

Mirela Oliva

## No Meaning for Believers? A Reply to Joshua Hochschild

Joshua Hochschild claims that the expression “meaning of life” stems from a modern framework different from traditional Christian faith and classical theism. He takes issue with the modern context in which this expression arises. In his view, this context is one of secularism, skepticism, solipsism, and nihilism and thus precludes any conception of human flourishing in an ordered world created and governed by God. The adoption of this expression by believers might be a precarious alliance that runs the risk of confusion. When using it, theists need to clarify their assumptions and goals.<sup>1</sup> Hochschild credits Pope John Paul II for the success of the “meaning of life” among Christians, but he thinks that the Pope has charitably employed modern parlance to ease his contemporaries into the Catholic tradition focused on happiness and the good life. I will argue that although some features in the modern context of the “meaning of life” are indeed negative, this is not the whole story. First, I will propose a different reconstruction of this expression’s historical background. My reconstruction traces the origin of the “meaning of life” back to the medieval concept of *sensus* and its use in Biblical hermeneutics. Second, I will show that existentialism and phenomenology are heirs of this longstanding career of *sensus* and that

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<sup>1</sup> I wish to thank Joshua Hochschild for the opportunity of this exchange.

their use of “meaning” and “meaning of life” is mostly positive. This development has also influenced the analytic scholarship on the meaning of life. Finally, I will show that the meaning of life is not a lesser substitute of the classic concept of happiness, but it addresses happiness along with its metaphysical, experiential, and aesthetic background. As such, it channels theism with all its basic questions, while advancing new ones.

### Hochschild’s Arguments

In his paper “John Paul II’s Gamble with ‘the Meaning of Life’” published in this issue, Hochschild argues that, contrary to our expectations, the meaning of life is not a timeless question that human beings have asked since the dawn of humankind, but a recent modern invention from the 19<sup>th</sup> century. While contemporary religious thinkers, including Pope John Paul II, see the meaning of life as the core question of religion imprinted in people’s minds and hearts, Hochschild thinks that there is no historical evidence for this claim. On the contrary, there is sufficient historical evidence for the opposite claim, namely that the expression emerged from a secular, rather than religious context.<sup>2</sup>

Hochschild’s historical landmarks are mostly authors hostile to Christianity, or authors tackling radical personal crises. In his short historical reconstruction, the first philosophical use of the German phrase *der Sinn des Lebens* occurs in Schopenhauer’s *The World as Will and Representation*. The first extensive use appears decades later in the work of Nietzsche, who employs it in several texts (*Untimely Meditations*, *Thus spoke Zarathustra*). These German authors set the stage for

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<sup>2</sup> Iddo Landau offers a similar historical reconstruction of the “meaning of life,” although not to dismiss the question. See Iddo Landau, “Why Has the Question of the Meaning of Life Arisen in the Last Two and a Half Centuries?,” *Philosophy Today* 41, no. 2 (Summer 1997): 263–269.

a negative kind of quest. French authors (Zola), Russian authors (Tolstoy), or English authors (Carlyle) use it to refer to a crisis, an interior struggle. Even when they propose a positive answer to the question of life's meaning (as in the case of Tolstoy), these authors remain captive of threatening meaninglessness. Wherever this question pops up, it carries the weight of pessimism and doubt.

This is especially the case with existentialism, which, in Hochschild's reading, is the home of the meaning of life, along with related questions such as: the meaning of suffering, the meaning of death, and the meaning of freedom. Accordingly, meaning is subjective: it has to do with the interior life, feelings, emotions, awareness, and consciousness. Existentialism reacts to the positivist conception of reason by taking refuge in irrationality. With his leap of faith, Kierkegaard subjectivizes the question of human destiny. No longer an intelligibly grasped purpose or the good of life, destiny becomes a personally felt and extrarational meaning of life.

Hochschild argues that this new kind of questioning represents a radical departure from the classic philosophical view, which has been the standard view in Western philosophy until the 19<sup>th</sup> and 20<sup>th</sup> century. This view is the Platonic-Aristotelian ethics of good, virtues, and happiness, further elaborated by medieval Christianity. In this view, when people wonder about human life, they ask about "the end of man," or "man's chief good." As "man" indicated the human species, they see the human purpose as the essential *Why* of the species. Their concern is not individual, but general: What are human beings for? What is the ultimate point of our creaturely existence? Thus in Hochschild's reading, the classic question of the human purpose regards the general purpose of humanity, and it excludes the individual intention, the conscious sense of purpose, or a particular vocation to fulfill. The classic approach is teleological and essentialist. It sees human fulfillment as rooted in human nature, which reflects its maker's purpose or intention.

This approach handles the question of life's purpose against the backdrop of metaphysical questions about the origin, nature, and destiny of human beings, which provide a framework for practical moral questions such as "How should we live?" or "For what end should I act?" Hochschild mentions that even when classic stories like the *Illiad*, the *Odyssey*, and the *Divine Comedy* talk about a character looking for their path, they frame it in terms of how an individual's destiny fits into the pursuit of the human good.

By contrast, the modern question of life's meaning moves away from the moral field and the metaphysical frame. Thus, Hochschild believes, this question is not timeless. It differs from the classic question about human purpose and detaches from the framework within which that enduring question has developed. As he writes, "The two questions entertain different sorts of answers, give rise to different associated questions, and make different assumptions about the nature of man and reality."<sup>3</sup> Hochschild envisions several options in dealing with this contrast. Option 1 is to ignore the contrast and keep using the new question as a version of the old one. Although it is the most frequent option in contemporary culture, it is untenable for the reasons explained. Option 2 is to accept the contrast, adopt the new question, and abandon the old one altogether. Option 3 is to drop the new question and go back to the old one. From Hochschild's perspective, this is the clearest option and less prone to confusion. Finally, option 4 is a sort of compromise: consider the first question as the most important and fundamental, but recognize that the second question has gained some cultural traction. As such, one should use the second to go back to the first.

