, also to the meaning of human existence at large.

the stars are all as small as threepenny bits' [loc. cit.]. Likewise, Nicholas Rescher [1990: 153] argues that,

on the astronomical scale, we are no more than obscure inhabitants of an obscure planet. Nothing we are or do in our tiny sphere of action within the universe's vast reaches of space and time makes any substantial difference in the long run.

Rescher, too, suggests that we should examine meaningfulness only in a narrower context. Similarly, Thomas Nagel, whose discussion of the issue is the most detailed, argues that 'when we look at the world from a general vantage point it seems not to matter who exists' [1986: 213]. This is true even of people such as Mozart or Einstein [loc. cit.]. Nagel distinguishes between this perspective, to which he refers as external, objective, detached, impersonal, and as examining life *sub specie aeternitatis*, and another perspective, to which he refers as internal, subjective, engaged and personal (or first-personal), which can be called *sub specie humanitatis*. He emphasizes that the two perspectives collide: 'from far enough outside my birth seems accidental, my life pointless, and my death insignificant, but from inside my never having been born seems nearly unimaginable, my life monstrously important, and my death catastrophic' [ibid.: 209]. While the tension between the two perspectives can be moderated, Nagel believes that 'some of the conflicts are impossible to eliminate' because 'the objective standpoint, even at its limit, is too essential a part of us to be suppressed without dishonesty' [ibid.: 210]. Similar claims can be found also in non-analytic philosophy: Albert Camus, for example, claims that 'from the point of view of Sirius, Goethe's works in ten thousand years will be dust and his name forgotten. Perhaps a handful of archaeologists will look for "evidence" as to our era' [1969: 78]. To cope with this difficulty Camus, too, suggests that 'that idea has always contained a lesson ... Above all, it directs our concerns towards what is most certain—that is, toward the immediate' [loc. cit.]. Likewise, William Lane Craig [2000: 40] claims, from a religious standpoint, that life must be meaningless (for atheists) because it is '... but a spark in the infinite blackness, a spark that but appears, flickers, and dies forever. Compared with the infinite stretch of time, the span of man's life is but an infinitesimal moment; and yet this is the only life he will ever know'.

Seeing life as meaningless *sub specie aeternitatis* does not mean that life *sub specie humanitatis* must be considered meaningful; people sometimes see their lives as meaningless also from the internal, subjective perspective because, say, their loved one left them or they failed in their careers. But authors such as those mentioned above believe that while people *can* consider their lives meaningful *sub specie humanitatis*, they cannot do so *sub specie aeternitatis*. I will argue here that this view is incorrect: life can be seen as meaningful also *sub specie aeternitatis*. I will largely ignore other issues that arise in this context, such as whether it is possible to disregard the external perspective (as Rescher, Blackburn and Camus believe we can do, but Nagel denies), whether the two perspectives could be completely reconciled (as Nagel, again, denies), or what the authors mentioned above

precisely mean in notions such as ‘*sub specie aeternitatis*’ or ‘a witness with the whole of space and time in its view’.²

2.

But why should life seem at all meaningless *sub specie aeternitatis*? One may take one’s life to be so because, when seen in a very large context, it becomes clear that our behaviour and existence make no difference to most aspects of the universe; most of the universe would remain unaffected even if we were not to exist at all. This is all the more so if we look at the cosmos also temporally: in hundreds or thousands of years, *a fortiori* millions of years, it would not make any difference how we behaved when we were here, or even if we were here or not. Our effect on the world, then, is very limited both spatially and temporally.³

But this argument supposes that only a life that affects the whole universe, and will continue to do so for billions of years, can be considered meaningful. It is not clear why we should accept this supposition. I suggest that we should distinguish sharply between *perspective*, on the one hand, and *standards for meaningfulness* on the other hand. We can have an expansive perspective that reflects on a certain life in the context of all other things, while at the same time holding standards of meaningfulness that do not require a life to affect all other things in order to be considered meaningful. The authors mentioned above both inspect one’s life in the context of the whole cosmos and endorse a threshold of meaningfulness that has to do with an effect on the whole cosmos. But it is possible to inspect one’s life in the context of the whole cosmos while using standards of meaningfulness that do *not* have to do with an effect on the whole cosmos. A cosmic perspective may endorse non-cosmic, but rather much more moderate, standards of meaningfulness, and consider many people to have successfully passed this threshold. For example, many parents who, owing to the fruits of their parenting, see their children flourishing consider their lives meaningful even if they fully recognize that their efforts did not affect the cosmos at large. Standards of meaningfulness may have to do not only with a moderate effect, but also with no *effect* at all; they may have to do, for example, with reaching a certain degree of wisdom, or happiness, or aesthetic fulfilment. Thus, one may be taken to have had a meaningful life if,

