Is life to be taken seriously?

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DECLARATION

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Abstract

In this thesis, the question "is life serious?" is posed and answered. To answer this question, a conceptual analysis of the concepts 'life' and 'serious' is undertaken along with an extrapolation and analysis of the ontological structure of human *existence*. The conclusion that this thesis ultimately reaches is that, because of the inherent value of human life, which is necessitated by the ontology of *existence*, life is inalienably serious. To reach this conclusion, the thesis begins by exploring the work of David Benatar, who argues that the best possible outcome for human beings would be to become extinct. By analysing Benatar, we are able to ground the argument in Benatar's understanding that non-existence is preferable to existence, as well as place it firmly in the contemporary discussion. Continuing the discussion, before attempting to answer the question "is life serious?" the thesis undertakes a conceptual analysis of the concept 'life'. An analysis is undertaken of 'life' as understood in its common linguistic and conceptual application. A distinction is drawn between life as a purely biological phenomenon and life as an existential phenomenon. After analysing the various conceptualizations of 'life', the conclusion is drawn that the only intelligible use of 'life' in the question "is life serious?" is of 'life' understood as *existence* - a concept which is to be understood with recourse to the existential style of doing philosophy. The thesis continues by analysing the concept *existence* as it is understood within the so-called discipline of Existentialism. To this end, the work of John Macquarrie is utilized along with a number of other 'existential' philosophers. What is concluded from this analysis is that the human existent is situated in a unique position with regards to its 'mode-of-being'. As determined by its ontology and in light of its relationship with (among other elements) death, the existent invariably *exists* with a concern for its *being*. It is this idea which is built upon to reach the final conclusion of this thesis. Before such a conclusion is reached, a conceptual analysis of 'serious' is undertaken. What is elucidated from this analysis is that the 'seriousness' of any matter depends on the acceptance of the premise that human life (thus understood as *existence*) has inherent value. Thus, to conclude that life is serious one must substantiate its inherent value. To substantiate this premise, the argument is made that the human being *exists* necessarily with a concern-for-being. A return to the discussion on Benatar as well as an analysis of Thomas Nagel is utilized to substantiate this argument. The argument ultimately concludes that human beings, because of the ontological structure of their *existence*, *cannot but* conceive of life as valuable and, consequently, serious. To *actually* reach such a conclusion would be to conceive of a manner of *being* which is different to our own - which is impossible.

Abstrak

In hierdie tesis, word die vraag "is die lewe ernstig?" gestel en beantwoord. Om hierdie vraag te beantwoord, is 'n konseptuele analise van die konsepte "lewe" en "ernstig" onderneem, asook 'n ekstrapolering en analise van die ontologiese struktuur van die menslike *bestaan*. Hierdie tesis kom uiteindelik tot die gevolgtrekking dat die lewe onvervreembaar ernstig is weens die inherente waarde van die menslike bestaan wat vereis word deur die ontologie van *bestaan*. Om hierdie gevolgtrekking te kan maak, word daar eerstens ondersoek ingestel na die werk van David Benatar, wat aanvoer dat uitsterwing die beste moontlike uitkoms vir menslike wesens is. Deur Benatar se werk te ondersoek, kan die grondslag gelê word vir die argument dat **nie-bestaan** verkieslik teenoor **bestaan** is. Verder word 'n konseptuele analise van die konsep "lewe" onderneem. Hierdie analise steun op die algemene linguistiese en konseptuele toepassing van "lewe". 'n Onderskeid word getref tussen die lewe as 'n pure biologiese verskynsel en die lewe as 'n eksistensiele verskynsel. Die gevolgtrekking hieruit is dat die enigste verstaanbare gebruik van "lewe", in die vraag "is die lewe ernstig?", is "lewe" as *bestaan* ─ 'n konsep wat met behulp van eksistensiële filosofie begryp sal kan word. Daarna word die konsep van *bestaan*, soos uiteengesit in die sogenamde dissipline van Eksistensialisme, geanaliseer. Hiervoor word die werk van vele eksistensiële filosowe, maar veral John Macquarrie, gebruik. Uit hierdie analise kan daar afgelei word dat die menslike wese in 'n unieke posisie geplaas is met betrekking tot sy "wyse van bestaan". Soos bepaal deur sy ontologie en aan die hand van sy verhouding me, onder andere, die dood, bestaan die wese, sonder uitsondering, met 'n besorgdheid vir sy wese. Dit is ook op hierdie voortgeboue idee waarop die finale gevolgtrekking van die tesis steun. 'n Konseptuele analise van "ernstig" is ook nodig om die sentrale vraag te beantwoord. Wat hieruit blyk is dat die "erns" van enige saak op die aanvaarding van die veronderstelling dat menselewe (d.w.s. *bestaan*) inherente waarde het, berus. Om dus vas te stel dat die lewe ernstig is, moet die inherente waarde daarvan bewys word. Om hierdie veronderstelling te staaf, word daar aangevoer dat die menslike wese *bestaan* noodsaaklikerwys met 'n besorgdheid vir sy bestaan. Die bespreking van Benatar en 'n analise van Thomas Nagel se werk is gebruik om hierdie argument te motiveer. Die argument kom oplaas tot die slotsom dat menslike wesens, weens die ontologiese struktuur van hulle *bestaan*, *nie anders kan as* om die lewe as waardevol, en gevolglik, ernstig te verstaan *nie*. Dit is onmoontlik om *werklik* tot so 'n gevolgtrekking te kom omdat dit buite die bereik van ons denkbare wyse van *bestaan* lê.

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Chapter 1: Introduction and problem statement

In our deliberations on different problems, we generally approach them in the spirit of taking them "seriously". Indeed, we tend to identify certain matters as problems exactly because they are "worth taking seriously".[1] Certain problems are also regarded as more serious than others. We may say, without controversy, that certain matters - for example, the ever-increasing risk of cancer developing in people - are undeniably serious matters. In fact, it seems that the entire scope of our concerns can be understood on a spectrum of the serious and non-serious. Some matters are regarded as utterly serious - such as decisions on assisted suicide - whereas others are regarded as trivial - such as deciding which brand of coffee to buy. As such, it seems straightforward and perfectly intuitive to make sense of the kind of statement: "X is serious", or "Y is not serious". Furthermore, placing minor differences of personal preference aside, it appears that most people would agree on which matters are more, or less, serious than others. For example, most people would probably agree that assisted suicide is a serious matter and that deciding which brand of coffee to buy isn't.

However, we encounter an interesting problem when we ask, "is *life* serious?". This is certainly an odd kind of question but one that is nonetheless worth asking - in earnest.[2] It is worth asking because we encounter statements such as "don't take life too seriously" which seem to be in reference to something significant. We must then ask: is such a statement no more than a colloquialism meant to demonstrate that it is healthy to relax now and again? If so, does the claim "life is serious" not actually mean anything substantial? If not, what does such a statement mean? It seems that such an apparently innocuous statement demands an analysis of the concept's 'life' and 'serious' in order to be answered conclusively and coherently. What we are trying to discover is what exactly such a question is asking and whether it can be answered sufficiently. However, what sets this question apart from other conceptual analyses of this nature, is the additional existential element. Asking, "is life serious?" is not simply to ask whether the concept 'serious' is appropriate in relation to the concept 'life'. Rather, it is to ask after the very significance of the existence of 'life' as a phenomenon and whether an attitude of concern and care is necessary, warranted or ultimately inconsequential. We identify a problem as it appears entirely possible to make a somewhat

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[1] We can think of a problem such as the global climate crisis which presents as a significant and pertinent issue exactly because of the immensely serious implications.