Option 4 is, according to Hochschild, the case of Pope John Paul II, who uses the question of meaning to reawaken the first, original

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<sup>3</sup> Joshua Hochschild, "John Paul II's Gamble with 'the Meaning of Life'," *Studia Gilsoniana* 10, no. 3 (July–September 2021): 508.

question of purpose. In several texts and encyclicals (*Faith and Reason*, *The Splendor of Truth*, among others), the Pope undertakes a creative set-up of the historically contingent question of life's meaning as a path back to the timeless question of life's purpose. Unlike the first authors writing on the meaning of life, John Paul II asks this question within a metaphysical framework that preserves the sapiential dimension of reason cut off by positivism. Hochschild sees John Paul II's adoption of this new question as an inheritance from the Second Vatican Council, whose documents make use of it (in particular, the declaration *Nostra Aetate* of Pope Paul VI, 1965). The Council calls for a renewal of the Catholic Church. Therefore, it adopts modern cultural features such as the meaning of life. Nevertheless, even these documents still frame the new question in terms of the old one. Thus the new question appears not as a new framework for moral evaluation, but as a new rhetorical entry to the longstanding framework.

Hochschild appreciates the cultural creativity of John Paul II's use of the meaning of life to re-direct toward the old question. He credits Pope's creativity for the success of this expression among Christians in the second half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. However, he remains, overall, skeptical about this question. John Paul II's and other Christians' use of the expression might be episodic, and we might in the future not need to talk about the meaning of life anymore, once we regain the classic view. In itself, this is a dead-end question. It did not exist in the history of Western philosophy until the 19<sup>th</sup> century, and Catholic teaching would not ask it without John Paul II. Once it appeared, it brought a plethora of problems and confusions, by displacing the classic moral and metaphysical framework. In conclusion, Hochschild rhetorically asks: "Would it be any great loss if the question does fade on its own, and will there be any great gain if it is kept alive within the Catholic

intellectual tradition?”<sup>4</sup> We can only guess that, for Hochschild, there would be no loss if the question fades away, and there would be no great gain if the question remains within the Catholic intellectual tradition.

### **Reply to Hochschild’s Criticism of the Meaning of Life**

Hochschild’s historical reconstruction rests on two directions of criticism against the meaning of life. First, it is a recent invention, a historically contingent expression with a weak philosophical identity compared to the solid corpus of the Western philosophical tradition. Coming from nowhere, it is not going anywhere. Second, the context of its emergence is negative and opposed to the spirit of Christianity and, for that matter, to any kind of religious commitment. My reply will follow these two directions.

#### *The Novelty of the Meaning of Life: from Medieval “Sensus” to Modern “Meaning”*

Tracing the intellectual history of a concept is not an easy task. Most encyclopedias locate the emergence of this expression around the 18<sup>th</sup> and 19<sup>th</sup> century in German philosophy. The *Historisches Wörterbuch der Philosophie*<sup>5</sup> indicates that the expression “meaning of life” (*Sinn des Lebens*) first appeared in Germany in the aftermath of Kantian philosophy and in conjunction with the emergence of the concept of value (*Wert*) in the 18<sup>th</sup> century. Goethe and Schiller talk about life’s meaning (*Lebenssinn*) in correspondence, and Fichte uses the expression “meaning of the human existence” (*Sinn des Daseins*). In the 19<sup>th</sup>

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<sup>4</sup> *Ibid.*, 512.

<sup>5</sup> Joachim Ritter and Karlfield Gründer, “Sinn des Lebens,” in *Historisches Wörterbuch der Philosophie*, vol. 9 (Darmstadt: Wissenschaftliche Buchgesellschaft, 1971), 815–823.

century, Feuerbach, Schopenhauer, and Nietzsche used it, and the expression expands outside Germany. Shakespeare talks in *Macbeth* about the significance of life, Tolstoy employs it in his *Confessions*, Kierkegaard uses it throughout his entire work, and Comte talks about “le sens général de l’évolution humaine” (the general meaning of human evolution).

While the expression “meaning of life” is relatively new, “meaning” is not. The first objection against Hochschild’s account regards the longstanding history of “meaning,” which goes back to the Latin *sensus*. Indeed, the word *Sinn* in German is etymologically rooted in the Latin *sensus*.<sup>6</sup> Like *Sinn*, *sensus* means both intelligible content (signification) and the faculty of perception or understanding (the five senses, the inner sense). My point is that “the meaning of life” comes from the long linguistic sedimentation of *sensus*, and is not, as Hochschild claims, a sudden appearance in Western philosophical vocabulary.

The role of *sensus* in Roman and Medieval literature and philosophy is substantial.<sup>7</sup> It underlies semiotics, psychology, moral and political thinking. The term evolves within a family of words with several verb/noun couples: *valere/vis*, *sentire/sententia*, and *significare/significatio*. *Vis*, the Latin equivalent of the Greek *dynamis*, and its verbal version *valere*, the Latin equivalent of the Greek *dynamai*, are used to indicate power, virtue, efficacy, value, and significance: the virtue of a plant, the efficacy of a remedy, the value of a coin, or the signification of a word or phrase. For instance, Cicero writes in *De officiis*: “hoc verbum

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<sup>6</sup> See Brothers Grimm’s German dictionary, *Deutsches Wörterbuch von Jacob and Wilhelm Grimm*, entry “Sinn.” Available on-line—see the section *References* for details.