²Both notions suggest omniscience, but this clearly is not applicable to humans. Moreover, Blackburn’s having ‘the whole of space and time in its view’ and Nagel’s ‘look at the world from a general vantage point’ employ visual metaphors, but these do not apply literally to the considerations at hand. It is not entirely clear that the authors above will be able to say what precisely these notions amount to beyond the simpler claim that we have only a limited effect on our non-immediate environment. In what follows, however, I treat the notions as non-problematic, and argue that even if they are accepted life need not be considered meaningless.

³But is our effect on the world indeed so limited? It might be argued that whatever we do affects causes that again influence other causes, thus having consequences indefinitely into the future. The accumulated effect of our actions over time, then, may be vast, perhaps even infinite (even if unpredictable and unintended). Likewise, it could be argued that a world in which we would have not existed, or one in which we would have taken different actions, would have had to differ from the present world from its very start. But I will not pursue these paths here, and will argue that even if it is granted that our effect on the world is quite limited, our life can be considered meaningful.

for instance, one achieved some deep understanding, happiness, or artistic accomplishment that did not affect anyone else. All of that could be seen also from a cosmic perspective, *sub specie aeternitatis*.

The distinction could perhaps be understood better if we recall that, according to some theistic traditions, God knows everything, including a certain sparrow's flutter of its wings. Of course, God knows also that I am alive, and that, say, yesterday I committed a small sin or a small virtuous act (for example, I looked disdainfully at a co-worker who failed in something, making him feel even worse, or looked at him encouragingly, making him feel better). According to such theistic traditions, God knows of each act and event in the context of all the many acts performed by each of the many people who ever lived and will live, and of course realizes that what I did yesterday does not affect many people in the world and would not really affect anything in five hundred years. Yet, God may still evaluate what I did and judge it as worthy or unworthy. Seeing an action in a large context and acknowledging that it has only a very limited effect, then, does not mean that God will not consider the act to be of worth; a cosmic perspective does not entail cosmic thresholds of meaningfulness. Indeed, according to some theistic notions, this is precisely what happens: God knows things *sub specie aeternitatis*, yet takes our lives, even our deeds, to be very meaningful.

One need not be a theist to accept this point; I gave the example of God just as an illustration of a possible position that examines lives from the cosmic perspective, noting our place in the context of all other events, yet does not infer that the value of what we have is insufficient or meaningless. We can replace the notion of God in the example above with that of another external observer (such as Blackburn's 'witness'): it may be a creature from another planet, or even you or me when we think about our lives in the context of the cosmos at large. The point is that it is possible to accept a cosmic perspective without adopting extremely challenging standards of meaningfulness that require one to affect the whole universe for ever. More generally, the size of the framework in which a certain issue is evaluated is largely independent of the standards of evaluation. When the former grows the latter may, but need not, become more demanding. Of course, the two are not *completely* independent. If one employs only a limited framework one cannot endorse all-encompassing standards of evaluation, since all-encompassing standards—such as influencing the whole cosmos—require a wide framework that enables one to notice the cosmos. But this does not mean that a wide framework necessitates all-encompassing standards. The wide framework allows both all-encompassing standards and much more moderate ones. And moderate standards can be adopted within both a limited framework and a wide one.

Blackburn [2001: 79] argues that,

when we ask if life has meaning, the first question has to be, to whom? To a witness with all of space and time in its view, nothing on a human scale will have meaning (it is hard to imagine how it could be visible at all—there is an awful *lot* of space and time out there).

But this argument takes the visual metaphor too literally. True, it is visually or optically difficult to notice a small item in an immense or infinite background; but that does not mean that we cannot conceive of, or evaluate, the worth of such an item while acknowledging its place in a larger, and even infinite, context.

Note also that discerning the difference between two things does not necessitate that we judge one of them in terms of, or relatively to, the other. We can observe our lives in the context of the cosmos without estimating the former in terms of the latter. It may be that in *comparison* to the universe our lives are very short and have hardly any effect, but in absolute terms they are sufficient to reach the threshold of meaningfulness.