2 As opposed to merely a tool for highlighting the absurd elements present in life e.g. "don't worry so much about X, life isn't that serious".

cohesive argument *against* the seriousness of life.[3] One may, for example from a nihilist position, argue that life ultimately amounts to nothing and that nothing one (as individual) does or abstains from doing truly matters. Such an argument would imply that there is no difference in outcome between taking life seriously or not taking it seriously. However, such an argument has clearly undesirable implications (at least, for most people). If one is to conclude that *life* is not a serious matter then one can easily conclude that matters such as violence, war, famine, sexual assault, racism, slavery and so on are also not particularly serious. If one rejects notions of the supernatural, it seems there is nothing (at least not logically) to stop one from adopting an attitude that *everything* is trivial and meaningless. In other words, if meaning does not stem from a source external to that of the natural (such as the designation of a deity) then one may conclude that the notion of 'meaning' is a construction of human reason alone and thus entirely arbitrary.[4] This conclusion appears counterintuitive. It seems to undermine every element of our concern and places any attitude towards anything as significant or important in the realm of subjective feeling. However, most people don't think this way and much of our philosophy (especially disciplines around ethics) depend on a foundational understanding of certain matters as being significant, important or *serious* - thus we would prefer to avoid such a conclusion. It is thus the goal of this thesis to try and answer the question "is life serious?" in earnest. The intention of this thesis is to answer this question in the affirmative after analysing the question from an existentialist framework. To do this we must undergo a number of steps. We begin by analysing the argument David Benatar makes in *Better Never to Have Been: The Harm of Coming into Existence*. This argument constitutes a contemporary development of the idea that human beings are *better off* becoming extinct. Although arguably not a purely nihilistic position, Benatar's argument is a strong example of the kind that undermines our desire to take life seriously.[5] Furthermore, an analysis of this argument provides vital insight into the kind of philosophical problem we are dealing with and how we may attempt to solve it. Following this discussion, we turn to a conceptual analysis of 'life' in chapter 3. For this task we must consider the manner in which 'life' has been conceptualized in philosophical literature. We draw a comparison between what we call the "biological" conception and "every-day" conception of life as the two primary modes of conceptualizing *life* philosophically. We conclude that the manner in which this concept functions in our discussion is equal to the concept *existence*, as understood from

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3 Such arguments are usually about human life exclusively but are not necessarily restricted to only such an understanding.

4 That is, the argument in this paper presupposes a metaphysical framework in which notions of the supernatural are rejected. This point is elucidated further in Chapter 6 below.

5 Although one may call Benatar an existentialist of sorts. His work falls significantly outside of the usual understanding of the discipline and contains enough qualifiers to arguably place it outside of the realm of 'traditional existential philosophy'.

the existential style of philosophy - which is discussed in chapter 4.[6] When one explores the philosophical literature known as existentialism, one encounters a strong emphasis on the importance of one's decisions and a determined, at moments even morbid, interest in the finitude of human life. To consider it plainly, it seems uncontroversial to state that existential philosophers tend to regard (human) life - or rather, existence - with profound seriousness.[7] As such, the argument that life can only be a serious matter, thus rests on the validity of the underlying concepts supporting so called existential thinking. Exploring these concepts, we will maintain that existentialism provides the necessary ontological insight into the nature of (human) existence which necessitates the attitude that life is invariably a serious matter. Finally, chapter 5 brings the elements of the prior discussion together to attempt a conclusive answer to the question "is life serious?". Chapter 6 entails a critical reflection on some of the potential shortcomings of the argument and the thesis concludes in chapter 7.

It is my view that upon careful analysis, one is bound to conclude that life can only be regarded as a serious matter. That, all things considered, we don't have another choice. It is thus the task of this thesis to develop and defend the argument that the answer to the question "is life serious?" is: "yes, necessarily so." It is my position that the most correct attitude towards the above-mentioned question is one that posits that - at least for human beings - there is no alternative to life being a serious matter.

Let us now begin with our discussion of Benatar.

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[6] Per the discussion of the so-called existentialists that is to follow this section, it must be pointed out that nihilism and existentialism is not necessarily to be juxtaposed. As we will see in Chapter 5, the argument that life (understood as existence) is to be taken necessarily seriously makes room for the ideas put forth by nihilism. This will be elucidated below but the reader will do well to keep this in mind.

Chapter 2: David Benatar – the most recent serious claim that human life should become extinct

David Benatar, a professor of philosophy at the University of Cape Town, is regarded by some for developing rather controversial arguments. Better Never to Have Been: The Harm of Coming into Existence,[8] is an example of a work containing such an argument. In this book, Benatar makes the argument that it is always worse for a human being to exist than not to exist and, therefore, all things considered, the best possible moral outcome would be for the human species to let itself become extinct. The strength of this conclusion rests on two central arguments. First, and most importantly, Benatar argues that there is an asymmetrical relationship between existence and non-existence which shows that one is always worse off coming into existence than never coming into existence at all.[9] Secondly, Benatar argues that, in addition to the asymmetry or, if we reject it, in spite of it, when we assess the quality of the average human life, we find that self-assessments of our lives are generally overly optimistic and that the quality of almost everyone's life is objectively poor.[10]

The asymmetry between existence and non-existence

Benatar considers the categories of existence and non-existence in relation to human being. Living human beings either exist (they are in the world) or they do not exist (they are not in the world). Another way of conceptualizing these categories is between human beings as being alive or being dead/never born. In considering these categories, Benatar utilizes human experiences of pleasure and pain. In his usage of these terms, Benatar is referring to an objective measurement of pleasure and pain. In other words, any experience which invokes a positive mental state in an individual can be said to constitute an experience of pleasure and any experience which invokes a negative mental state in an individual can be said to constitute an experience of pain.[11] The intensity and duration of this mental state may affect the overall measurement of the quantity of pleasure or pain in an

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8 Benatar, 2006.
9 Ibid, pp. 30-40.
10 Ibid pp. 60-92.
11 That is to say that Benatar is not trying to simplify and quantify positive and negative emotional states. Rather, when we are speaking of pleasure, we speak of an experience which is deemed positive relative to the individual. As such, we may still regard the experience of working very hard and achieving a desired goal as a delayed powerful pleasure. The same logic is applied to instances of pain.

individual's lifetime, however, as will be seen below, this is inconsequential to Benatar's analysis.[12] Also important to note is, in order for Benatar's analysis to work, is that this analysis presupposes that human experience begins with birth and ends with death.[13]

Thus, in categorizing existence and non-existence with relation to pleasure and pain, Benatar constructs the following model:

<u>Within existence there is:</u>

(1) the presence of pain (which is bad)

(2) the presence of pleasure (which is good)

<u>Within non-existence there is:</u>

(3) the absence of pain (which is good)

(4) the absence of pleasure (which is *not* bad)

Benatar argues that when a person exists, they experience both pleasure (which is objectively good) and pain (which is objectively bad). However, when a person does not exist, no experience of either is possible. Thus, in non-existence a potential person is spared the experiences of pain (which is objectively good) whilst not being deprived the experiences of pleasure (which is therefore not bad). Therefore, the relationship between existence and non- existence (in respect of pleasure of pain) is asymmetrical. One concludes from this asymmetry that even if a person exclusively lives a life of pleasure (a situation which Benatar believes is impossible) it would be no better than not ever coming into existence. Thus (according to this model) all things considered, an individual is better off never coming into existence (or, even in the best-case scenario, not worse off).

Furthermore, if one agrees with Benatar that one's life can never be devoid of any pain (perhaps by accepting the second part of his argument - see below), then according to this model one is always worse off when coming into existence as opposed to never coming into existence. The argument Benatar is trying to make is not that we are literally better off not existing, but that, on a state of

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12 As is argued, the quantification of pleasure or pain becomes irrelevant as Benatar simply tries to show that there is no pain in the state of non-existence, a state of affairs which always outweighs existence.

13 This just means that we cannot exist (and experience pleasure or pain) before being born or after dying.

affairs basis, we are always worse off coming into existence. Thus, the crux is that the benefit lies in never existing, as opposed to going-out of existence. For Benatar, the absence of pain is an objective good, irrespective of the subjects it potentially affects. Thus, according to Benatar's model, no matter how good, meaningful or fulfilling human life may be (or may come to be in the future), we are never better off than simply not being in the first place.