<sup>7</sup> My reconstruction draws mainly from the following sources: “Sense/Meaning,” in *Dictionary of Untranslatables: A Philosophical Lexicon*, ed. Barbara Cassin, trans. S. Rendall et al. (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2014), 949–967; Marc Baratin, Claude Moussy, *Conceptions latines du sens et de la signification* (Paris: Presses de l’Université de Paris-Sorbonne, 1999).

quid valeat, non vident.”<sup>8</sup> The value of a word becomes a combination of its signification and its effect on the audience in Augustine’s *De dialectica*: “Vis verbi est, qua cognoscitur quantum valeat. Valet autem tantum quantum movere audientem potest.”<sup>9</sup> Thus the emergence of the expression “meaning of life” and the concept of value in 18<sup>th</sup> and 19<sup>th</sup> century is not a merely modern contingency but (re)actualizes connections already present in the Latin evolution of *sensus*. It is also probable that the signification of orientation present in the German *Sinn* rests upon this association between meaning and value. Indeed, *sinnan* in old German means to move in a direction, to aspire to something.

Like *vis* and *valere*, *sentire* and *sententia* are a semantic pair. *Sentire* is the verb, meaning to feel, to perceive, but also to grasp intellectually. Its polysemy (sensible perception and intellectual comprehension) grounds the ambivalence of *sensus* between the sensible and the intelligible. *Sententia* means, in Roman Latin, the juridical sentence in a trial court, or the decision of the senate. It refers to more than just a word: an idea, a sequence of words, a discourse, a text. When *sensus* takes over *sententia*, it assimilates this linguistic compositionality. However, *sensus* has also preserved the sense of perception and grasping, indicating either sensible perception or intellectual understanding (*e.g.*, *sensus prudentiae*).

The sensible/intelligible ambivalence of *sensus* is relevant for the genealogy of the meaning of life because, in many instances, this quest entails a sense of life, which is not only intellectual but also perceptive. From the Romans to the Italian and Scottish humanists, the concept of *sensus communis* (common sense) includes the intuitive grasp of life, embedded in social and cultural practices. *Sensus communis* is, in its

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<sup>8</sup> Cicero, *De Officiis*, trans. Walter Miller (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1913), 306.

<sup>9</sup> Augustine, *De Dialectica*, XVII, 12, trans. B. Darrell Jackson (Dordrecht: D. Reidel Publishing Company, 1975), 100.



first determination by Aristotle, an inner sense that represents the unifying root of all human sensitivity. Through common sense, we are aware of our perception, and we unify the sensible data coming from different senses, which, in themselves, do not have this unifying capacity. When seeing a white flower, our sight captures the color and the shape; our smell captures its fragrance, our touch captures its texture. The common sense assures us that the color, the shape, the fragrance, and the texture belong to the same object. The Roman and the humanist school of common sense build upon this unifying function. For them, *sensus communis* unifies all fields of human experience and functions through immersion in social and cultural practices. As I have shown elsewhere, in the 20<sup>th</sup> century, this tradition of *sensus communis* grows into a comprehensive view of human life in Gadamer's hermeneutics.<sup>10</sup> Gadamer combines the Aristotelian perceptive definition with the Roman and humanist social and cultural determination. He conceives the *sensus communis* as the very sense of life, understood as an interior sense, which grasps the totality of life through cultural mediations. Gadamer reaches this view by way of the Pietist theologian Friedrich Oetinger (18<sup>th</sup> century), who takes the concept of life to be the basis of *sensus communis*, thus talking about *sensus communis vitae gaudens*.<sup>11</sup> Reading Aristotle in a theological key, Oetinger identifies the capacity to unify all sensorial data with the divine mystery of life because it captures life's unity.

The modern *Sinn des Lebens* has thus preserved, in some cases, the ambivalence of *sensus*. At the same time, many scholars writing on

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<sup>10</sup> Mirela Oliva, "Hermeneutics and the Meaning of Life," *Epoché* 22, no. 2 (Spring 2018): 523–539; *id.*, "The Challenge of the Thomistic *sensus communis*: a Hermeneutic View," in *Thomas Aquinas: Teacher of Humanity*, ed. John Hittinger (Cambridge Scholars Publishing, 2015), 255–270.

<sup>11</sup> Hans-Georg Gadamer, *Truth and Method*, trans. Joel Weinsheimer and Donald G. Marshall (London–New York 2003), 27–30. Gadamer quotes from Friedrich Oetinger, *Die Wahrheit des sensus communis oder des allgemeinen Sinnes, in den nach dem Grundtext erklärten Sprüchen und Prediger Salomo oder das beste Haus- und Sittenbuch für Gelehrte und Ungelehrte* (Ehmann, 1861).

the meaning of life have neglected the perceptive aspect of *Sinn*. The theologian Gerhard Sauter warns that this neglect of the sensorial signification of *Sinn* has led to a modern reductive intellectualization of the meaning of life, even in religious environments. He thinks that a theistic account of life's meaning should regain the perception of the given meaning (which he calls "appointed meaning"). This perception, he argues, takes place in the experience of faith: "To perceive our existence in such a way as to see it as God's work is to inquire into meaning."<sup>12</sup> However, neither Gadamer, nor Sauter gives many details about how this perception of life works. This remains an issue that needs further development.

The last pair in the family of *sensus* is *significare/significatio*. *Significare* comes from *facere* (to do) and *signum* (sign) and means to indicate, announce, and reveal. It can be used both for the speaking agent who signifies, and for the word or expression that has a signification. In the first case, it conveys an action; in the other, it conveys a relationship between a sign and what it signifies.