I have discussed up to now the possibility of opting for a variety of standards of meaningfulness *sub specie aeternitatis* without suggesting any set of specific standards for which to strive. But the question of the appropriate standard of meaningfulness—although important—is independent of the question I discuss in this paper, and need not be dealt with here. The aim of this paper is to show that a wide, cosmic perspective need not lead us to the conclusion that life is meaningless. All other questions are beyond the scope of the present paper. I happen to endorse rather moderate and realistic standards for a meaningful life, and thus believe that many people's lives are meaningful. Others' standards may be even less demanding, taking more people's lives to be meaningful, or may be more demanding, taking only the lives of iconic people such as Shakespeare or Gandhi to be meaningful. Yet others may be even more demanding and adopt cosmic standards, believing that only godlike creatures that affect the whole cosmos eternally have meaningful existence. But it is sufficient for the purpose of the present article that it would be acknowledged that none of these standards, including the latter, is *necessitated* by the cosmic perspective. We may examine our lives *sub specie aeternitatis*, and we may adopt godlike standards of affecting the whole universe; but we need not adopt the latter *because* of the former.

3.

I have distinguished up to now between the two perspectives only as regards the size of the context in which a certain life is considered, and argued that a very large or even total context does not in itself necessitate any specific standard rather than another. But Nagel characterizes the perspectives also in other ways. According to him, when we examine our lives *sub specie humanitatis* we employ a personal or first personal, internal perspective. On the other hand, when examining our lives *sub specie aeternitatis* we employ an impersonal, external, detached perspective, treating ourselves as if we were other people whom we do not personally know or for whom we do not especially care. Nagel takes the detached, impersonal–external perspective to coincide with the cosmic perspective, *sub specie aeternitatis*, treating them as one perspective that has several characteristics. Similarly, he takes the personal–internal perspective to coincide with the limited, *sub specie*

humanitatis perspective. But one can adopt the internal perspective and examine one's life either in the context of very few events in one's immediate environment, or in the context of the universe at large. Similarly, one can adopt the external, impersonal and detached perspective while examining one's own or another person's life either in a narrow context of that life's immediate environment or in a larger and even all-inclusive context. Thus, the distinction between *sub specie humanitatis* and *sub specie aeternitatis* and the distinction between the internal and external perspectives cut across each other. We have here not two perspectives as regards the meaning of life, but four.

Nagel does not explain why we are likely to consider our lives meaningful under the personal perspective and meaningless under the impersonal one. Perhaps the reason is that under the personal–internal perspective our evaluation of our lives is likely to be favourably biased; they may appear to us more worthy and meaningful than they really are just because they are ours.⁴ But be our evaluations of our lives under the personal perspective as they may, does the impersonal, detached perspective necessitate the evaluation of our lives as meaningless? While the internal perspective may bias us towards judging lives as meaningful, the external perspective does not *prevent* us from judging either our or others' lives as meaningful. Even if we do not particularly like or care for a person, and are not favourably biased when evaluating her meaning of life, we may find her activities, achievements, etc. to be of sufficient meaning and worth. Just as we frequently evaluate complete strangers as highly moral, intelligent, knowledgeable or musical, so we can evaluate them as having meaningful lives. Thus, examining our own or others' lives impersonally does not necessitate that we see them as meaningless. Not only *sub specie aeternitatis*, but also under the external–impersonal perspective, we may take ourselves and others to have meaningful lives.

Nagel calls the personal, internal perspective also 'subjective', and the impersonal, detached or external perspective 'objective'. Some connotations of 'subjective' are similar to those of 'personal' or 'internal', and some connotations of 'objective' are similar to those of 'impersonal', 'external' or 'detached', and thus have already been discussed above. But other connotations, which have not yet been considered, have to do with emotionality and rationality. Perhaps in the subjective mode we examine the meaning of our lives also more emotionally, while in the objective mode we reflect on it more rationally. The distinction between the emotional and the rational perspectives cuts across the distinction between *sub specie humanitatis* and *sub specie aeternitatis*: we can examine the meaning of our lives more emotionally, or more rationally, both *sub specie humanitatis* and *sub specie aeternitatis*. However, the distinction between the emotional and

⁴Note, however, that although many people employ such a double standard, considering the meaning of their own lives less critically than that of others' lives, some people employ the opposite double standard, evaluating their own lives more critically than others'. Such people may feel, for example, that others' lives are meaningful if they are only moral, interesting and loving, while their own lives are meaningless unless they show achievements of the stature of Bach or Michelangelo. For such people, considering their lives impersonally may bring about more favourable evaluations than considering them personally.

the rational seems to coincide with, respectively, the distinction between the internal–personal perspective and the external–impersonal perspective.