The quality of our lives is (much) worse than we think

In addition to the above model, Benatar argues that objectively the quality of human life is actually poor and that most people incorrectly assess the quality of their own lives. The purpose of this analysis is to convince the reader who rejects Benatar's asymmetry that there may still be sufficient reason to abstain from having children. Thus, even if one was to reject the asymmetry above, Benatar's argument may still pose sufficient reason to not have children and, by implication, to accept that non-existence is preferable to existence. To show that we incorrectly assess the quality of our lives, Benatar draws on three psychological principals, namely: (1) the Pollyanna principle; (2) adaptation, accommodation or habituation and (3) comparison with the lives of others. Let us now briefly consider these principles in turn:

(1) The Pollyanna principle

The Pollyanna principle is the phenomenon which suggests that the majority of people tend towards an optimistic outlook on the experiences in their lives. Studies have found that individuals, when asked to recall past experiences, show a bias towards recalling positive experiences instead of negative ones.[14] Additionally, when predicting the future prospects of one's life, this principle dictates that people have a greater tendency towards predicting positive outcomes than negative ones. Finally, when asked to qualify their general state of well-being, most people tend to refer to themselves as somewhat or mostly happy, with most people judging themselves to be better off than the average person. Thus, according to this principle, if one were to measure the quality of life and experiences of an individual objectively, as negative or positive, one would find that the individual's assessment is incongruent and biased towards positivity. It is evident, therefore, that an individual's assessment of the quality of their life is more likely to be skewed in favour of a

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14 Matlin, Margaret W., and Stang, David J.1978, The Pollyanna Principle: Selectivity in Language, Memory and Thought. The principle is named after Pollyanna, the protagonist of Eleanor Porter's children's book of the same name, [Porter, Eleanor H. Pollyanna, (London: George G. Harrap & Co.1972)] which is also the name of a film in which Halley Mills played the main role, released in 1960.

positivity bias than to be accurate overall. Indeed, very few people accurately assess the quality of their lives or regard it as being worse than average. As such, the principle indicates that we are, on balance, likely to give an inaccurate assessment of the quality of our lives and that there is a distinct possibility that an assessment of the kind Benatar makes - that the quality of our lives is objectively poor - is more likely to be correct.

(2) Adaptation, accommodation or habituation

The second principle, which is rather an amalgam of the results of numerous psychological studies, which makes the assessment of the quality of one's life unreliable, Benatar terms: "adaptation, accommodation or habituation".[15] This principle indicates that individuals are adept at adjusting their subjective measurement for what constitutes good quality of life. If a person has a significant negative experience (let us say, for example, they have a traumatic accident which leaves them partially paralyzed), there is an initial dissatisfaction with the new state of affairs in comparison to previous experiences in this person's life. A person who can no longer use their legs is likely to be unhappy about it in accordance with his/her remembrance of how much easier their life was when they could walk and run. However, this individual is likely to adapt to the new state of affairs over time, thus adjusting his/her expectations as well as the measurement against which they assess other experiences in their lives. We have seen, time and time again, how people are capable of overcoming certain challenges, such as not having the use of their legs, in order to continue living their lives as they were - such individuals, when assessed, seem to come to terms with the new state of affairs, having returned to more or less the same psychological state as before the event. In other words, an individual is likely to get used to a state of affairs - even if this state of affairs is arguably objectively bad - and thus assess the quality of his/her life comparatively and (according to Benatar) incorrectly.

(3) Comparison with the lives of others

The final principle Benatar relies on for his claim is that of the tendency for people to assess the quality of their lives in comparison with the lives of others, as opposed to some form of objective

15 Campbell, A., et al, 1976, The Quality of American Life, pp. 163–164,485. Brickman, Coates, and Janoff- Bulman, 1978 "Lottery Winners and Accident Victims: Is Happiness Relative?", pp. 917–927. Headey, and Wearing, 1989, "Personality, Life Events, and Subjective Well-Being: Toward a Dynamic Equilibrium Model", pp. 731–739. Suh, Diener, and Fujita, 1996, "Events and Subjective Well-Being: Only Recent Events Matter", pp.1091–1102. For a recent review of the literature see Ed Diener, et al, "Subjective Well-Being: Three Decades of Progress", pp. 285–286.

measurement. Thus, when individuals assess the quality of their lives, they tend to do so in comparison with the lives of others (this comparison being influenced by the proximity of this other). One tends to measure the quality of one's life in comparison to friends or neighbours, assessing surface elements of such lives. As such, there is a tendency to not only incorrectly assess the quality of others" lives, but to then also incorrectly compare them to their own.[16] Furthermore, as can be seen in the application of the Pollyanna principle, people tend to view the quality of their lives to be comparatively better than that of the average person, thus tending towards an optimism bias for their own lives and a pessimism bias for the lives of others. An assessment of the quality of one's life thus tends to be unreliable as the assessment is based on a (possibly incorrect) comparison to the quality of the lives of others.

Three views on the quality of life, and why life goes badly in all of them

Having shown significant reasons for his claim that we incorrectly judge the quality of our own lives, Benatar proceeds to show why the quality of our lives is objectively poor (at least for the vast majority of people). To achieve this, Benatar analyses three different views about the quality of human life, arguing that life goes objectively badly in all of them. These views are: (1) hedonism; (2) desire fulfilment theory and (3) objective list theory. Let us now consider these theories in respect to Benatar's analysis.

(1) Hedonism

Hedonism is the philosophical belief that pleasure is the highest attainable good and the essential pursuit of all human life. Hedonism is centrally concerned with the mental states one experiences during one's lifetime. Benatar considers positive, negative and neutral mental states. Benatar defines negative mental states as including feelings such as frustration, anger, discomfort, etc. Positive mental states may include either intrinsic positive states (such as enjoying a beautiful piece of music) or the alleviation of negative mental states (such as quelling one's hunger by eating) or a combination of both (such as eating a delicious meal which is intrinsically good whilst also quelling one's hunger).[17]

Neutral mental states are neither negative nor positive mental states but rather constitute an absence

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16 See, for example, Wood, 1996 "What is Social Comparison and How Should We Study it?", pp. 520–537.

17 Benatar, 2006, pp. 70-72.

of a negative mental state (for example, the absence of hunger). With this in mind, Benatar argues that a major part of our lives is made up of negative mental states. We all experience hunger, thirst, bowel and bladder distention and tiredness for a large portion of our lives. In addition to these unavoidable negative mental states, most people experience ones of a much worse nature - most people will, in their lifetime - experience the death of a loved one, a serious disappointment, acute or chronic injury or illness, and so on.

Benatar argues that most of the positive mental states we experience are generally in the form of relief from the abovementioned negative mental states - such as quenching one's thirst or hunger - and intrinsically good positive mental states rarely occur in the absence of at least some kind of negative mental state (we may have an interesting conversation with a friend whilst having a mild headache). Thus, a pure positive mental state is rarely experienced. Finally, Benatar argues that positive mental states of a truly exceptional nature (such as winning the lottery) are few and far between in most people's lives. Thus, when looking at human lives in general, one concludes that the major part of one's life is made up of either purely negative mental states, or positive mental states which only occur as a relief from a negative mental state. Therefore, according to Benatar, in view of the accuracy of hedonism, the quality of our lives is objectively poor.

(2) Desire fulfilment theory

This theory assesses the quality of human life in respect of the amount of satisfied desires one has during one's lifetime. One difficulty that comes up at the outset of this theory, is the one of reliably tracking one's fulfilled desires. Desires tend to be fickle and malleable and, even if they are rigid and clear, one can (barring a kind of strict observation)[18] hardly track and note the amount of fulfilled and unfulfilled desires one has in one's lifetime. Benatar argues that given the difficulty in assessing whether one's desires in life have been met or not, there exists a large margin of error for assessment of the quality of one's life.[19] However, even if one were to accurately measure such a thing, Benatar argues that one's life is usually, in any case, filled with a greater amount of unsatisfied desires than satisfied ones.[20] One generally spends a substantial amount of time in anticipation of the fulfilment of a desire (such as, perhaps, getting one's dream job or going on one's dream holiday) - the anticipation of which may cause frustration or anxiety - and this desire

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18 If one were, for example, to rigidly keep track of one's desires in a notebook throughout one's lifetime.
19 Benatar, 2006, pp. 73-80.
20 Ibid.

may still ultimately remain unfulfilled. In addition, desires which are fulfilled may only remain so for a brief period of time before a similar desire rises anew or becomes ultimately thwarted, perhaps through unforeseen circumstances.[21] Even if one were to fulfil a desire promptly, there is no guarantee that this fulfilment will make one's life better for it. I may have a long-standing desire fulfilled only to find that I remain unhappy or that the quality of my life has not improved. Such an occurrence is bound to only result in further dissatisfaction.[22] It then seems evident that much of our lives is constituted by unsatisfied desires. Those desires that we do satisfy, we generally do so with sacrifice or compromise. Desires that are fulfilled to our absolute satisfaction are exceedingly rare. Benatar argues that the fulfilment of one's desires remains uncertain throughout life, but what is inevitable is that such desires will exist and that at least some of them (but probably most of them) will remain unfulfilled.[23]