*Vis*, *sententia*, and *significatio* inform the medieval use of *sensus* in Biblical hermeneutics. In interpreting the Bible, the Latin Medievals distinguish between four senses of the Scripture: *sensus litteralis* and three types of *sensus spiritualis*: *sensus allegoricus* (concerning the contents of faith), *sensus moralis* (concerning the ethical guidance following the model of Christ) and *sensus anagogicus* (concerning everlasting glory in the afterlife). Aquinas synthesizes this distinction in *Summa Theologiae*:

Therefore, that first signification whereby words signify things belongs to the first sense, the historical or literal. That signification whereby things signified by words have themselves also a signification is called a spiritual sense, which is based on the lit-

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<sup>12</sup> Gerhard Sauter, *The Question of Meaning: A Theological and Philosophical Orientation*, ed. and trans. Geoffrey W. Bromiley (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1995), 152.

eral, and presupposes it. Now this spiritual sense has a threefold division. For as the Apostle says (*Hebrews X:1*) the Old Law is a figure of the New Law, and Dionysius says (*Cael. Hier. 1*) *the New law itself is a figure of future glory . . .* Therefore, so far as the things of the Old Law signify the things of the New Law, there is the allegorical sense; so far as the things done in Christ, or so far as the things which signify Christ, are types of what we ought to do, there is the moral sense. But so far as they signify what relates to eternal glory, there is the anagogical sense.<sup>13</sup>

Christian Biblical hermeneutics flourished together with the Jewish hermeneutics of the Hebrew Bible and the Muslim hermeneutics of the Qu'ran throughout the Middle Ages.<sup>14</sup> A detailed history of meaning would benefit from a comparative study of these medieval religious streams of interpretation.

We should note that not only words have meaning (*sensus literalis*), but also things themselves (*sensus spiritualis*). While both senses engage the interpretation of the Bible for the moral and spiritual growth of its reader, the *sensus spiritualis* seems to better qualify as the medieval predecessor of the meaning of life. The *sensus spiritualis* has to do with the ethical and religious significance of the human life: the origin of life, the deeds following God's will, and the promise of eternal glory in the afterlife. One might object that modern Biblical interpretation has focused primarily on the literal sense, with Luther being the turning point.<sup>15</sup> However, even if the verbiage of the threefold *sensus spiritualis* has faded away in some historical-critical approaches of Biblical exege-

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<sup>13</sup> Thomas Aquinas, *Summa Theologiae*, I, q. 1, a. 10, co., trans. Fathers of the English Dominican Province (Notre Dame: Christian Classics, 1984).

<sup>14</sup> For Jewish and Islamic hermeneutics, see: Moshe Idel, *Absorbing Perfections: Kabbalah and Interpretation* (New Haven/London: Yale University Press, 2002); Bruce Fudge, *Qur'anic Hermeneutics: Al-Ṭabrisī and the Craft of Commentary* (New York: Routledge, 2011).

<sup>15</sup> See Werner G. Jeanrond, *Theological Hermeneutics: Development and Significance* (London: MacMillan, 1991), 29–32.

sis, the Bible's existential meaning remains the fulcrum of every interpretation made from the standpoint of faith.

Thus the expression "meaning of life" grew from a centuries-long development of the concept of *sensus* which became *Sinn* in German, *sens* in French, *sense/meaning* in English, *senso* in Italian, *sentido* in Spanish, *sens* in Romanian, etc. Within this development, the medieval study of the meaning(s) of the Bible was decisive because it emphasized both the linguistic and the existential dimensions of meaning. This study continued into the modern time, especially in German Protestant hermeneutics, which perhaps nourished the appearance of *Sinn des Lebens* in wider German culture. Schleiermacher is significant in this sense. His Biblical hermeneutics and philosophy of language influenced the German philosophers who employed the "meaning of life," such as Dilthey and Nietzsche, and, later, Husserl, Scheler, Heidegger, and Gadamer. It is plausible to see Schleiermacher as the crossing point between the medieval tradition of *sensus* and the four senses of the Bible on the one side, and the modern inquiry into the meaning of language and life on the other side. Furthermore, it is perhaps not a coincidence that John Paul II's pontificate issued a document on the Bible's interpretation in the Church, heavily relying on the concept of meaning and the medieval and modern Biblical hermeneutics.<sup>16</sup> John Paul II's use of the "meaning of life" seems to go hand in hand with his interest in the meanings of the Scripture, thus continuing a line of development already started by the medieval *sensus*.

Besides modern Biblical hermeneutics, modern logic and philosophy of language also took up the concept of meaning. While in early modern philosophy, questions about meaning and language are somewhat peripheral (Descartes, Leibniz), in later modern philosophy they

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<sup>16</sup> Pontifical Biblical Commission, *The Interpretation of the Bible in the Church* (Shearbrooke: Editions Paulines, 1994).

become more and more important (Herder, Von Humboldt). The semantic treatment of meaning comes to the fore, especially in the 19<sup>th</sup> and 20<sup>th</sup> centuries, following questions raised by Kant's epistemology, particularly the question of the *a priori*.<sup>17</sup> Frege was the leading figure of this new orientation, whose work laid the ground for analytic philosophy and influenced scholars now classified as Continental, like Husserl. Frege's famous distinction between *Sinn* and *Bedeutung* (*sense* and *reference*) has moved the issue of *a priori* in the logical sphere of meaning. The analytic philosophy of the 20<sup>th</sup> century walked in Frege's footsteps and placed meaning at the center of their investigations (Wittgenstein, Russell, Putnam, etc.).

This increased analytic adoption of the concept of meaning does not automatically validate the expression "meaning of life." Some analytic scholars have objected against the use of the expression "meaning of life," motivating that the term "meaning" can only apply to language and linguistic entities; moreover, if applied to life, it can not satisfy the verification criteria required by positivism.<sup>18</sup> This objection runs counter to the everyday use of "meaning," which nowadays and during medieval times refers also to states of affairs and events, apart from language. For instance, when a friend does something unexpected, we often wonder about the meaning of her behavior. In any case, the resistance of some analytic scholars to adopt this expression might indicate that the conspicuous analytic scholarship on the meaning of life in the last decades has been propelled not only by the growing attention of analytic philosophy to questions of linguistic meaning, but also by the influence of Continental existentialism, which employed "meaning" across the board. Scholars like Susan Wolf or T. J. Mawson acknowl-

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<sup>17</sup> See J. Alberto Coffa, *The Semantic Tradition from Kant to Carnap: To the Vienna Station* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1991).

