

1 'A Warm Welcome': Formulating Life's Meaning with "The Art 2 of Meaning"

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5

6 **Abstract**

7 The aim of this paper is to demonstrate how to draw out a meaningful formulation of a
8 person's life with the aid of "the Art of Meaning" semi-structured interview. A qualitative
9 research method of a one-on-one interview, designed by a philosophical interpretation
10 approach, is employed. The formulated meaning—the outcome of "the Art of Meaning"
11 interview—is analyzed through a basic qualitative interpretation. A mutually satisfying
12 formulation is created with the collaboration of the interviewee. "A Warm Welcome" was the
13 outcome of a specific interview which I held with an American philosopher. Discussion avers
14 that meaning appears at the overlap of self-identity and worldview. It corroborates the
15 postulate that meaningfulness surfaces through strong connections among self, others and the
16 world. The formulated meaning draws a line connecting fundamental life decisions and values.

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18 **Index terms**— meaning in life, the art of meaning, ronald dworkin, self-identity, worldview, wellbeing.

19 **1 Introduction**

20 everyone needs a meaning in life, but not everyone creates it (Frankl , 1978(Frankl , , 1988(Frankl , , 2014)).
21 Everyone wishes their life to express their choices, yet too many perceive themselves as victims of their
22 circumstances. Everyone needs to know that they did not live in vain, but many experience the bitter taste
23 of senselessness. No one wants to live idly, without purpose, a goal, a sense of worth or aim. No one wants to
24 miss out on their lives, to waste them, to perform on the world's stage without having played a memorable role
25 and vanish without leaving a trace—an orderly and uneventful departure, timed so as not to detract or distract.

26 Many find themselves caught somewhere inbetween meaning and senselessness. Few will proclaim wholeheartedly
27 that they lead the life they wish to live, or that they live the best version of their lives. Meaningfulness
28 emerges through strong contact with self, others and the world (Debats, Drost & Hansen, 1995). The art of
29 formulating meaning, thus, grapples with this challenge (Yaguri, 2018, June 2019). A successful outcome is
30 marked by straightforward assertions—this is my life; it is the most meaningful one I could create. The stronger
31 meaning is sensed in life, the greater the well-being experienced ??Stegera, Oishib & Kashdanc, 2009: 48).
32 Does life have a universal meaning in which all share a purpose? In *What Does It All Mean? A Very Short*
33 *Introduction to Philosophy*, Thomas Nagel concludes that "life may be not only meaningless but absurd" ??1987:
34 100). Perhaps this should be our rational answer to the BIG wonder concerning the meaning of life. After all,
35 this is Wittgenstein's final word in the *Tractatus* (1922: 6.41, 6.521, 7). Yet, this "solution" does not help with
36 smaller-scale dilemmas concerning meaning in my life and in the lives of others. As Nagel puts it, "if there's any
37 point at all to what we do, we have to find it within our own lives" (1987: 95). We cannot, and should not,
38 abandon the quest for small-scale personal solutions:

39 Even if life as a whole is meaningless, perhaps that's nothing to worry about. Perhaps we can recognize it
40 and just go on as before Philosophical interpretations often focus on critique, on negative critical thinking. I
41 will begin by showing why we should switch to "creative interpretation" when tapping on the query regarding a
42 personal meaning of life. There is an art entailed in satisfying a quest for meaning—a process aimed at distilling
43 a formulation of meaning (Yaguri, June 2019). Meaning emerges in the overlap of self-identity and worldview,
44 as "A Warm Welcome" in an "Art of Meaning" interview," I set forth here in order to demonstrate how meaning

4 III.

45 in a person's life can be drawn out. I conclude by showing how a satisfactory formulation of worthiness, worked
46 out with an interviewee, provides a life-line connecting major life-decisions, preferences and values.

47 2 II.

48 3 Philosophical Interpretation

49 Critical thinking has played a major role in the practice of philosophy-from the examination of presuppositions
50 through the validation of arguments aimed at determining a logical, solid conclusion. Critical thinking uncovers
51 refutations, flaws, contradictions, invalid assumptions, unsubstantiated conclusions. It tends to sidestep affording
52 better suppositions, resolving contradictions, or reinforcing appropriate conclusions.