(3) Objective list theory

According to Benatar, objective list theory constructs notions of what is considered objectively good and objectively bad sub specie humanitatis.[24] This theory thus attempts to describe states of affairs which are considered good or bad for all humans objectively - irrespective of individual tastes and desires. A list of objective goods will invariably include the experience of pleasurable mental states as well as the fulfilment of desires (as described in the above two sections). Benatar argues that such a theory is still subject to an incorrect assessment of the quality of human lives. Because we construct lists of objective goods sub specie humanitatis, we describe what is good or bad in comparison with the average human life instead of in comparison with some kind of absolute objective measurement - this would be the case if one constructs such a list sub specie aeternitatis.[25] Benatar thus argues that we have insufficient reason to accept that objective lists contain actual objective goods. Just because a state of affairs may be deemed good compared to the life of an average human being, does not mean it translates into an objectively high quality of life. One can, for example, take many of the measurements applicable to an "objectively" good human life, and place conditions upon them which vastly increase their effect. For example, a human being that lives to be 80 years old is regarded as having lived a full life, yet there is no reason this has to be regarded as such. One can easily imagine a state of affairs in which a human can become 200 years

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21 Or perhaps one realises that this desire was not something you actually wanted, and its fulfilment has brought no real satisfaction.
22 Ibid.
23 Ibid.
24 That is, according to an anthropocentric model.
25 That is, according so some kind of universal model.

old, which according to the same measurement - would be much better.[26] One may further imagine a state of affairs in which one spends the largest portion of one's life in good health and only become infirm near one's death instead of the actual state of affairs in which one may begin experiencing ever increasing health problems from as early as 30 years old (or perhaps even younger). Additionally, with allusion to the above discussion on hedonism, one can imagine a state of affairs in which a person never feels hunger, tiredness, pain, anxiety, heartbreak, etc. By the same measurement, this state of affairs would be vastly better than that of the average human life. Therefore, although the quality of one's life may be regarded as good in terms of objective list theory as it is understood, Benatar argues that - because of the measurement being limited sub specie humanitatis - there is sufficient reason to judge the overall quality of human life as objectively poor sub specie aeternitatis.

Implications of Benatar's arguments

David Benatar concludes that, all things considered, a person is always harmed when coming into existence. The logic which follows from this position is that the most preferable situation for human beings would be to become extinct.[27] The implications of this conclusion is that human beings should always abstain from having children. In addition, we ought to actively instantiate the extinction of the human animal - we ought to, for example, make it illegal to have children and (particularly in instances of lack of fault) make abortion compulsory.[28] In justification of this controversial argument, Benatar adopts a particular utilitarian approach. Considering the arguments he makes in favour of anti-natalism (in particular the asymmetry between existence and non-existence), the amount of potential suffering that is prevented through the prevention of bringing new life into existence immeasurably outweighs the amount of suffering that would be experienced by forcing the human species to become extinct. Practically speaking, Benatar's argument has a much more significant implication than most of the arguments one tends to find in philosophical discourse of this nature. Benatar implies in his argument, as well as stating explicitly, that the best thing humans can do is to take steps to ensure the extinction of our species. What Benatar is essentially doing, is reversing the traditional for the value of the perpetuation of human life. "Pro-life" proponents, for example, argue that very good reasons need to be given to allow us to perform

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26 At least, if being 200 years old is no worse than being 80 years old in terms of one's quality of life. In fact, reaching old age without much suffering or pain is a situation which is far better than when it is compared to our actual state of affairs where aging is accompanied by fragility and illness.

27 Benatar, 2006, pp. 132-159.

28 Ibid.

an abortion. Benatar flips reverses this relationship between value and life. For Benatar, very good reasons need to be given to allow a child to be born in the first place. In this regard, Benatar considers problems such as forceable sterilization and abortion. Such extreme considerations are usually considered (at least in the broader philosophical discourse) to be highly unethical. However, in light of Benatar's argument, the amount of suffering that will be spared if no humans are ever able of being born will eventually and immensely outweigh the significant suffering that comes with forced abortions or sterilization.[29]

Benatar's argument and the question of life's seriousness

Having given a brief overview of the core elements of Benatar's arguments as well as the significant implications they have, it becomes the task of this discussion to consider how they relate to the discussion at hand. When one critically considers Benatar in terms of the arguments above, can one reliably conclude that Benatar takes life seriously or not? The reader may ask the pertinent question of what significance Benatar's argument holds for the question "is life serious?" To this I will endeavour to answer that it provides us with significant insight into the notion of seriousness and avails us to a position from which we may further the discussion which is to follow. It must be stated that there is a significant caveat when it comes to the work of Benatar in this book. Benatar is primarily arguing for an anti-natalist position, stating that one should abstain from having children as their existence will invariably lead to a net suffering whereas their non-existence avails them therefrom at no detriment. In the argument, which is to follow, I do not wish to argue against anti-natalism, at least not explicitly. Rather, I wish to use the argument presented by Benatar to highlight a significant problem presented by the ontological structure of human existence with regards to arguments of this nature. I will address the potential criticism that I am misapplying Benatar for my purposes in the development of my argument in Chapter 5 below. For the time being, it is sufficient to keep in mind my claim that arguments of the type Benatar makes are untenable in the face of the necessary seriousness of human existence.[30] When we consider Benatar's philosophy in Better Never to Have Been: the harm of coming into existence, as a whole, we recognize that, at the end of

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29 Benatar does agree, however, that such suffering would be great and that, nearing the end of human extinction, the final few people on earth would experience tremendous suffering. However, considering that no more humans could ever be born, this situation would invariably lead to a net avoidance in human suffering (barring some form of natural mass extinction in the near future).

30 Benatar is certainly not the only thinker to make a strong anti-natalist, perhaps even nihilistic argument. He is, however, a prominent contemporary thinker who presents a unique and strong claim that human life, or existence, is indeed better off not being.

the day, Benatar considers human life not worth living.[31] Indeed, even if one lived the perfect life devoid of suffering (which is, according to Benatar, impossible anyway), one would be no better off than if one had never come into existence to begin with. For Benatar, there is essentially no reason to bring new life into the world. Thus, one may concede that the inherent value Benatar places on (specifically human) life is very low. At least, what outweighs any value human life may have, for Benatar, is the absence of pain - irrespective of subjects who experience it or not. For Benatar, the crux of human existence hinges on a significant and inevitable suffering. He does not think there is any reason to endure this suffering either, nothing about human life that makes it worthy of being. As such, one may well draw the conclusion that Benatar does not take life seriously. However, if the seriousness of life hinges on the magnitude of our concern with human life, it seems not entirely tenable to argue that Benatar is unconcerned with human existence.

Benatar argues for the extinction of all human existence for the sake of no more potential suffering. As such, it appears that Benatar cares extensively about at least one aspect of human life - suffering - and is a proponent of the view that we deserve better than a life filled with unavoidable suffering. Thus, we are better off if we are never born. Furthermore, Benatar is explicit in his deliberations that, once someone is born, because of their vested interests in remaining alive, their death may be regarded as a bad thing.[32] For Benatar, thus, suicide is not the ideal solution to returning the state of non-existence for the sake of avoiding future suffering.[33] Indeed, one of the criticisms one may advance against Benatar's overall argument is that he wants to have it both ways. Benatar argues that non-existence is always better than existence, yet also argues that if one already exists, one is not better off taking one's own life. However, if non-existence is better than existence and there is no real reason to fear death as, upon dying, we are non-existing and thus incapable of suffering, why isn't it better to actively seek the state of non-existence even if one has so-called vested interests in one's life? The development of this particular criticism goes a long way in the assistance of the primary argument of this thesis. However, considering the complexities of such a criticism it is prudent to displace its development to chapters 5 below.