<sup>18</sup> For a brief discussion of this objection, see Thaddeus Metz, *Meaning in Life: An Analytical Study* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2013), 21–22.

edge this influence. Wolf indicates that questions about life's meaning originate in existentialist philosophy, and Mawson formulates his theistic position on the meaning of life in response to Sartre's predicament.<sup>19</sup>

### *The Innovation of the Meaning of Life*

Hochschild might still press the point that even though the “meaning of life” built upon the well established Latin *sensus*, its sphere of questioning is not timeless, but conditioned by some specifically modern questions. The second argument in his historical criticism attacks the assumptions and goals of the quest for life's meaning in modern times. These assumptions and goals grow from a negative soil: they hunt the modern person who lost her compass in a secularized world and is looking to make her life bearable. As such, they are a departure from the classic view on the purpose of life, in which the ethical notion of the good life belonged to a metaphysical framework involving human nature, world creation, and divine government. I will show that not all modern sources of life's meaning are negative and opposed to Christianity. On the contrary, phenomenology and existentialism, the first heirs of the tradition of *Sinn* in Germany, maintain the classic idea of global intelligibility while introducing new themes: self-awareness and personal significance, the historicity of human existence and the problem of suffering. These themes, I submit, rest upon tenets of Christianity insufficiently developed in the classical paradigm. This school also informed Pope John Paul II and his successor, Pope Benedict XVI.

Hochschild is not alone in denouncing the negativity of the meaning of life. Another Catholic philosopher, Edward Feser, sees the meaning of life as a product of modern secularization that Christians do not

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<sup>19</sup> Susan Wolf, “Happiness and Meaning: Two Aspects of the Good Life,” *Social Philosophy and Policy Foundation* 14, no. 1 (Winter 1997): 209. T. J. Mawson, *God and the Meanings of Life: What God Could and Couldn't Do to Make Our Lives More Meaningful* (London: Bloomsbury, 2016), 110–116.

necessarily need to employ. At the origin of this question is a shift from the purpose of the human existence as such to individual purposes that have no bearing upon human nature and thus cannot attain an objective status. Since teleology disappeared from this picture, the overall answer to this modern quest is, most of the time, negative. That said, Feser adopts option 4; namely, he conduces this question back to the classic-medieval framework, showing how Aquinas would answer it:

With that metaphysical background in place, the question of the meaning of life barely even arises, but can readily be given an affirmative answer when it does arise. Without that metaphysical background, the question arises in an obvious and urgent way, but seems impossible to answer except negatively.<sup>20</sup>

Feser argues that human existence has a twofold point for Aquinas: the natural and the supernatural end. The natural end is the knowledge of God, approximated already in Greek philosophy. The supernatural end is the beatific vision, a communion with God that requires divine assistance, namely grace.

One might further object that even if we bracket the aspect of secularism, the context of this expression's birth is still a negative one. Indeed, naturalist scholars like Iddo Landau point to several shortcomings of existentialism, although not to dismiss the expression "meaning of life," but to advance a positive and humane view on life's meaning. Landau criticizes several existentialist thinkers (Kierkegaard, Nietzsche, Heidegger, Sartre, Camus) who, in his eyes, "unnecessarily instill negative feelings in people, suggesting to them that their lives are less meaningful than they really are and, often, that they are by and large worthless beings."<sup>21</sup> Landau detects the reasons for this negativity in some tenets of existentialism. First, existentialism is perfectionist: it

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<sup>20</sup> Edward Feser, "Aquinas," in *The Meaning of Life and the Great Philosophers*, ed. Stephen Leach and James Tartaglia (London/New York: Routledge, 2018), 117.

<sup>21</sup> Iddo Landau, *Finding Meaning in an Imperfect World* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2017), 265.

sets the bar too high and concludes that life is inherently absurd and meaningless. With this mindset, the existentialists despise ordinary enjoyments, and, in general, the simple lives of most people. Second, existentialists do not sufficiently look for ways to combat suffering and exalt anxiety and despair. All of them lack any sense of humor and cannot take into account the joyful aspects of human life. Finally, existentialists are hostile to society and community. The existential hero looks for authenticity all by himself and pays no attention to solidarity, friendship, and love.

This type of objection has some merit. A strain of existentialism is, indeed, one-sided and leans toward the dark side. However, this is not the case with all existentialists—Kierkegaard’s leap of faith yields a positive outcome, and Heidegger’s view on human existence points to pervasive meaningfulness.<sup>22</sup> Heidegger’s existential impetus grew from the tradition of interpretation in Schleiermacher and Dilthey. Heidegger also followed his teacher’s (Husserl) phenomenology, which shows that not only language but all phenomena have meaning.<sup>23</sup> I have argued in detail elsewhere,<sup>24</sup> that the phenomenological-hermeneutic school employs the concept of “meaning” for all reality levels and human experience. Although Husserl, Heidegger, and Gadamer address various kinds of crisis in modernity, their question of meaning is the basis of an innovative philosophy and not just a symptom of existential crisis. They propose a renewal of philosophy through the concept of meaning. This renewal gives a unified account of human existence and reality while introducing new elements, such as history and consciousness. Phenomenologists establish a continuity with the classical paradigm of the good

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<sup>22</sup> Martin Heidegger, *Being and Time*, trans. John Macquarrie and Edward Robinson (New York: Harper, 2008), 193.

