

Is Life's Meaning Ultimately Unthinkable?: Guy Bennett-Hunter on the Ineffable

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Abstract In this critical notice of Guy Bennett-Hunter's *Ineffability and Religious Experience*, I focus on claims he makes about what makes a life meaningful. According to Bennett-Hunter, for human life to be meaningful it must obtain its meaning from what is beyond the human and is ineffable, which constitutes an ultimate kind of meaning. I spell out Bennett-Hunter's rationale for making this claim, raise some objections to it, and in their wake articulate an alternative conception of ultimate meaning.

Keywords God · Ineffability · Meaning of life · Philosophy of religion · Religious existentialism

A Trend Towards Meaning 'All the Way Down'

In his deep and influential discussion of what makes a life meaningful, now 35 years old, Robert Nozick drew a distinction between meaning that is limited or partial, on the one hand, and meaning that is unlimited or ultimate, on the other (1981: 594–618). The former sort of meaning in life is relational, a matter of connecting with something else that is meaningful. But for this latter, meaning-conferring condition to itself be meaningful, it too must be related to something else that is meaningful, and so on 'all the way down' in Nozick's pithy words (1981: 599), until one reaches something that cannot relate to anything beyond itself and constitutes an intrinsic kind of meaning. Nozick at one point characterizes this unlimited condition, which is meaningful in itself and the source of all other meaning, as 'the ineffable' (1981: 608).

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Although Nozick's relational account of meaning has been influential, his view that an unsurpassable sort of meaning might be a function of the ineffable has not, or at least nowhere to the same degree.¹ Recently, however, there has been an upswing of interest in this idea, to be found most notably in David E. Cooper's *Meaning* (2003: esp. 126–142), Nicholas Waghorn's *Nothingness and the Meaning of Life: Philosophical Approaches to Ultimate Meaning through Nothing and Reflexivity* (2014), and Guy Bennett-Hunter's *Ineffability and Religious Experience* (2014), the subject of the present critical notice.

Although the foremost aim of Bennett-Hunter's book is to articulate and defend a novel approach to the philosophy of religion, he recurrently alludes to the latter's implications for life's meaning, and it is those on which I concentrate here. This focus means that I do not address a number of other interesting and intricate discussions in the book, such as how one can speak of the ineffable without self-stultification, how reference to the ineffable has been present in the history of Christian discourse, and how to understand Martin Heidegger's later philosophy.

In the following, I start by providing an overview of how Bennett-Hunter understands talk of God in terms of the ineffable, what issues of meaning in human life are about, why Bennett-Hunter believes meaning is a function of such a God, and how this view of meaning informs his new philosophy of religion. Then, I focus on critically discussing Bennett-Hunter's fascinating key claim about what makes a life meaningful: 'Only the notion of ineffability, to repeat Nozick's phrase, can give us meaning all the way down' (2014: 124).

Bennett-Hunter on the Meaning of Life

As noted in the introduction, Bennett-Hunter's bold ambition in *Ineffability and Religious Experience* is to ground a new philosophy of religion, one he deems superior to current forms of it. He is dissatisfied with analytic approaches to religious topics, centrally characterized by attempts to *argue* for belief in the existence of God, understood as a particular kind of *being*. As an alternative to these elements, which have long dominated Anglo-American philosophy of religion, Bennett-Hunter aims to revitalize religious existentialism. So, instead of conceiving of God as a being, he thinks of God-talk as signifying what is ineffable, what is necessarily beyond our comprehension, and instead of arguing for belief in God, he urges us to experience God in a way that includes emotional and aesthetic dimensions.

Although Bennett-Hunter draws heavily on Continental figures such as Heidegger and Karl Jaspers, he is not speaking merely to the converted, so to speak; he is also addressing himself to analytic philosophers of religion. Indeed, he is aiming to convince them *on their own terms* of the limits of their approaches. As he puts it, awareness of the ineffable 'is not mere nonsense but a valuable, indeed rationally required, description of a certain religious dimension of human experience which eludes a purely rational articulation' (2014: 126; see also 107).