Nevertheless, Benatar's initial claim remains. Given the condition of human suffering, Benatar argues that the human species (and indeed, all sentient life) is better off allowing itself to become

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31 We must note that Benatar makes a distinction between 'lives worth starting" and "lives worth continuing". Benatar admits that a life in progress may very well be worth continuing but that it is never worth starting. The point remains that, for Benatar, the ideals situation is ultimately not to exist.
32 Benatar, 2006, pp. 202-207.
33 Except perhaps, he argues, if one's life is truly terrible.

extinct. As one may expect, this argument has been met with significant controversy, both by professional philosophers and others alike. The notion that it is essentially not worthwhile (and indeed bad) to bring forth new human life throws contemporary understanding of the value of human life into question. As stated above, Benatar places the suffering of human beings at the centre of his concerns. Arguably then, Benatar contends that the present and potential future suffering of human beings outweighs any particular notion that life is worth living. If we follow through this line of thought, we may conclude that Benatar does not hold the apparent inherent value of life in high regard or, at least, not higher than that of the value of avoided suffering. Certainly, to maintain that life ought to become extinct is to maintain that it is of very little relative value.[34] Thus, if we take it to mean that life's seriousness lies in the acknowledgement of its value, one may reasonably argue that Benatar does not take life seriously. The development of the points above will require more careful consideration and deliberation to be expanded adequately. For the time being it serves us well to place this discussion on hold to be concluded at a later stage in this thesis. For now, it is sufficient to place Benatar (tentatively) in a camp that argues against the seriousness of life.

We now turn back to the question "is life a serious matter?". To answer this question, we must first develop a conceptual analysis of 'life' and 'seriousness'. Let us begin by considering what exactly we mean with the concept 'life'.

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34 Most likely, Benatar acknowledges the potential value of human life but regards the inalienable character of inevitable suffering as fatal to any such potential value.

Chapter 3: Life - a biological characteristic shared with the organic world

The discussion at hand asks whether or not 'life' may be regarded as a serious matter. The discussion that follows will give much consideration to what exactly it means for something to qualify as 'serious'. But before putting the necessary particulars in place with regards to seriousness, we are required to determine the content of the concept 'life' in order to adequately determine whether it can be rightfully described as such. What follows is an elucidation of the term 'life' in how it functions in its various conceptual underpinnings. For the sake of the discussion at hand, I may very well define 'life' in accordance with a particular set of characteristics and determine that such an understanding of life sufficiently fits the notion of seriousness. However, such an endeavour would leave much to be desired philosophically (especially with regards to the discussion that follows). Therefore, it is my task to not only construct an adequate conception of 'life' but also to argue that this conception is the only correct understanding of the term as it functions in the question at hand (and other questions of this nature). To complete this task, we begin by considering the various conceptions of 'life'. Secondly, we expand upon the conception of life as existence. Finally, we discover why life is correctly regarded as existence in this discussion and why this conception necessitates its seriousness. Chapters 4 and 5 will deal with the latter two tasks respectively, for now, let us consider 'life' as it appears in its various conceptions.

Life and linguistic convention

To ground the current discussion, it serves us to consider the term 'life' as it functions in general, in English linguistic usage. In other words, what do people usually mean when they use the word 'life'? Barring the metaphorical usage of the word,[35] 'life' is generally used in one of three senses:

To refer to a characteristic that distinguishes certain beings from others (biological life)

In this sense, we are referring to the manner in which the term is generally applied in the natural sciences, especially the studies of biology and medicine. This sense seeks primarily to distinguish the characteristic of a "living being" from a "non-living being". In other words, certain entities are

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35 For example, to refer to the characteristic of a piece of art - e.g. "this piece really brings the Thames to life" - or to describe something as being vigorous or energetic - e.g. "you sure are full of life today!".

alive whilst others are not. We can state that such entities have a 'life'. In this sense, we are referring to a specific characteristic or set of characteristics which afford an entity the notion of 'life'.

To refer to the temporal structure between being and not-being

Perhaps the most commonly used sense is the temporal description of life. In this sense, we are simply referring to the period of time between an entity coming into being and going out of being. In this sense, we are referring to the time of "being alive" that an entity has. Although this sense is most commonly understood with reference to human beings, it is by no means exclusive. It is often applied to animals and even things generally not regarded as biologically alive. I may, for example, refer to the lifespan of my computer. This sense is thus restricted to a description of the temporal structure between a being coming-into-being and no-longer- being.

To refer to *existence*

In this sense, one uses the term to describe that which has been exposited in depth within the school of existential philosophy as existence. What is described, in this sense, is the peculiar phenomenon of being-there and being-in-the-world as an existent. Such usage is almost exclusively with reference to the particular mode of being exhibited by human beings. One could say that, where the first sense above refers to a determinant of what constitutes being "alive", and the second sense referring to the temporal structure of a 'life', this sense refers to the actual activity of being a living, self-aware, in-the-world phenomenon. Giving an accurate description of what exactly this sense is in reference to it would be insufficient at this point. Instead, although some preliminary remarks will be made, the discussion proper is put on hold until the next chapter.

We conclude, then, that within the realm of linguistic usage, their exists three distinct meanings of the term 'life':

(L1) To refer to a characteristic that distinguishes certain beings from others (biological life).

(L2) To refer to the temporal structure between a being coming into being and going out of being.

(L3) To refer to *existence*.

Part of the difficulty of clarifying a concept such as 'life' is due to the frequent inconsistency of its usage. The word is hardly the type that need be strictly applied in the same manner one applies a technically restricting concept such as "electromagnetic" or "chromium". Indeed, unless one restricts oneself to a clearly defined meaning of the word, usage thereof will be dependent on contextual clues and, even then, may still not be entirely clear. One may use the word in a manner that seems to denote all three senses, but none to the full extent. If one speaks of 'life' with reference to death, one may easily cut across all three senses and, if one is not careful, one's exact point may be difficult to understand. In addition, one may use the term in ways that seem to denote none of the above senses, or only as mere suggestions. For example, if I speak of the "political life" of a person as opposed to their "personal life". Furthermore, the term may be applied in a number of metaphorical or analogous expressions. I may say that I wish I had the life of a tree, as trees do not have to work for a living. Here, I am using L3 with reference to a tree as a metaphor for easy living. However, if one takes it to mean L1, the statement takes on a different meaning. Although certainly not the only reason, the linguistic flexibility of a concept such as life contributes to the difficulty of answering questions such as "is life serious?". There appears to be an intangibility in the term, and one is often required to call upon one's intuitions and interpretive tools to make sense of its usage in any given form. Having looked at the common linguistic usage of the term, we turn our attention to the manner in which the term has been used by philosophers, particularly those that struggle with the same problem of definition as we are doing here.

Within philosophical discourse, the matter of conceptualizing life has generally been discussed in one of two general ways. One either goes about the business of defining life as a concept which holds strict ties to the discipline of biology and other natural sciences or, on the other hand, certain philosophical deliberations on life attempt to answer specific questions with inference to questions of meaning - such as what the meaning or value of 'life' entails. An example of the first kind of inquiry would be something like "how ought one to define life?" and an example of the second kind of question would be "is life absurd?" As a preliminary remark to what follows, it must be noted that although a question such as "is life absurd?" seems to indicate an additional investigation into the characteristics of 'life' as a concept. Although this is technically true, the intention with which one undertakes such an investigation is with the purpose of building upon a presupposed understanding of 'life' as a vehicle of existential meaning. On the one hand, we are trying to determine which particulars constitute a correct understanding of 'life' as a characteristic of biological entities and, on the other hand, we are trying to expand upon an already understood notion

of 'life' as existential phenomenon. Before we continue with the discussion at hand, it is worthwhile to briefly analyse some of the discussions which have been formulated in terms of the above approaches.