53 In Law's Empire (1986), Ronald M. Dworkin promotes what he terms "creative interpretation" (ibid: 65). In
54 a courtroom defense, a lawyer would appeal to a jury armed with a "creative interpretation" of the defendant's
55 action, which is set against certain social practices that the jury will recognize as pertinent to the case. This
56 "creative interpretation" resembles the argumentation of an art critic who makes a case for a controversial artwork.
57 The critic will highlight those aspects of the work that put it in a good light. Similarly, a courtroom lawyer will
58 present the accused's behavior in the most favorable way. The lawyer does not make up a story, but rather gives
59 a plausible and positive interpretation that "strives to make an object the best it can be" (ibid: 53). A courtroom
60 interpretation has to address the accused's intention and show it in the best possible light (ibid: 52-3). Although
61 the interpretation cannot be altogether objective, it will appeal to consensual values. Such common consent i
62 s required, since "the interpretive attitude cannot survive unless members of the same interpretive community
63 share at least roughly the same assumptions" regarding good and evil, fairness and dishonesty, and so forth (ibid:
64 67).

65 There is no "right answer" to questions about aesthetic, moral, or social value, Dworkin believes. He argues,
66 "It is a philosophical mistake to suppose that interpretations can be right or wrong, true or false" (ibid: 78).
67 Nonetheless, an interpretation may aim to yield the best account concerning practices of different people, and
68 the best possible defense for the accused. Interpretations can be better or worse. In the courtroom, the degree
69 of a lawyer's creativity is measured by her ability to render the best possible account of an accused's behavior.

70 A good defense attorney may be creative in the interpretation of facts, choosing from all possible interpretations
71 the one which will be most recommendatory for the accused. He sticks to the most favorable version of the
72 defendant's life-story-of his intentions, purposes and actions. He shows how the most important value of the
73 story is relevant to many lives-not only for this particular person's life-story.

74 Dworkin's creative interpretation approach provides guidelines for an evaluation of the kind of work and talent
75 invested in a high quality advocacy. A search for meaning in life also requires creative interpretation and advocacy.
76 Persons seeking meaning need an interpretation of their personal story, one they can advocate for themselves and
77 offer others. One that would attach a paradigmatic segment of personal life to a wide cultural value. A creative
78 interpreter acts as a defense attorney for a life-story segment presented by a seeker. The interpretation will be
79 loyal to the facts. If vibrant, the seeker will acknowledge this, and adopt it as his or her own (Yaguri , 2018: 18).

80 4 III.

81 The Art of Meaning: Interview Structure

82 Finding and formulating meaning in one's life is an art. Someone seeking to formulate meaning in their lives
83 is helped by a careful listener who becomes a good defense attorney for the seeker. The attentive interviewer
84 artfully selects-with the help of the interviewee-out of many possible interpretations, the one that offers the
85 greatest positive value for the seeker (Yaguri, July 2019).

86 Jean-Paul Sartre defines the principle of psychoanalysis-a paradigm for well-being-whereby a person is "a
87 totality and not a collection. Consequently, he expresses himself as a whole in even his most insignificant and
88 his most superficial behavior" (1987: 68). This principle is applied here to the way a person tells a story
89 segment of his or her life. A life story segment can stand as a synecdoche for the entire life story of the narrator
90 (Josselson, 2013; Lieblich, Tuval-Mashiach, Zilber, 1998). Dworkin's stages of interpretation (1986: 65-7) suggest
91 an interview driven by four questions and a story segment:

92 1. What is the meaning of your life? If the interviewee hesitates or experiences difficulty, the interviewer
93 may reformulate the question: What is important to you? Up on receiving an answer, the interviewer asks for
94 a concrete example-a story segment which encapsulates those important things: is there a salient event that
95 illustrates the meaning described? What is important in the story? The interviewer listens for the subject or
96 character traits that appear to be most important for the interviewee. Based on this mapping of priorities, the
97 interviewer reflects back to the speaker different possibilities that might be chosen as the most significant aspect
98 of the story. The interviewee is asked which feature seems most salient. 3. Why is this important? Meaning in
99 life expresses personal identity and also a broader worldview shared by others. This question seeks to frame a
100 worldview that captures the initial expression of importance. Worldviews reflect widely shared values. Activities
101 which are valuable only to the one who is engaged in them would be considered very low on the scale of meaning,
102 and could be seen as practically meaningless. It is not enough that someone upholds certain activities as valuable.
103 Others have to share that sense of worthiness.