¹ So suggest the comprehensive surveys of the English-speaking philosophical literature on life's meaning in Seachris (2011); Mawson (2013); and Metz (2013a).

Bennett-Hunter's central argument for the limits of argumentation with regard to philosophizing about God turns on a certain conception of meaning in life. 'If God is held to be ineffable, that is because it is only as such that he can be appealed to in explanations of the meaning of life and of our human world' (Bennett-Hunter 2014: 14).

Like Nozick, Cooper, Waghorn and others,² Bennett-Hunter thinks that talk of 'meaning' is characteristically relational; as he says, 'an explanation of something's meaning relates it to something beyond itself' (2014: 26, see also 25, 110, 124). To ask about the meaning of a word is to enquire into how it figures into a broader context of other words, and to ask about the significance of a tool is to enquire into what purpose it might serve in a human life (Bennett-Hunter 2014: 23). Similarly, when enquiring into meaningfulness, understood as a value that a human life can exhibit to varying degrees, it is in the first instance a matter of asking about how a certain aspect of oneself relates to something else in one's life. For example, what can uncontroversially make a person's life meaningful are actions such as creating a work of art or loving another person, and the meaningfulness in these actions is a function of the agent positively relating to something else, viz., an artwork or a person.

The next move in Bennett-Hunter's argument is to note that for any given relationship, one can take a step back and ask how it (or one of its relata) relates to something still larger. Even if loving another person confers some meaning on one's life, what is the significance of *that*? Perhaps it is to make another person happy, or to create a supportive home for a child, or to inspire others to love. But, then, why do *these* things matter? What is their point? What are they related to, such that they are in turn meaningful?

A regress ensues on the conditions of meaning. And of course either the regress goes on forever, or it does not. In the former case, life would be absurd for not being grounded upon anything, but few of us live as though that is the case. As Bennett-Hunter plausibly points out, even those such as Albert Camus, Jean-Paul Sartre and Samuel Beckett, who create literary masterpieces attesting to the ultimate meaninglessness of life, implicitly believe that doing so makes their lives more important than they would have been had they not done so. 'Surely, when one chooses to spend one's life writing plays and novels that communicate the pointlessness of human Life, the writing of such works is tacitly and implicitly regarded to be more worthwhile than other activities which do not' (2014: 26).

We are, at least day to day, committed to the notion that our lives can and often do matter. Or, setting aside whether they in fact do or we must believe that they do, at least it is worth enquiring into what could in principle make them matter. And that, for Bennett-Hunter, is the ineffable.

He maintains, with Cooper and Waghorn, that the only way to stop the regress of meaningful relationships is to end up with something that cannot be conceived as having a relationship with anything else. For any thing in a human life to be meaningful, it must obtain its meaning from something else in a human life, as must that condition, and so on, until one is driven to what is utterly beyond the human, to a realm that transcends what human beings can in principle articulate or conceive. 'Life is itself meaningful in virtue of being experienced as being in a relation of appropriateness to what is beyond itself. And it is only as determinately meaningless that what is beyond the human can, in a non-circular manner, function as the measure for all human meanings' (Bennett-Hunter 2014: 124).

² Such as Nagel (1987: 94-97); Levy (2005); and Mintoff (2008).

To borrow some Kantian ideas and terms to illustrate, the ineffable is plausibly understood as the ‘unconditioned condition’ (Kant 1787: A397, A457) of meaning, supposing meaning indeed obtains. In the way that a first cause would be the unconditioned condition of other elements of a causal chain (Korsgaard 1996: 11), and in the way that the dignity of rational nature would be the unconditioned condition of other values (Korsgaard 1996: 117–118, 268), so, for Bennett-Hunter, the ineffable would be—indeed, *must* be—the unconditioned condition of all the conditions of a human life insofar as it has meaning in it.