<sup>23</sup> See Steven G. Crowell, *Husserl, Heidegger, and the Space of Meaning: Paths Toward Transcendental Phenomenology* (Evanston, Ill.: Northwestern University Press, 2001).

<sup>24</sup> Oliva, “Hermeneutics and the Meaning of Life,” 526–527.



life, insofar as also for them the meaning of human existence partakes in the world's global intelligibility. While naturalistic scholars in the current scholarship on the meaning of life seek to bracket the issue of the cosmic significance of human life, phenomenologists remain attached, through their ontology, to the classical paradigm.

I believe that Pope John Paul II (born Karol Wojtyła) and his successor, Pope Benedict XVI (born Joseph Ratzinger), adopt the "meaning of life" following this phenomenological tradition. Their adoption is not a matter of cultural instrumentalism, but intellectual formation. Besides Aristotle and Aquinas, John Paul II's philosophical studies focused on phenomenology. He wrote his doctoral dissertation in philosophy on Max Scheler, a phenomenologist. Benedict XVI's theological studies crossed paths especially with Heidegger, whom he quotes several times.

John Paul II's encyclical *Faith and Reason* starts in phenomenological fashion, claiming that the meaning of human existence is intertwined with the meaning of things. The Pope argues that in both East and West, the knowledge of the world and the human self has an ascending trajectory, marked by the progress of personal self-consciousness. Through this progress, all objects of our knowledge are seen as a part of our life. The more we know about the physical universe, the more we know about human existence. For instance, the sophisticated knowledge of quantum mechanics overlaps with the knowledge of history, freedom, personhood, and intersubjectivity in the 20th century. We can not fully dissociate the meaning of non-human objects from the meaning of human life. The spontaneity of quantum mechanics and human freedom have some similarity. How is a human person who has a rational and spiritual nature linked to the physical universe? Neither of them can provide sufficient ground for this link. John Paul II thinks that we should search for the ground of this link beyond human self-consciousness and beyond scientific knowledge:

It is the nature of human beings to seek the truth. This search looks not only to the attainment of truths which are partial, empirical or scientific, nor is it only in individual acts of decision-making that people seek the true good. Their search looks toward an ulterior truth which would explain the meaning of life. And it is therefore a search which can reach its end only in reaching the absolute.<sup>25</sup>

Therefore, John Paul II employs the concept of meaning in a phenomenological way, namely as applicable to all kinds of objects: material things, human beings, human decisions, language. He works out in detail this transversality of meaning in *The Acting Person*, where meaning is at the center of a Husserlian-Schelerian type of analysis of intentionality:

The power and efficacy of active understanding allow us to ascertain the meaning of particular things and to intellectually incorporate them, as well as the relations between them, “into” our consciousness. For to “understand” means the same as to “grasp” the meaning of things and their interrelations.<sup>26</sup>

This transversality of meaning conduces him to a transcendent ground. In human life, the question of meaning is a matter of the ultimate meaning of human existence and the whole world, a meaning which he identifies with God. This modern expression harbors perennial questions that have popped up in all philosophical and religious texts throughout human history: Who am I? Where have I come from and where am I going? Why is there evil? What is there after this life? At the same time, John Paul II acknowledges the novelty of the modern concept of meaning, which realizes a new, deeper integration of these questions made possible by the progress of self-consciousness and scientific knowledge. This kind of integration combines his phenomenological

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<sup>25</sup> John Paul II, *Fides et Ratio: On the Relationship between Faith and Reason* (Boston: Pauline Books, 1998), 45.

<sup>26</sup> Karol Wojtyła, *The Acting Person*, trans. Andrzej Potocki (Dordrecht: D. Reidel Publishing Company, 1979), 35.

approach with his Aristotelian-Thomistic heritage, which leads him to see the value and intelligibility of life within the total cosmic order. It results in a personalist quest for meaning, which is individual and experiential, while still part of a world governed by God's Providence.

Pope Benedict XVI, his successor, has continued in his steps, albeit with a different twist. Benedict XVI, too, espouses the phenomenological concept of meaning and its derivative, the meaning of life, but he brings it in agreement with Augustine's and Bonaventure's thought. While John Paul II's vision of meaning recalls Thomistic order, Benedict's view on meaning has a stronger existential flavor. Benedict XVI attributes his interest in the question of meaning to Heidegger's philosophy that was one of the milestones of his studies in Munich:

It is perhaps permissible here to draw attention to a distinction made by Martin Heidegger, who speaks of the duality of calculating and reflective thought. Both modes of thought are legitimate and necessary, but for this very reason neither can be absorbed in the other. There must therefore be both: calculating thought, which is concerned with "makability," and reflective thought, which is concerned with "meaning."<sup>27</sup>

Benedict talks about the meaning of life in several books, especially *Eschatology: Death and Eternal Life*.<sup>28</sup> He individuates the origin of this question in two parts of the Hebrew Bible: *Qohelet* and *Job*. They expose the problem of suffering and anguish of human life and break with the previous traditional connection between action and destiny. Both *Qohelet*<sup>29</sup> and *Job* wrestle with apparently meaningless situations: the virtuous suffer, the vicious thrive. This incongruence between merit and reward throws into crisis the trust into a divine government that gives

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<sup>27</sup> Joseph Cardinal Ratzinger, *Introduction to Christianity*, trans. J. R. Foster and Michael J. Miller (San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 1990), 74.

<sup>28</sup> Joseph Ratzinger, *Eschatology: Death and Eternal Life*, trans. Michael Waldstein (Washington: Catholic University of America Press, 1988).

