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

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

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

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I. Introduction

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

Many find themselves caught somewhere in-between meaning and senselessness. Few will proclaim wholeheartedly that they lead the life they wish to live, or that they live the best version of their lives. Meaningfulness emerges through strong contact with self, others and the world (Debats, Drost & Hansen, 1995). The art of formulating meaning, thus, grapples with this challenge (Yaguri, 2018, June 2019). A successful outcome is marked by straightforward assertions-this is my life; it is the most meaningful one I could create. The stronger meaning is sensed in life, the greater the well-being experienced (Stegera, Oishib & Kashdanc, 2009: 48).

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Does life have a universal meaning in which all share a purpose? In *What Does It All Mean? A Very Short Introduction to Philosophy*, Thomas Nagel concludes that "life may be not only meaningless but absurd" (1987: 100). Perhaps this should be our rational answer to the BIG wonder concerning the meaning of life. After all, this is Wittgenstein's final word in the *Tractatus* (1922: 6.41, 6.521, 7). Yet, this "solution" does not help with smaller-scale dilemmas concerning meaning in my life and in the lives of others. As Nagel puts it, "if there's any point at all to what we do, we have to find it within our own lives" (1987: 95). We cannot, and should not, abandon the quest for small-scale personal solutions:

> Even if life as a whole is meaningless, perhaps that's nothing to worry about. Perhaps we can recognize it and just go on as before. The trick is to keep your eyes on what's in front of you and allow justifications to come to an end inside your life, and inside the lives of others to whom you are connected.(ibid: 99)

To demonstrate how this trick-keeping your eyes on what's in front of you-works is the aim of my paper.

Philosophical interpretations often focus on critique, on negative critical thinking. I will begin by showing why we should switch to "creative interpretation" when tapping on the query regarding a personal meaning of life. There is an art entailed in satisfying a quest for meaning—a process aimed at distilling a formulation of meaning (Yaguri, June 2019). Meaning emerges in the overlap of self-identity and worldview, as "A Warm Welcome" in an "Art of Meaning" interview," I set forth here in order to demonstrate how meaning in a person's life can be drawn out. I conclude by showing how a satisfactory formulation of worthiness, worked out with an interviewee, provides a life-line connecting major life-decisions, preferences and values.

II. Philosophical Interpretation

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

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

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

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

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

III. The Art of Meaning: Interview Structure

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

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

1. *What is the meaning of your life*? If the interviewee hesitates or experiences difficulty, the interviewer may reformulate the question: What is important to you? Upon receiving an answer, the interviewer asks for a concrete example-a *story segment* which encapsulates those important things: is there a salient event that illustrates the meaning described?
2. *What is important in the story?* The interviewer listens for the subject or character traits that appear to be most important for the interviewee. Based on this mapping of priorities, the interviewer reflects back to the speaker different possibilities that might be chosen as the most significant aspect of the story. The interviewee is asked which feature seems most salient.
3. *Why is this important?* Meaning in life expresses personal identity and also a broader worldview shared by others. This question seeks to frame a worldview that captures the initial expression of importance. Worldviews reflect widely shared values. Activities which are valuable only to the one who is engaged in them would be considered very low on the scale of meaning, and could be seen as practically meaningless. It is not enough that someone upholds certain activities as valuable. Others have to share that sense of worthiness. Collecting corks or soap bubbles can be important to a person, but it is hardly a shared enough activity to count as a worldview. Hobbies are *too* personal to count as worldviews. Helping others, in contrast, is fraught with rich and encompassing shared importance.

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This part of the interview works to show that the importance chosen is valuable not only from the subjective point of view of the interviewee. What was initially presented as a private position is now artfully presented as bearing general importance. If the meaning was prefaced at first by the qualification, "*in my opinion* it is important," now it can carry the broader assurance, "it *is* important."

4. *What value is expressed by that meaning?* The goal is to present in a word or phrase a summary of that which has surfaced so far. Meaning is initially formulated as that which bears the deepest significance for the individual, and then as a broad culturally recognized value. Such reframing through a wider perspective lends meaning a broad social and cultural justification. This move-from an initial intuitive personal meaning to a formulation accepted by the interviewee as associated with a broad cultural value-is similar to extracting a diamond out of a lump of coal.

IV. "A Warm Welcome" - An Art of Meaning Interview

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

"So that is the meaning of your life?"

"I don't know. What do you think?"

"I have a way to extract meaning 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 go anywhere as long as I'm holding the wheel and there's still an hour's drive ahead." Ted nodded.

"Tell me something about yourself, a story that describes something in your life."

Ted turned his gaze toward me. He wrinkled his brow.

"What should I tell? Something that teaches about the meaning of my life? Maybe how I came to study philosophy or why I have devoted my life to the field?"

"Tell me whatever you want. This will get us going. Choose a decade. You know, between birth and the age of ten, between ten and twenty, up to now. Choose a ten-year period. Okay? Have you made a choice?"

He nodded, shaking his head, as if trying to get rid of a nagging thought.

"It's bizarre. On one of my holidays, I went to visit my parents, who were already elderly and living in a retirement community. I was fifty. We sat and led an impersonal, forced conversation. My mother and I mainly spoke. My father sat on the couch besides her, listening with no interest, contributing nothing. After a short while I stood up to leave. He automatically rose to walk me out. At the doorstep he said: 'Of all my children, Jim is the only one who has made something of himself.' 'What are you talking about?' I blurted out, astonished, 'Your eldest daughter has a doctorate and your youngest one is very successful at her job, and I'm not in a shabby state myself.' He averted his eyes as he retorted: 'You're just a professor.'"

We were quiet for a short while.

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

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

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

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

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

"Do you know anyone else whose guiding principle is to be supportive and encouraging?"

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

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

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

Ted nodded.

"You also notice when others are encouraging. You wish that as many people as possible adopt this value."

"I am grateful when others welcome me warmly, and I try to be kind to others."

"Then that is the meaning in your life: *a warm welcome*," I declared with satisfaction. He looked at me questioningly, "How? Why is that the meaning?"

"Because your self-identity is shaped by this value, and you feel at home in the world, happy to be part of it, when you receive a warm welcome. That is the place where your self-identity and your worldview meet. This preference may have begun as your need when confronting your father. But among many other needs, you have adopted this particular one, and have made it a fundamental part of your personality. It is also one of the principles through which you assess the reality around you. A warm welcome connects your identity and your worldview and becomes the value which represents meaning in your life".

Ted nodded in deep agreement. He smiled with relief, and, like an academic moderator who sums up a discussion, said, "The meaning in my life is the value of a warm welcome."

I stopped the car and turned off the engine. We had arrived.

V. Discussion and Conclusion

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

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

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

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

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

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in moments of detachment, to be objectively insecure" (Ibid: 73).

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

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

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

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

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