At this point, there are two more large steps of argument to take in order to reach Bennett-Hunter’s overall conclusion about how to philosophize about religion. One is to identify talk of God with the ineffable. Drawing on the theme that the God that is the conclusion of an argument is not the God of worship, Bennett-Hunter maintains that it is plausible to identify God with the mysterious, inaccessible source of all meaning in life.

The last step amounts to indicating how we can and should relate to God, so construed, so as to find meaning in our lives. Since the ineffable obviously cannot be known conceptually, one can have only an inarticulable awareness of it. ‘What is nonsense from the perspective of rationality may be (in the same breath) phenomenologically and religiously illuminating’ (Bennett-Hunter 2014: 122). Bennett-Hunter most often uses terms such as ‘experience of’ and ‘attunement to’ an ineffable God, with a salient way of so relating to be to view life as a gift (2014: 28, 35, 119, 122; cf. 138), a kind of Wittgensteinian ‘seeing-as’.³ Other ways to experience an ineffable God, ‘toward which we can *only* gesture’ (Bennett-Hunter 2014: 151), include poetically and emotionally, through art and ritual.

To sum up, Bennett-Hunter believes he has shown ‘philosophically the inevitability of such religious experience...by identifying religious experience as the experience of God where “God” is understood to refer to the concept of ineffability and thereby to evoke what is truly ultimately Real, the Absolute, in terms of which the meaning of life must be explained’ (2014: 129). In the following, I question neither Bennett-Hunter’s identification of God with the ineffable, nor his views about the nature of religious experience. Instead, I critically explore his rationale for the claim that the ineffable must be the ultimate ground of meaning in a life.

Is Meaning in Life Strictly Relational?

In this section, I focus on the linchpin of Bennett-Hunter’s argument for the conclusion that what makes a human life meaningful must be a function of the ineffable, namely, the relational account of (determinate) meaning. For any given meaningful condition in a human life, Bennett-Hunter maintains that it must receive its meaning from some other condition, ‘in a relation of appropriateness to what is beyond itself’. Is this true (or does it at least warrant belief)?

The evidence presented so far makes it seem so. Many intuitively meaningful facets of life do involve a positive relationship with something else, such as an artwork or a person, as well as other things such as a tradition, justice or truth (Nozick 1981: 595), and it does appear that one can always step back and sensibly ask what their point is.

³ For a fresh and thorough discussion of aspect-seeing in the context of life’s meaning, see Hosseini (2015: 47–66).

However, there is strong reason to doubt this ‘trickle-down theory of importance’, to use Daniel Dennett’s pithy characterization (cited in Baggini 2004: 14; see also Thomson 2003: 25, 48). First off, although many meaningful aspects of a life appear to involve relationship, not all of them do. Consider the suggestions that the following can confer some meaning on a life: overcoming a neurosis, exhibiting integrity, being authentic and displaying courage.⁴ These conditions are intrinsic to a person, making no essential reference to something beyond her, but they appear to be meaningful nonetheless.

Of course, if one *stipulates* that meaning-talk is exhausted by relationship, then these cases will not count as counterexamples.⁵ However, one might fairly find the strength of the counterexamples to provide reason to doubt a definitional stipulation of meaning as relational. Perhaps meaning-talk does not invariably connote relationship alone, but also additional properties, such as achieving a purpose much higher than animal pleasures and desires, or doing something worthy of great esteem and admiration (Metz 2013b: 28–35).

A second, *prima facie* stronger sort of reply from Bennett-Hunter might take a cue from Joseph Mintoff (2008: esp. 70–72) to the effect that the above intrinsic conditions are facets of virtue, rather than dimensions of meaning. In reply, note that more than a few theorists have deemed meaning to be largely (if not entirely) constituted precisely by virtue (Bond 1983; Taylor 1985; Thomas 2005; May 2015). Just because one can collect certain properties under an umbrella heading does not mean that the umbrella falls under nothing still more inclusive. For example, certain morally sacrificial behaviour can intuitively confer meaning on a life; the mere fact that these actions can be labelled ‘moral’ does not provide much reason not also to call them ‘meaningful’. Similar remarks go for attitudes that can be labelled ‘virtues’.