104 Collecting corks or soap bubbles can be important to a person, but it is hardly a shared enough activity to
105 count as a worldview. Hobbies are too personal to count as worldviews. Helping others, in contrast, is fraught
106 with rich and encompassing shared importance.

107 This part of the interview works to show that the importance chosen is valuable not only from the subjective
108 point of view of the interviewee. What was initially presented as a private position is now artfully presented
109 as bearing general importance. If the meaning was prefaced at first by the qualification, "in my opinion it
110 is important," now it can carry the broader assurance, "it is important." 4. What value is expressed by that
111 meaning? The goal is to present in a word or phrase a summary of that which has surfaced so far. Meaning
112 is initially formulated as that which bears the deepest significance for the individual, and then as a broad
113 culturally recognized value. Such reframing through a wider perspective lends meaning a broad social and
114 cultural justification. This move-from an initial intuitive personal meaning to a formulation accepted by the
115 interviewee as associated with a broad cultural value-is similar to extracting a diamond out of a lump of coal.

116 IV.

117 "A Warm Welcome" -An Art of Meaning Interview

118 Here is a vignette that illustrates the steps formulated above in four questions and a story segment. I share
119 a ride with Ted (aged 73) on the way back from the university in Jerusalem. He is a professor of philosophy,
120 and one of the wisest persons I have known. Driving on Highway 1, which spirals down toward the coastal plain,
121 I ask him what he thinks is the meaning in his life. He gives me the forgiving smile of someone who is familiar
122 with my passion for the subject. "Many things in life are important in my eyes," he answers cautiously, "for
123 example, understanding that good things can happen in the world inasmuch as bad things, without disrupting
124 its wholeness. On the other hand, in private life, one always moves between the good and the bad, and tries to
125 enhance the good."

126 "So that is the meaning of your life?" "I don't know. What do you think?" "I have a way to extract meaning
127 in life from a life-story. Do you want to give it a try?" I gave him no opportunity to hesitate, "Anyway, you can't
128 go anywhere as long as I'm holding the wheel and there's still an hour's drive ahead." Ted nodded.

129 "Tell me something about yourself, a story that describes something in your life." Ted turned his gaze toward
130 me. He wrinkled his brow.

131 "What should I tell? Something that teaches about the meaning of my life? Maybe how I came to study
132 philosophy or why I have devoted my life to the field?" "Tell me whatever you want. This will get us going.
133 Choose a decade. You know, between birth and the age of ten, between ten and twenty, up to now. Choose a
134 ten-year period. Okay? Have you made a choice?" He nodded, shaking his head, as if trying to get rid of a
135 nagging thought. "It's bizarre. On one of my holidays, I went to visit my parents, who were already elderly and
136 living in a retirement community. I was fifty. We sat and led an impersonal, forced conversation. My mother
137 and I mainly spoke. My father sat on the couch besides her, listening with no interest, contributing nothing.
138 After a short while I stood up to leave. He automatically rose to walk me out. At the doorstep he said: 'Of all
139 my children, Jim is the only one who has made something of himself.' 'What are you talking about?' I blurted
140 out, astonished, 'Your eldest daughter has a doctorate and your youngest one is very successful at her job, and
141 I'm not in a shabby state myself.' He averted his eyes as he retorted: 'You're just a professor.'"

142 We were quiet for a short while.

143 "Ted, let's figure out what's important in the story you told about your dad's comment that 'you're just a
144 professor.'"