<sup>29</sup> See also Thaddeus Metz, "Kohleth," in *The Meaning of Life and the Great Philosophers*, 73–78.

each what they think they deserve. The two Biblical books are a pivotal point in the Jewish tradition because they lead to a new kind of personal relationship with God, a pillar in Israel's faith. Pace Hochschild, the question of the meaning of life starts, for Benedict, with a crisis. This crisis is not the product of modernity, but the centuries-old expression of human vulnerability in the Jewish tradition. The experience of suffering is part of a meaningful life lived in a personal relationship with God: "Suffering for God's sake and that of other people can be the highest form of allowing God to be present, and placing oneself at the service of life."<sup>30</sup>

Suffering belongs to the history of salvation, and the meaning of an individual human life is intertwined with the meaning of history. While hoping for a blissful afterlife, the believer must still cope with the whirlwind of history. The Jewish theology of history continues in the Christian theology of Incarnation and Resurrection: "History and cosmos are not realities alongside spirit, running on into a meaningless eternity or sinking down into an equally meaningless nothingness. In the resurrection, God proves himself to be the God also of the cosmos and of the history."<sup>31</sup> Benedict's existential approach does not exalt suffering as a badge of honor, but admits that suffering can be a way to find new possibilities of meaning: "For even then life remains a gift of God, opening up for us new possibilities of existence and meaning."<sup>32</sup> As in the case of John Paul II, Benedict's quest for meaning is personalist; it emphasizes the unique features and experiences of the human person throughout history.

To sum up, the adoption of the "meaning of life" by John Paul II and Benedict XVI is the outcome of a philosophical formation at the school of phenomenology, which employs this expression within a

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<sup>30</sup> Ratzinger, *Eschatology*, 86.

<sup>31</sup> *Ibid.*, 116.

<sup>32</sup> *Ibid.*, 101.

broader conception of meaning, applicable to all kinds of objects. In all likelihood, the Popes did not use it as a substitute for the classic paradigm of the good life, nor as an instrument to regain it. They used it as a novel conceptual questioning that gathers perennial questions of humankind and brings into light matters insufficiently explored before, like self-consciousness or history. They have contributed to the strengthening of this question in the 20<sup>th</sup> century.

How does this question deal with the classic paradigm? What are the challenges that a theistic scholarship on the meaning of life must meet? Hochschild's criticism raises awareness of the need for clarity in the way religious thinkers (be they Catholic, of a different Christian confession or a different faith) employ the concept of meaning. The issue of life's meaning belongs to more than one field: it pertains to ethics, but also metaphysics, philosophy of religion, and aesthetics. It deals with happiness and the good life, with the structure of reality, with personal religious experience, with the narrative account of human life. Hochschild rightly observes that this question was not able to create a proper field. It is perhaps an opportunity to bring unity to an academic field divided by disciplinary classifications.

Furthermore, the philosophical quest for the meaning of life has made its way also outside the Western world. In 2020, a special issue of the *South African Journal of Philosophy* was devoted to African perspectives to the question of life's meaning. Aribiah Attoe, the guest editor, points out that African theories about what constitutes a meaningful life are utterly opposed to nihilism.<sup>33</sup> Their wide variety (theistic, vitalistic, communal, or consolationist) offers views on life different from the modern Western nihilistic paradigm. Since 2011 in Japan, the *Journal of Philosophy of Life* publishes articles about the meaning of

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<sup>33</sup> Aribiah D. Attoe, "Guest editor's introduction: African perspectives to the question of life's meaning," *South African Journal of Philosophy* 39, no. 2 (2020): 93–99.

life written by both Asian and international scholars, covering topics and traditions in the Asian space and beyond. This expression's ability to stimulate other traditions to speak in their voice testifies to its universal philosophical value that transcends modern conditions.

From a theistic perspective, the meaning of life warrants several basic questions.

First, it has to do with the cosmic significance of life and the meaning of the entire universe. This entails issues such as the origin and end of the universe, creation, God's attributes, and our place in the universe.<sup>34</sup>

Second, it addresses the purpose of human life on earth and the afterlife: Why are humans born? Why do humans have to die? Is there life after death? A theistic account will conceive this purpose as given by God, and achievable through a personal relationship with God and, after death, through union with God in the beatific vision. Here, the classic question of happiness and beatitude appears against the backdrop of cosmic significance and divine Providence. Some scholars writing on the meaning of life (Metz, Wolf) distinguish meaningfulness from happiness because they take happiness in a subjective sense, as pleasure, positive feeling, satisfaction of desires. They follow a modern shift in the signification of happiness from objective to subjective value. However, what they now mean by meaningfulness is very similar to what the classics meant by happiness. A theist writing in the Christian tradition needs to clarify her terminological choice. The best route to take, to avoid objections of the sort raised by Hochschild, would be to continue using the term happiness in its classic sense, as a final good of objective value.<sup>35</sup>

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<sup>34</sup> See also Mawson's analogy between cosmic significance and the job of a junior widget-affixer in Mawson, *God and the Meanings of Life*, 111–134.

<sup>35</sup> There are, however, also other competing theistic views. See Stewart Goetz, *The Purpose of Life: A Theistic Perspective* (London: Continuum, 2012). Goetz defines happi-

This issue of human purpose also raises the question of suffering and evil. Why do we have to suffer? Why is there evil? A theistic account can confront this problem<sup>36</sup> and find ways to alleviate suffering (mine and of the others) or channel it toward a personal transformation.

Third, there is the issue of the individual purpose that each of us receives from God and must realize here on earth. Hochschild's picture of the classical paradigm seems to downplay this matter. Modern self-awareness has emphasized the idea of individual purpose, as we see, for instance, in John Paul II's work. However, the idea of the individual purpose is already present in the Bible and the medieval tradition. For instance, Job is conscious that God has a specific purpose for him, as He is testing him: "Nevertheless, He knows my way, and He will prove me like gold which passes through fire" (Job 23:10). In the medieval time, Aquinas shows that God's Providence in the case of human beings is special: He governs each human being not only for the sake of the species, but also for her own, individual sake.<sup>37</sup>

Fourth, the question of life narrative. Is my life a story? What is its narrative meaning? Does my whole life have narrative meaning or only parts of it? How should I account for the narrative shape of my life? This question crosses paths with aesthetics, the standard field for the theory of narrative. It became relevant in contemporary philosophy thanks to the emphasis on the historicity of human existence in the German tradition following the Jewish and Christian theology of history.