The third and strongest possible reply from Bennett-Hunter at this stage would be to recall that, for any putative instance of meaningfulness, one can always step back and sensibly ask about its meaning from a broader context. As Waghorn puts it clearly, ‘(W)e have a tendency to ask by what further criteria a goal or purpose that is meant to bestow meaning is itself meaningful. For any end point or limit we reach, there seems the possibility of moving past it, which puts it into question’ (2014: 3). It indeed appears coherent to ask what the point of overcoming a neurosis is or what the purpose of displaying courage is, that is, to ask whether meaning obtains merely in virtue of these internal properties.

I have two responses to make to this defence of a relational account of life’s meaning, ones that have not been made before in the literature.⁶ One is to note that it is reminiscent of G. E. Moore’s open question argument and might rely on its dubious presuppositions. Moore’s argument, recall, is roughly that the intelligibility of asking whether a certain property is identical with another one is strong (perhaps even conclusive) evidence that they are not identical. Moore takes the fact that it makes sense to ask whether pleasure is good to entail that they are not really one and the same thing. Applied to the present

⁴ For these and similar examples, see Metz (2013b: 5, 29, 30, 191–193, 201, 210, 221).

⁵ Alternately, the relational theorist might try to grant that the cases are ones of meaning, but appeal to the concept of an intrapersonal relationship (cf. Metz 2013b: 29–30).

⁶ One criticism that has already been made is to accept that meaning is relational, but to deny that a condition must obtain its meaning from another meaningful condition. Nozick himself ultimately maintains that a condition could obtain meaning insofar as it is related to something finally valuable that is not meaningful (1981: 610; see also Thomson 2003: 25–26). Indeed, in later work Nozick says, ‘The regress of meaning is stopped by reaching something with a kind of worth other than meaning—namely, reaching something of value’ (1989: 168).

context, the suggestion seems to be that the intelligibility of asking whether a feature internal to a person is meaningful, or wanting to know what its external source of meaning is, is evidence that it is not meaningful, at least not in itself.

However, it is widely held that contemporary philosophy of language has put paid to the open question argument. Even if the senses of two terms differ, it does not follow that their referents do. To invoke the familiar example, ‘water’ and ‘H₂O’ differ in terms of what they connote, making it intelligible to ask whether water is H₂O, but these terms, for all we can tell, pick out the same thing in terms of what they denote. Similarly, the coherence of asking whether meaning truly obtains insofar as one has overcome a neurosis merely shows that the terms involved have different senses; nothing yet follows about whether the terms fail to (partially) co-refer.

Here is a second response to the compelling point that for any condition that seems meaningful, it is reasonable to enquire into its meaning by asking what its purpose is from a broader context or how it relates to something meaningful beyond it. Bennett-Hunter and those with similar views maintain that the reasonableness of such an enquiry is evidence that meaning is strictly relational, i.e., that any given meaningful condition in a life must have obtained its meaning from something extrinsic to it. However, it is plausibly evidence merely of a weaker view, namely, that while *some* meaning can accrue in virtue of properties intrinsic to a person, *more* meaning would accrue insofar as those properties were to relate to broader contexts. In short, meaning can be essentially relational without being exhaustively relational. And so the coherence, and even apparent necessity, of enquiring into the relational dimensions of meaning at best show that there are such dimensions, not that there are only such dimensions.