145 We tossed around ideas. Many issues emerged: impersonal and hollow communication with parents, sadness
146 about witnessing the helplessness of aging people, the things that are never discussed between parents and their
147 children-things both sides yearn to vent but are smothered by a thick coat of silence. Ted spoke about things
148 that had been better left unsaid, and, furthermore-should never have come to pass in the first place. He focused
149 on his father's critique. It affected him like a paralyzing poison. This did not begin at the age of fifty. The
150 father's indifference and lack of care; the demeaning attitude and snide comments toward his son were always
151 there.

152 "Would you say that the harm caused by the critique is the most important thing in the story?" Ted nodded
153 in agreement, and with a contemplative gaze, added, "The damage is important because you learn what not to
154 do. Communication between parents and children, or among human beings in general, shouldn't look like that.
155 Words can kill."

156 "But here's the beauty in the story," I jested optimistically; "from your parents' negativity we can identify
157 something positive. You have learned to support, encourage, and empower. That's how you proceeded as a
158 parent." I reminded Ted about a story he had told me. "When the kids stole a street sign, you didn't scold
159 them. You planned with them how to return it to its lawful place. Positive communication with your children
160 was important to you."

161 Ted smiled when he recalled his children's youthful follies.

162 "Do you know anyone else whose guiding principle is to be supportive and encouraging?" He thought for a
163 moment, "My philosophy professor. We used to speak over the phone from time to time, and during one of those
164 conversations I told him that I was planning to travel to Alaska and go canoeing. He said: 'that sounds like a
165 great idea.' This threw me back thirty years. When I told my own father I was travelling to Alaska; he said: 'if
166 you break a leg, there will be no one to help you.'"

5 DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSION

167 We spoke about the great value of an encouraging approach and about the fact that some people consciously
168 choose to support others. We agreed that in their decision to give strength, they reject persistent criticism of
169 others.

170 "You are a person who is kind to students, colleagues, to people you don't know. You say 'no' to emasculating
171 criticism and 'yes' to encouragement. This is part of you." Ted nodded.

172 "You also notice when others are encouraging. You wish that as many people as possible adopt this value."
173 "I am grateful when others welcome me warmly, and I try to be kind to others."

174 "Then that is the meaning in your life: a warm welcome," I declared with satisfaction. He looked at me
175 questioningly, "How? Why is that the meaning?" "Because your self-identity is shaped by this value, and you
176 feel at home in the world, happy to be part of it, when you receive a warm welcome. That is the place where
177 your self-identity and your worldview meet. This preference may have begun as your need when confronting your
178 father. But among many other needs, you have adopted this particular one, and have made it a fundamental
179 part of your personality. It is also one of the principles through which you assess the reality around you. A warm
180 welcome connects your identity and your worldview and becomes the value which represents meaning in your
181 life".

182 Ted nodded in deep agreement. He smiled with relief, and, like an academic moderator who sums up a
183 discussion, said, "The meaning in my life is the value of a warm welcome." I stopped the car and turned off the
184 engine. We had arrived.

185 V.

186 5 Discussion and Conclusion

187 The coalescence of Ted's life meaning in the formulation "a warm welcome" supports research findings that
188 trace a strong correlation between meaning in life and an interpersonal dimension: "meaningfulness is essentially
189 connected with a state of being in contact" ??Debats, Drost & Hansen, 1995: 371). His meaning is in line
190 with findings which corroborate that intrinsic aspirations for self-acceptance, affiliation, community feeling, and
191 physical health were associated with a sense of higher well-being and less distress ??Kasser and Ryan, 1996: 280).
192 Ted's distilled meaning is also commensurate with findings on meaning in life in older adulthood (65+), whereby
193 meaning is associated with life satisfaction, well-being across a range of domains, and psychological resources:
194 "Meaning in life is psychologically adaptive in older-adulthood. Searching for meaning appears less important,
195 especially in later older-adulthood" ??Hallford et al. 2016 ??Hallford et al. : 1270).