Life as biological concept

Life, as biological concept, is generally defined as a property of "living" entities. There exists some form of observable substance(s) or interaction(s) within living systems that may be attributed to this property. In discussing this kind of approach to defining life, I will draw on the work of, among others, Bruce Weber, who develops a rigorous and extensive analysis of this philosophical endeavour.[36]

Mechanism versus Vitalism

How, exactly, do we make sense of the phenomenon of organic life? How do we describe the shared characteristic between "living" beings that set it apart from non-living beings? What, exactly, is this force or essence or substance that allows us to distinguish living beings from non-living ones? One of the longest standing discussions in philosophical conceptions of 'life' is the discussion around what exactly constitutes something as being alive. The primary drive behind this discussion being that if one can sufficiently discern the qualities a being needs to exhibit to be considered "alive", then one has essentially discerned what constitutes 'life'. The problem, historically, comes from the question on what imbues something with life, what makes something alive or animate rather than non-alive or inanimate? Answers to this question can generally be divided into mechanist views or vitalist views. The mechanist view maintains that living things are no more than complex machines that consist of complicated parts that work in conjunction with one another to produce a result but that lack any necessarily intrinsic relationship with one another.[37] Regarding human life specifically, Anthropic Mechanism maintains that everything about human beings can be sufficiently explained in terms of the nature of mechanical systems. Contrary to this is the view of the so called vitalists, who believe that what distinguishes living organisms from other things is a non-physical force or element which signifies life, or which determines that living beings are subject to different principles than those that dictate the conditions of inanimate objects. Ultimately,

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[36] Weber, 2011.
[37] Famous mechanists include Thomas Hobbes (see *The Leviathan*, 1651), Rene Descartes (who is credited with the introduction of the mind-body problem, see the *Treatise of Man* and *Passions of the Soul*) and Maurice- Merleau-Ponty.

the debate between mechanists and vitalists comes down to the question of whether life is reducible to a purely physical phenomenon or not. As stated pertinently by Bruce Weber,[38] the 20th Century version of the debate between mechanists and vitalists may be captured by the work of three authors over the course of four books, namely: Woodger (1929), J.S. Haldane (1929, 1931) and Lancelot Hogben (1930). Haldane rejected the strict mechanist view of life, stating that, when observed, biological systems seem to exhibit behaviour that is inconsistent with physical ones. He believed that the principles of chemistry and physics were insufficient to account for biology. As he states: "It is life we are studying in biology, and not phenomena which can be represented by causal conceptions of physics and chemistry"[39] However, he denies that the nature of biological entities is to be understood from an all-encompassing non-physical (vital) force, but rather that the phenomena that is life can only be understood from a more holistic perspective.

Hogben, on the other hand, takes the approach towards a reductionist epistemology and ontology. Hogben regards consciousness as integral to the problem of life. For Hogben, formulating the problem in a way that separates the inquiry into life or consciousness appears to be an error. As he writes in The Nature of Living Matter: "…an inquiry into the nature of life and the nature of consciousness presupposes the necessity of formulating the problem in the right way."[40] Hogben's views, however, are influenced by his idea that the nature of science is incompatible with the completeness that he deemed to be sought out in philosophy. In other words, Hogben understands the sciences as always incomplete, focusing on the evidence of phenomena to inform it thus always being open to falsifiability in its practice. On the other hand, philosophy - according to Hogben - strives to obtain homogenous knowledge.

As Bruce Weber writes on Hogben:

> "He saw no need to abandon the reductionist methodology that biochemistry was developing and argued that Whitehead's assumption that science would reveal a universe consistent with human ethical predilections should be reversed and that philosophy would have to conform with the findings of science."[41]

Woodger determined that one's understanding of 'life' is a much more complex matter than can be

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[38] Weber, 2011.
[39] Haldane, 1931, p. 28.
[40] Hogben, 1930, pp. 31-32.
[41] Ibid.

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explained by either a mechanist or vitalist conception. When one talks of 'life' one talks of a characteristic of an entity which appears beyond the realm of being able to be fully explained by science. As he writes: "…by a cell therefore I shall understand a certain type of biological organization, not a concrete entity"[42] What Woodger argues is that the kind of concern one is dealing with in the sciences, is insufficient for our understanding of 'life', which is determined to be a concept of a complexity unveiled by pure scientific inquiry. As such, Woodger suggests abandoning the word 'life' in scientific discourse and rather using "living organism" as the subject of study as the question of the homogenous character of life is beyond science.[43] As seen from the above, this particular avenue of investigation into 'life' is less concerned with what exactly we should call 'life' but rather whether 'life' is reducible to mechanical interactions or not. The debate may be characterized as taking either a mechanist, vitalist or middle ground approach. Having considered the debate above, we may turn to some of the more substantial approaches that have been taken to address this problem.

Life conceived as biochemical phenomenon

Frederick Hopkins, in the Department of Biochemistry at the University of Cambridge, made great strides in the field of biochemistry with his desire to understand all biological phenomena at a chemical level. Hopkins understanding of life is certainly not vitalist, but still rejects the harsh reductionism of traditional mechanists.

As Weber states:

"Hopkins rejected both the reductionism of organic chemists who sought to deduce in vitro what had to happen in vivo and the crypto-vitalism of many physiologists who viewed the protoplasm of living cells as itself alive and irreducible to chemical analysis."[44]

Hopkins' view of life was one of greater complexity. Although Hopkins would never ascribe a vital force to living beings, he maintained that our understanding of living cells is complicated beyond pure physical interactions. Living cells are constituent of a series of organized structures which interact with one another in a manner that appears irreducible to singular constituents.

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[42] Woodger, 1929, p. 296.
[43] Weber, 2011.
[44] From Weber, 2011, in reference to Hopkins, 1913 [1949]

Hopkins states:

> [The living cell is] "not a mass of matter composed of a congregation of like molecules, but a highly differentiated system: the cell, in the modern phraseology of physical chemistry, is a system of co-existing phases of different constitutions"[45]

What Hopkins finds is that, when observed on a chemical level, a cell's makeup comes in the form of a complex set of interactions between chemicals at different levels, at different phases and in different orders, all of which appear to serve a different function. The organization of the different phases of these different constitutions is what appears to make the cell "alive". Thus, Hopkins understanding of life was that of it being "a property of the cell as a whole, because it depends on the organization of its processes."[46] Following the work of Hopkins, we find several thinkers who also contribute significantly to the understanding of life as not a matter of an entity's constitution but rather as a series of complex processes. Joseph Needham, one of Hopkins' students, concluded that in the important consideration in terms of 'life', the question comes to an understanding of mind vs body, as opposed to simply living vs non-living. To this end, biochemistry must restrict itself to the study of the latter, conceding the former to the work of philosophy or neuroscience.[47] Alongside Needham, we find his colleague, N.W. Pirie who concluded that defining life could not be adequately done by a list of variables or processes as life "cannot be defined in terms of one variable."[48] Following the work of Hopkins and with the continual focus on molecular physics in the years leading up to the Second World War, the focus shifted from an attempt to understand the nature of 'life' itself to an investigation into the advent of life. In other words, recognizing that biochemistry (or the natural sciences in general) may be inadequate to elucidate the essence of 'life', one must still investigate the apparent anomalies in living systems.

Why is it that living entities appear to behave in ways incongruous with physical laws as applied to non-living entities? For example, as claimed by Haldane: "[life is] a pattern of chemical processes. This pattern has special properties. It begets a similar pattern, as a flame does, but it regulates itself as a flame does not."[49] Thus, the question moves away from "what is life?" to "how does life

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[45] Hopkins, 1913 [1949], p. 151.
[46] Hopkins, 1913 [1949], p. 152.
[47] See Needham, 1925.
[48] Pirie, 1937, pp. 21–22.
[49] Haldane 1947, p. 56, this metaphor stands for the apparent anomaly of biological systems able to self-regulate their inner systems despite the second law of thermodynamics stating that all-natural systems proceed with increasing

emerge from natural phenomena governed by physical laws?" This focus places the inquiry into the realm of molecular biology as we attempt to understand how the interaction of systems on a molecular level may result in what we can conceive of as a living system.

Schrödinger - "What is Life?"

In 1943, well known scientist Erwin Schrödinger's gave a series of lectures which released in 1944 as the text *What is Life?* His work, although not as ground-breaking as that of Hopkins, served as an amalgam of the most common strands of thought on the topic during the period. In his attempt to address the question, "what is life?" Schrödinger was concerned with two primary problems: (1) how do entities made up of ordered molecules act in a manner that seems to go against the understanding of entropy - or: how do entities maintain sustained hereditary molecular order in a manner that non-living entities cannot? And (2) How does the thermodynamics of living things function generally and how they appear to give rise to order from disorder through their metabolic structure? Schrödinger answers his first question by concluding that hereditary information is contained within a code that is contained in a "aperiodic" solid within the molecular material. As a result, the replication of the molecular structure would be of a higher-level order due to the pattern found within the atoms which constitute the molecular hereditary.[50] His answer to the second question, that a cell must constantly maintain a state outside of an equilibrium as the method of dealing with entropy, has been overtaken by modern understandings on the structure of DNA and the structure of genetics in molecules.