Another way to put my point is that meaning could be ultimate without being the ‘unconditioned condition’ for chains of meaning, to use the Kantian phrase above. Bennett-Hunter maintains that ultimate meaning *qua* ineffable is a necessary condition for all other meaning in human life. For example, he remarks, ‘It is only as ineffable, and therefore not as an entity necessarily invested with the concepts of the human world, that “God” can be religiously significant, that God can appropriately be thought of as the prior condition, the source of or measure for, the meaningful human world’ (2014: 45–46; see also 70, 110). However, by regressing on conditions of meaning, one is plausibly tracing the full *extent* of a thing’s meaning, without tracing its *source*. Seeking meaning ‘all the way down’ might not be discovering what it is that *confers* meaning on all the other meaningful conditions, but instead merely a comprehensive *reckoning* of all the meaning conditions that are present or possible.

To return to the example of overcoming neurosis, asking what the point of it is from a broader context need not be taken to suggest that it has no meaning in itself, as per Bennett-Hunter and others working in his vein. It might rather be plausibly understood to suggest that there is potentially more meaning beyond the intrinsic properties. Insofar as improving one’s mental health would be quite useful, say, for being productive and helping others, that is plausibly the case.

Must Relational Meaning Be Grounded on the Ineffable? Could It Be?

So far, I have been questioning Bennett-Hunter’s claim that meaning is strictly relational, that for any element of a human life to be meaningful, it must have obtained its

meaning from some other, meaningful condition. I now grant this strictly relational conception of meaning in life, in order to consider whether, if it were true, it would ‘inescapably’ (2014: 114)⁷ lead to an ineffable God as the unconditioned condition of all other meaningful conditions. What else might plausibly stop the regress, or, equivalently, start the chain?

In one text, Thomas Nagel appears to accept a strictly relational account of meaning but to balk at the idea that an ineffable God is what grounds it, or even could. He says,

Can there really be something which gives point to everything else by encompassing it, but which couldn’t have, or need, any point itself? Something whose point can’t be questioned from outside because there is no outside? If God is supposed to give our lives a meaning that we can’t understand, it’s not much of a consolation. God as ultimate justification, like God as ultimate explanation, may be an incomprehensible answer to a question that we can’t get rid of (1987: 99).

As the quotation stands, it might seem to beg the question. After all, Bennett-Hunter’s precise contention is that a human life, as what is comprehensible through conceptual schemes and languages, could as a whole obtain its meaning only from what is non-human and hence in principle incomprehensible.

However, I aim to buttress or rework Nagel’s thought by suggesting that what makes life meaningful is, at least in large part, something that renders it intelligible. A number of thinkers maintain that what makes a life meaningful is centrally something that makes sense of a human person’s existence (e.g., Markus 2003: 129–130; Thomson 2003: 8–13; Affolter 2007; Wong 2008; cf. Seachris 2009). Here, there is recurrent appeal to the idea that a meaningful life involves realizing a pattern, achieving a telos or exhibiting a narrative. And it sure seems as though these meaning-conferring conditions, or indeed the only conditions that could promise to make sense of our lives, are ones that are *not* ineffable and are instead readily comprehensible.

I expect Bennett-Hunter to reply that even if sense-making must not be ineffable, it can be done in a meaning-conferring way only by having been informed by the ineffable. He repeatedly speaks of the ineffable as the ‘measure’ of a meaningful life. ‘There must...be a measure for human Life but it would be inconsistent to think of this measure as conceptualizable or discursable. Therefore the measure must be undiscursable, ineffable: in short, a *mystery*’ (2014: 27; see also 6, 26, 28, 39–40, 45–46, 124).

However, normally when we seek to measure something, we appeal to something fairly clear, distinct and precise, or at least we tend to think that such would ideally be available. If I want to know how long a medium-sized object is, I can appeal to the standard metre iron rod in Paris. If I want to know how much time has passed, I can go to the atomic clock in Boulder, Colorado. To be sure, the kind of precision available when measuring pure magnitude is not to be expected when thinking about how much meaning is in a human being’s life. However, appealing to what is *unavoidably*

⁷ Cooper likewise suspects that it is ‘inevitable’ that one will, or that one ‘must’, regress on meaningful conditions (2003: 126–127), and also claims that if one regresses thoroughly, then one ‘must’ reach the ineffable (2003: 136, 140).

mysterious or hidden seems like the *least* promising way to go about measuring (appraising) the extent to which a life has displayed value or otherwise rendering it intelligible.