196 Ted's life story, like every life story, is composed of numerous, varied events and situations, details and facts
197 collected and accumulated over a lifetime (McAdams, Josselson, Lieblich, 2006). "The Art of Meaning" entails
198 a creative exploration that regards meaning as an essence to be uncovered and chosen. The semi-structured
199 interview is intended to extract a core essence out of a plethora of details (Yaguri , 2018). The extracted essence
200 is the leitmotif of the narrative. Through the process of the interview, Ted's stories were transformed into a
201 concise formulation of an essence in his life.

202 For Ted , this interview amounted to an initial attempt to formulate the main value in his life. But for the
203 abovementioned process, the formulation "a warm welcome" would only have had a pleasant ring . The coining
204 of this phrase has enabled him to look at his life with a new focus and emphasis. The process allowed him to
205 flaunt his value. In retrospect, he realized that this meaning had guided him all along. He seemed to have gained
206 a new appreciation of who he is and what guides him in his life.

207 Ted's meaning lies in his purposes for living that provide motivation for his activity (Feldman & Snyder, 2005).
208 It might represent an integrative drive for the 'how' and the 'why' of his health and well-being at his current time
209 in life (McKnight & Kashdan, 2009). "A warm welcome" is the meaning in his life, the attitude that shapes his
210 world and his daily life (Yaguri , 2014). The process of artfully exposing meaning enabled him to apprehend that
211 his striving for a warm welcome, his insistence on endorsing it with his kid as well as with many other people in
212 his life has turned out to be of the essence.

213 "I am grateful when others welcome me warmly, and I try to be kind to others," says Ted. The wording
214 that emerged from the interview rendered the meaning in Ted's life more interpersonal and even more universal
215 (Wolf, 2010). The notion that meaning in life should not be merely reduced to a private one is expressed by
216 another American philosopher: "When meaning in our lives gets challenged in global, urgent terms, the remedy
217 is not always a return to more local and ordinary 'subjective' concerns" ??Mooney, 1996: 82). Having said that,
218 meaning in life could be a far cry from comprehensive. "It is a deep if disturbing fact that the very beliefs
219 we embrace, and must embrace, as the foundation of our integrity, are beliefs we can also see, in moments of
220 detachment, to be objectively insecure" (Ibid: 73).

221 Ted realized that he shares his meaning with others. His personal meaning in life is not so personal after
222 all. Yet it is not everybody's meaning in life. His meaning was similar to that of the disposition of people he
223 enjoyed and befriended-kind, hearty, hospitable people. Those who follow the saying that is attributed to the
224 Dalai Lama—"Be kind whenever possible. It is always possible," share a worldview of warm reception, cordiality
225 or affability. In Ted's case, this worldview coalesces with his self-identity, thereby creating his life meaning. For
226 him it is not only a question of just and important ideals, but also a "subjective passion, a constantly renewed
227 commitment to [?] activities, people, principles, and ideals that are part of [his] life, [which] can create and
228 sustain the core of [hi s] integrity" (Ibid: 73).

229 Ted had earlier perceived his aversion to his dad's behavior as a mere homegrown and personal matter. It
230 became crystal clear that the kind of parent he became stood in diametrical opposition to his father. But then
231 the question of parenting turned out to be a key to what makes life worth living, not only for him but also for
232 people he looked up to and respected. It became clear now that he was not just "too sensitive" or neurotically
233 entangled with his parents. He was so much more than that, he now realized. Now he could choose to be the
234 kind of person that he would respect and look up to in light of a meaning that had been buried hitherto.

235 Like Ted, many may entertain a general idea of the meaning in our lives, but few of us coin a concise and
236 precise wording for it. Clarity of conscious meaning translates into quality of life. Once a person is able to
237 refine the essence of her meaning , she can look through it to focus herself and her life (van Deurzen, 1997). A
238 formulated meaning fosters self-realization. On a daily basis it becomes a north-star beckoning decisionmaking.

239 Extracting meaning in life contributes to the quality of life and to mental health; it punctuates selfunder-
240 standing and helps navigate one's way. On a daily basis and even in times of difficulty , meaning in life affords
241 a framework within which life-events receive justification. It becomes a reminder of the truly important essence
242 of one's life.

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