Schrödinger sums up the answers to the questions above as follows:

> "…an organism's astonishing gift of concentrating a "stream of order" on itself and thus escaping the decay into atomic chaos — of "drinking orderliness" from a suitable environment — seems to be connected with the presence of "aperiodic solids", the chromosome molecules, which doubtless represent the highest degree of well-ordered atomic association we know of — much higher than the ordinary periodic crystal — in virtue of the individual role every atom and every radical is playing here"[51]

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entropy.
[50] Weber, 2011.
[51] Schrödinger 1944, p. 77.

Despite the above, Schrödinger's secondary argument has inspired a great body of work in what has come to be known as "non-equilibrium thermodynamics." For example, the work of J.D. Bernal, as inspired by Schrödinger's student, Illya Prigonine, explores the relationship of the living 'organisms' ability to maintain an internal order through both interacting with 'its' external environment and 'its' ability to create internal disorder.[52] Further examples include the work of Harold Morowitz on the production of internal order through "gradients of energy".[53] Morowitz work, in particular, helps us to understand the apparent peculiar phenomenon of 'life' as going against entropy by explaining how living systems produce and maintain energy whilst still paying the "entropy debt".

As Jansch, another prominent thinker in the field, puts it:

"With the help of this energy and matter exchange with the environment, the system maintains its inner non-equilibrium, and the non-equilibrium in turn maintains the exchange process…. A dissipative structure continuously renews itself and maintains a particular dynamic regime, a globally stable space-time structure".[54]

As Bernal points out, such an understanding of the cell does not reduce it to physics, but rather, as stated by Warren Weaver, is to understand it in terms of an "organized complexity."[55] The phenomenon of self-maintenance of an internal order is not exclusive to cells or organisms, but are observable in ecosystems and larger life systems as well.[56] What is perhaps needed to accommodate an understanding of life as organized complexity is a systems focused approach.

As Weber states:

"Given that the catalysts in biological systems are coded in the genes of the DNA, one place to start defining life is to view living systems as informed, autocatalytic cyclic entities that develop and evolve under the dual dictates of the second law of thermodynamics and of natural selection."[57]

Such an approach is an attempt to study living systems and thus life in a manner which attempts to

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[52] Bernal, 1951.
[53] See Morowitz, 1968 (iterations: Peacocke, 1983; Brooks and Wiley, 1986: Wicken, 1987; Schneider, 1993; Swenson, 2000; Morowitz, 2002).
[54] Jansch 1980.
[55] Weaver, 1984.
[56] Camazine et al. 2000, Ulanowicz, 1997.
[57] Depew & Weber, 1995; Weber & Depew, 1996.

reconcile hard physicalism with observed complexity in living phenomena without recourse to vitalism. Whether such an approach to 'life' is sufficient to understand the complexities fully, is still a matter of debate. Nevertheless, such an approach contains a dynamism which allows for scientific explanations of the aforementioned emergence of life without the necessary implication of a vital force that motivates living behaviour.

The emergence of living systems

Given our understanding of physical phenomena, the existence of life is a peculiar one. By most measures, living entities seem to contradict many of the physical laws through which we understand the world. Finding that a reductionism is inadequate in describing what exactly 'life' is, we have concluded that science is best suited to the study of the complexity of living systems, perhaps being unable to fully avail itself to any description of life beyond the complexity of its systems. Nonetheless, perhaps the most significant obstacle to a scientific conception of life lies within an understanding of its emergence. Franklin Harold maintains that the question of life's origin is the question which carries perhaps the greatest significance to modern science whilst Bruce Ruse states that any definition of 'life' which is to be both scientifically and philosophically adequate must entail an investigation into the origin thereof.[58] Robert Rosen perhaps puts it best when he states that the phenomenon of life creates a problem in understanding what it is. What we are confronted with is not simply the question of what life is, but why it is. What "we are really asking, in physical terms, [is] why a specific material system is an organism and not something else."[59] Modern, post-Darwinian, theories on the emergence of life can be found as early as 1929 from both Alexander Oparin and J.B.S. Haldane.[60] Their work suggests the understanding of the geomorphic nature of earth's early atmosphere resulting in a kind of "primordial soup", through which an increasing complex set of reactions may give rise to the precursors of modern living metabolic structures within living organisms. Weber calls this the "metabolism-first" view.[61] Later work would suggest that proteins may hold the key to the emergence of life.[62] With the modern understanding of the structure of DNA, Dawkins posits what Weber calls the "self-replication" theory.[63]

Dawkins posits that the nucleic acids, which hold the templates for self-replication, may hold the

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[58] Harold, 2001, p. 235 and Ruse, 2008, p. 101.
[59] Rosen 1991, p. 15
[60] Oparin, 1929, Haldane, 1929/1967.
[61] Weber, 2011.
[62] Miller, 1953, Fox & Harada 1958, Fox 1988.
[63] Weber, 2010.

key to the emergence of life if they occurred initially by chance.[64] However, most processes for getting to nucleic acid require mimetic templates or catalyst activity which appear highly improbable by chance.[65] The solution to this catalyst activity may lie in the structure of RNA. However, since RNA requires some metabolic processes for its replication, many approaches blend the "metabolism-first" and "replication-first" views. Variants of these approaches make up the dominant modern view on the emergence of life.[66]

Artificial Life

We have, up till now, discussed the attempts to define life by analysing the underlying biological structure of living organisms, set against the backdrop of the mechanist versus vitalist debate. When we study what life is, we do so by analysing the underlying structure of beings that appear to be alive. However, with the advance of modern technology, it has become possible to encounter artificial systems that exhibit the same characteristics as organic systems but that are constituted by different underlying structures. Thus, the problem of artificial life complicates attempts to define it.

Work on artificial life seeks to determine life in any form as it presents itself in a larger conceptual framework. As such, the goal is not to simply understand current living systems but to understand what exactly constitutes something as living.[67] The focus is shifted to the processes in living things rather than the material makeup of their structures.[68] Studies in artificial life focus on the organizational relationship between the components of a system above the actual components themselves.

Bruce Weber states:

"A-Life [Artificial life] studies can help us to sharpen our ideas about what distinguishes living from non-living and contribute to our definition of life. Such work can help delineate the degree of importance of the typical list of attributes of living entities, such as reproduction, metabolism, functional organization, growth, responsiveness to the environment, movement, and short- and long-term adaptations." A-Life work can also allow exploration

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[64] Dawkins, 1976.
[65] Cairns-Smith, 1982.
[66] Gilbert, 1986, Maynard Smith and Szathmary 1995, Dyson 1982, 1999; de Duve, 1995, Eigen 1992
[67] Langton, 1989, 1995.
[68] Emmeche, 1994.

about which features of life are due to the constraints of being enmattered in a particular manner and subject to physical and chemical laws, as well as exploring a variety of factors that might affect evolutionary scenarios."[69]

Work on Artificial life is still significantly young. However, what is clear is that the emergence of the field complicates the traditional understanding of life. What is implicit in this discussion, beyond the problems that have been raised above, is that an attempt to define life is more complex than the process of examining the underlying physical structure. Rather, 'life' appears to fall within a broader, more complex conceptual framework, dependent on the complex processes of the components that make up the system, as well as the relationships within it.

Life as living systems

Above, we have explored some of the most prominent discussions on the concept life from a particular, biological, understanding thereof. This understanding dictates that entities are either alive or not alive and those that are, possess common characteristics that determine it as such. Such an approach attempts to reduce 'life' to a purely empirically discernible understanding. However, as we have seen above, attempts to do this have been difficult. Nevertheless, if one reduces and attempts to understand life in this way, what happens to questions such as "is life serious?"