The question is this: is it even *conceivable* or *possible* that a life could be made intelligible in terms of what is in principle unintelligible (let alone *only* by reference to it)? If an ineffable God is, to repeat a phrase, that ‘toward which we can *only* gesture’, why think we have any chance of making sense of our lives *in light of it*? We can of course tell ourselves stories about our lives, but what reason can we ever have for thinking they are *tracking* something ‘independent of the human contribution’ (Bennett-Hunter 2014: 116)?

Note that I am open to the idea that sense-making might not be rational in Bennett-Hunter’s terms *qua* conceptual and logical, and that it might instead be possible emotionally or quasi-perceptually, in terms of a kind of seeing-as. Viewing my life as a gift does seem to be a ‘non-rational’ way to make sense of my life. The deep problem for me is that Bennett-Hunter maintains that such a way of viewing my life confers meaning on it if and only if it is a real attunement towards what is in principle incomprehensible; but how could it be, or at least how could I ever know that it is?

To use another Kantian image, it is as though I am being instructed to comprehend an appearance by appealing to the thing-in-itself. Or it is like being in an unavoidably pitch-black room and told to attune myself to the work of art on the wall. Just as in these cases I am unable to refer to (or know) the relevant object, so it seems I cannot refer to what is ineffable and so cannot make emotional, perceptual or any other sense of my life in light of it.

Perhaps Bennett-Hunter’s best move would be to reject the idea that the meaningfulness of a life is (in large part) a matter of its intelligibility. However, it is not clear on what independent grounds he might do so, at this stage of the debate. This is particularly so when one option is to grant him that there is an unconditioned condition grounding a regress on meaningful conditions in human life, but to maintain that it is whichever condition *stops just short of ineffability*. It might be coherent to pose the question of what beyond the human and the comprehensible confers meaning on them (cf. Cooper 2003: 126–142), but it does not follow that a sound answer is forthcoming.

Conclusion: How to Conceive Ultimate Meaning

About 15 years ago I noted in a survey of the Anglo-American literature on life’s meaning that theorists, often religious ones, would sometimes speak of different kinds of meaning, construing some as ‘ultimate’ or ‘deep’, but that these distinctions had yet to be critically addressed by the field (Metz 2002: 810). It was not clear at that time what precisely might have been meant by calling a type of meaning ‘ultimate’ and why it should be considered to be much more choice-worthy than, say, the penultimate.

One major virtue of Guy Bennett-Hunter’s new book is that he has provided a thoughtful, sophisticated account of what ultimate meaning might be and of why one ought to seek it out. According to him, if anything in a human life is meaningful, it

must have obtained its meaning from some other condition, which, in turn, must have obtained its meaning from something else, and so on until one reaches something that cannot be conceived to relate to anything else, is utterly beyond the human, and is the source of all meaning in human life. And if one fails to engage in the right way with the source, then no other meaning will be possible.

In my critical discussion of this reasoning, I have implicitly provided a sketch of an alternative understanding of both what ultimate meaning might consist of and why it would merit pursuit. For one, I have argued that, insofar as meaning is relational, that dimension might be a supplement to some meaning that is intrinsic. From this perspective, there could still be a regress on meaningful relationships, but the terminus would not be a source of all meaning, and instead would be the completion of a series that adds substantial meaning to a life beyond what the intrinsic dimension provides.

For another, I have suggested that part of what it is for a life to be meaningful is for it to make sense or to be intelligible, and have argued that this condition is most readily satisfied by properties within the human realm, such as a purpose or a narrative. If there is a regress on meaningful relationships, it probably ends in something that does not go so far as to be ‘infinitely beyond the human world’ (Bennett-Hunter 2014: 122). Seeking meaning ‘all the way down’ could lead to a spade being turned upon the earthly, the comprehensible, the finite.

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