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ness as pleasure and claims that perfect happiness can only yield from a religious perspective that allows for pleasure *ad infinitum* in the afterlife.

<sup>36</sup> See especially Clifford Williams, *Religion and the Meaning of Life: An Existential Approach* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2020).

<sup>37</sup> Thomas Aquinas, *Summa Contra Gentiles*, III, 113 (available on-line—see the section *References* for details). On the importance of the individual purpose in a theistic account of the meaning of life, see T. J. Mawson, *Monotheism and the Meaning of Life* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2019), 9–10. See also Thaddeus Metz, *God, Soul and the Meaning of Life* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2019), 10.

Finally, how can we grasp and attain the meaning of life? It is a matter of knowing and contemplating, but also a matter of acting and accomplishing good deeds. What kind of rationality is involved in this process? What is the role of faith? Does faith gather human faculties within a unique interior sense such as the common sense, as in Oetinger's and Gadamer's case?

A unified account needs a robust conception of meaning. The phenomenological tradition already mentioned is a good start. In the analytic field, some scholars take the long route to clarify the concept of meaning as a first step in inquiring into the meaning of life. For instance, Nozick starts from the definition of meaning as relation and mounts, from there, to the meaning of life understood as transcending limits; the last stop in his systematic view is the Unlimited, which has no meaning but is meaning.<sup>38</sup> Seachris detects a meaning triad which underpins the meaning of life. The main significations of meaning are 1) intelligibility, sense-making, clarification, or coherence, 2) purpose, and 3) significance or value.<sup>39</sup> In this paper, I have tried to show that most of the senses of the modern concept of *meaning* are already present in the Latin medieval concept of *sensus*. Both schools, analytic and continental, might benefit from a consideration of this historical root.

## Conclusion

Hochschild, like other scholars, sees the meaning of life as the product of modern secularization. Secularization opposes the classic paradigm of happiness understood as a final good that yields an objec-

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<sup>38</sup> Robert Nozick, *Philosophical Explanations* (Cambridge: Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 1981), 571–651. See also Mirela Oliva, “The Relational Nature of the Meaning of Life in Nozick,” *Disputatio* 8, no. 11 (2019): 469–494.

<sup>39</sup> Joshua Seachris, “From the Meaning Triad to Meaning Holism: Unifying Life’s Meaning,” *Human Affairs* 29, no. 4 (2019): 363–378.



tive value in accord with human nature. Therefore, Christians and other believers need prudence in the use of the “meaning of life.” Pope John Paul II has used it as an instrument to lead his contemporaries back to the classic paradigm. In response to Hochschild, I showed that the meaning of life is not a modern construct, but the fruit of a longstanding development of the medieval concept of *sensus*, especially of its career in Biblical hermeneutics. This development has influenced German philosophers, including those hostile to Christianity.

Second, I showed that the first heirs of this tradition of *sensus*, namely existentialism and phenomenology, are not inherently negative. On the contrary, many accounts in this stream of thought maintain the classic idea of global intelligibility of the world. The conspicuous analytic scholarship on the meaning of life has indirectly benefitted from this development of “meaning.” I also argued that Pope John Paul II and his successor, Pope Benedict XVI, have adopted the expression “meaning of life” and the concept of “meaning” as a result of their intellectual formation steeped in phenomenology, which nourishes their personalism. John Paul II emphasized the personal quest for meaning within the cosmic order, whereas Benedict tackled the place of suffering in the individual destiny and the history of salvation.

Theistic scholarship on the meaning of life has thrived in recent decades. Sauter, Nozick, Cottingham, Nancy, Mawson, Goetz, Williams, Metz, Seachris, MacGrath, Waghorn, to name a few, have published extensive studies from a wide variety of perspectives.<sup>40</sup> Whether this question will persist in theists’ work or will fade away is hard to tell. Nevertheless, judging from the strong presence of the concept of meaning in the history of philosophy and its blooming in the 20<sup>th</sup> century, I am inclined to answer positively. Hochschild’s criticism is a

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<sup>40</sup> For an overview of the main theistic accounts on the meaning of life, see Mirela Oliva, “Meaning: Theism,” in *Theism and Atheism: Opposing Arguments in Philosophy*, ed. Joseph W. Koterski and Graham Oppy (Macmillan Reference, 2019).

good occasion to assess the meaning of life within the broader history of meaning and clarify how this philosophical quest brings together perennial questions, and, perhaps, advances new ones.



### No Meaning for Believers? A Reply to Joshua Hochschild

#### SUMMARY

Joshua Hochschild credits John Paul II for the success of the expression “meaning of life” among Christians, but he warns that this expression stems from a modern framework different from classical theism. Hochschild’s criticism challenges theists to clarify how the quest for meaning channels the basic questions of classic theism while advancing new ones. First, I will propose a different historical reconstruction of the “meaning of life,” tracing its origin back to the medieval *sensus* and its use in Biblical hermeneutics. Second, I will show that existentialism and phenomenology are the heirs of this legacy, and their use of the “meaning of life” is mostly positive. Pope John Paul II and Pope Benedict XVI adopted this expression under their influence. Finally, I will argue that the theistic quest for the “meaning of life” addresses classic questions such as happiness and the purpose of human life in the universe, and raises new questions regarding the individual purpose, the history of salvation, and the narrative of life.

#### KEYWORDS

John Paul II, Benedict XVI, meaning of life, *sensus*, happiness, purpose of life.

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