But be the relationship between the different perspectives as it may, need a rational consideration of our lives lead us to evaluate them as meaningless? Again, the reply is negative. As above, much depends on the standards of meaningfulness we endorse. If these are not over-demanding standards, a rational consideration will lead to the conclusion that our lives *are* meaningful.

What determines judgments about the meaning or meaningfulness of lives are the standards of meaningfulness we adopt. Most standards are compatible with most perspectives; they are usually not excluded by, or necessitated by, this or that perspective. When reflecting on judgments on the meaning of life, then, we should consider predominantly the standards of meaningfulness that we use. Discussing perspectives is frequently less important and relevant than discussing standards.

4.

I have up to now discussed perspectives, and suggested that none necessitates that we evaluate our lives as meaningless. But Nagel [1986: 211–14] also discusses a *fact* that may lead us to consider our lives as meaningless: our contingency. Much in our lives, moreover the very fact that we are alive, is affected by chance. When we recognize that our parents (or their parents, etc.) may have met by chance and could have easily not met at all, or that embryos incorporating other sperm cells could have easily been conceived, we see that we may well have not existed at all. It could have easily come about that another person, with a different genetic makeup, would have been born instead of us, or that no one at all would have been born at all. Likewise, many early experiences that have affected us psychologically and made us who we are also have much to do with chance (for example, our being in a certain nursery class with a certain child care provider rather than another). Chance also considerably affects the nature of our professional careers and our happening to meet the people with whom we develop emotional relationships.

Nagel relates the realization of our contingency only to the objective, external–impersonal, *sub specie aeternitatis* perspectives. But one can recognize one's (and others') contingency when considering people both from these perspectives and the subjective, internal–personal, and *sub specie humanitatis* ones. Nothing in the latter perspectives excludes the realization that we are not necessary, that our life could have been different, or that we might have not existed at all. Nagel suggests that when in the personal perspective we see ourselves as necessary because we conceive ourselves as a background to anything that we conceive or do [ibid.: 211–13]. However, this 'background' could be easily recognized as contingent and as something that might not have come into existence.

But be the perspectives under which we can realize our contingency as they may, contingency need not make our lives meaningless. Of course,

if one takes only necessary existence to be meaningful, then any non-necessary, contingent existence would be deemed meaningless. But one need not endorse this standard; other, more moderate and realistic, standards would yield different results. Again, all depends on the standard of meaningfulness we employ.⁵

I have discussed up to now the perspectives separately, arguing that none on its own necessitates that we take our lives to be meaningless. But the perspectives do not necessitate that we take our lives to be meaningless even if considered together because, again, meaningfulness is determined by the standards we use. One can easily conceive of people whose lives are considered at the same time rationally, objectively, externally, in a detached manner and *sub specie aeternitatis*, but are judged meaningful because the standards of meaningful lives used are not over-demanding. One can consider meaningful the lives of, say, Mozart or Tolstoy while keeping in mind the perspectives mentioned above, and I would evaluate so also the lives of many of my friends who, of course, have not achieved anything near the accomplishments of such luminaries.

Contrary to claims made in the literature, then, examining the meaning of life *sub specie aeternitatis*, impersonally or rationally, need not render our lives meaningless. One could of course see one's life as meaningless from these perspectives, depending on the standards of meaningfulness one uses, but one does not have to see one's life that way, and it is not the perspectives themselves that render life meaningless. We may well continue to adopt those perspectives and see our lives, or the lives of others, as meaningful.⁶

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⁵In an earlier paper Nagel [1970] discusses absurdity (rather than meaningfulness), relating it not to the external, *sub specie aeternitatis* perspective as such, but to the conflict between the external and internal perspectives, mostly as regards the 'collision between the seriousness with which we take our lives and the perpetual possibility of regarding everything about which we are serious as arbitrary, or open to doubt' [1970: 718]. Much of the criticism presented here applies, *mutatis mutandis*, also to Nagel's earlier claims.

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