For one, words may still simply mean different things. Perhaps one should simply accept that 'life' understood in this way has no real bearing on the question posed in this thesis. One may even, as Woodger suggests, conclude that we are better off using a different term such as "living organism" to conceptualize that what is being studied here isn't 'life' as such, but simply a part thereof. On the other hand, if one is truly able to reduce 'life' to a set of complex physical phenomena, one can theoretically understand the "seriousness of life" from a purely physical perspective. Human existence may thus be reducible to a series of complex interactions within and outside of the body. If this is done, the question becomes a matter of psychology, the seriousness of life is understood to be essentially artificial and the potential conclusion holds that "life is only serious because, if we didn't think it was, we may realize this and stop reproducing." However, as we will see, such an understanding fails to properly encapsulate the complexities of the question and leaves us with an ultimately unsatisfactory resolution. On the other hand, we have philosophers who work with an understanding of life as existential phenomenon. With this conceptualization, we attempt to

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[69] Etxeberria 2002, Weber, 2011.

elucidate something about life as it presents to us as living beings. There is seemingly no doubt that such an understanding is exclusive to human beings. It may be that animals exist in a similar fashion. However, if my dog's inner life is filled with angst, it is a reality that I can never be a part of and as such we must limit our understanding of life to that of human existence. Even here we can begin to see the schism between such an understanding and the former, biological one. We must now consider discussions on 'life' as it appears in conceptions of this kind.

Life as existential phenomenon

The other notable manner in which the concept 'life' functions in the field of philosophy is with recourse to its existential underpinnings. Indeed, some of the earliest endeavours into philosophy entail questioning life's "meaning" and trying to understand the purpose of being alive (and subsequently, how we ought to live). The concept 'life' clearly functions differently from the manner in which it does above. Although such discussions usually do little to describe which understanding of 'life' is being used, one immediately understands certain aspects thereof. In such usage, 'life' is usually restricted to an anthropocentric conception thereof. For example, if I say that "life is unfair" I am referring to the conditions of hardship that appear to come along with existing as a human being. Even in instances where one is referring to non- human entities, the understanding occurs as analogous to that of human life. If I say "that my dog's life is unfair" I am doing so from an analogous understanding of "fairness" from a human-centred view. To understand the use of the concept 'life' in this fashion, we may consider some of the most common arguments that have been made in an attempt to answer one of the oldest philosophical questions: "what is the meaning of life?"

What is the meaning of life?

When we ask after the "meaning of life", the substance of this question may seem intuitive, yet we may encounter difficulty with regards to "meaning". We must ask, firstly, what the referent of "meaning" is. Before we continue with the discussion below, we will attempt to gain further clarity on this definition. Generally, when we speak of a meaningful life, we understand it to mean that the life of the individual contains an overall positive value, and that a meaningful life is not one that is generally neutral nor one that is simply the constituent of sufficient

concern. In other words, just because a life may seem important, does not necessarily mean that it is meaningful.[70] One element that appears uncontroversial, is that meaningfulness is different to goodness. As Thaddeus Metz states: "Note that one can coherently hold the view that some people's lives are less meaningful than others, or even meaningless, and still maintain that people have an equal moral status."[71] One's moral status is not necessarily tied to the meaningfulness of one's life.[72] Another element is that meaningfulness is different from happiness or rightness.[73] To say that someone's life is meaningful is not necessarily the same as saying they are happy. Nozick uses the example of a virtual reality machine, stating that such a machine may be capable of making us perfectly happy, but most people would disagree that such a life is at all meaningful.[74] Furthermore, as Metz states, there are many examples of what may be called a meaningful life that includes the sacrifice of one's own happiness for the sake of others.[75]

Metz states that happiness and meaningfulness may have a synthetic relationship with one another,[76] but maintains that they are conceptually different.[77] How then, do we go about defining the meaning of "meaning"? One finds that there is hardly a consensus to an answer for this question within the philosophical community. One approach is to value the meaningfulness of life by the achievement of choice-worthy purposes and the satisfaction that comes therefrom.[78] Metz writes[79] that, some suggest that to this we must add that the purposes "also render a life coherent,[80] make it intelligible (and coherent)[81] or transcend animal nature."[82] However, as Metz points out, such an analysis does not account for the ideas such as Sartre's notion that meaning is determined by the individual or Taylor's suggestion that the mythical character Sisyphus is able to gain meaning in his life by having his strongest desire satisfied.[83] Finally, one may counter such arguments with the idea that we are not really talking about any substantial notion of life's "meaning" but that we are simply

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[70] See Edwards, 1972; Munitz, 1986; Seachris, 2009.
[71] Metz, 2013, see also Railton, 1984 and Nozick, 1974.
[72] One who, for example, makes a significant scientific discovery. Such an action may be viewed impartially as neither good nor bad yet still meaningful.
[73] See Wolf, 2010.
[74] Nozick, 1974, pp. 42-45.
[75] For example, the humanitarian who devotes his/her life to helping the less fortunate, even at the expense of comfort or luxury or the notion of a peaceful, easy life.
[76] One may say, for example, that life lacks meaning if one is unhappy.
[77] Metz, 2013.
[78] See Nielsen, 1964, Hepburn, 1965, Wolhgennat 1981.
[79] Metz, 2013.
[80] Markus, 2003.
[81] Thomson, 2003, pp. 8–13. Van Niekerk, 2017, pp. 202-204, 269-277. A coherent life is one that can be reconstructed where all the parts fit an overall, coherent project.
[82] Levy, 2005.
[83] Taylor, 1980, chp 18.

qualitatively comparing different goods.[84] The difficulty in finding a homogenous understanding of life's meaning may raise the possibility that it does not exist. As such, one may rather, as Metz suggests, turn to an analysis of the elements which overlap in each instance in the hope of finding certain "family resemblances."[85]

Metz states that the "meaning of life" may thus be referring to any of the following ideas:

"…certain conditions that are worthy of great pride or admiration, values that warrant devotion and love, qualities that make a life intelligible, or ends apart from base pleasure that are particularly choice-worthy."[86]

He remains open to the possibility, however, that no such resemblances exist and the "meaning of life" may consist of a collection of "heterogenous ideas."[87] What is required thus is an analysis of the field of study to determine what the potential connotations of meaning are, along with distinguishing it from similar notions, such as lives worth living or good lives. In what follows, we will analyse some of the most pertinent attempt to deal with this problem.

Supernaturalism

Any question of this nature and particularly the question, "what is the meaning of life?" is bound to be determined by one's approach to metaphysics. Broadly speaking, we may divide such approaches into either naturalism or supernaturalism. In the simplest of understandings, naturalism can be understood by the notion that everything in being is subject to natural laws. Thus, the naturalist understands the world as being made up of a number of different particles, with actions taking place as a result of an energy exchange between different physical entities. Although there is great variety amongst the naturalists, what ties them together is an understanding that there are no forces beyond the physical which act upon the world. On the other hand, Supernaturalism believes exactly that there are forces, generally manifested in a realm beyond the observable and physical world, which have a direct bearing on the physical world. The best-known example of supernaturalism is the impact the existence of a supernatural deity (such as the theistic God) has on our understanding of reality and our relationship with the world. Naturalistic approaches to existence determine that the meaning of one's existence is not dependent on anything more than

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[84] Ibid.
[85] Metz, 2013.
[86] Ibid.
[87] See also Mawson, 2010 and Oakley, 2010.

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certain ways of living one's life. In terms of supernaturalism, meaning is a constituent of one's relationship with the spiritual realm. Accordingly, the meaning of one's existence depends on God (or Gods) and this realm. If God or such a realm doesn't exist (or one fails to avail oneself to it properly) then one's life is, by implication, meaningless.[88] Metz divides supernaturalism approaches to meaning into God- centric and soul-centric views. God-centric views focus on one's relationship to a deity as the arbiter of meaning. Soul-centric views focus on the particular state one's soul is in, to determine meaning. However, as Metz notes, most supernatural views of meaning take the form of some combination of the above two views. Let us now briefly consider each in turn.

Meaning and God(s)

Perhaps the most common understanding of Supernatural meaning comes in the form exhibited by many of the major religions which depict the monotheistic God. Religions such as Christianity, Islam and Judaism depict God (or Allah or Jehovah) as the creator of humanity who has done just that in order to instil a purpose within us. Thus, the fulfilment of this purpose is what grants meaning to our existence.[89] If one strays from a lifestyle devoted to fulfilling this purpose, one's life essentially becomes devoid of meaning. Some theorists in this line of thinking maintain that such a God-created purpose would give the only sufficient situation in which the meaning of human existence is not wholly contingent.[90] Others maintain that the creation of humans with a purpose instils meaning because of the intention of the creator.[91] Although the validity of such stances are debatable, Metz highlights a criticism which seems to damn them:

> "Not only does each of these versions… have specific problems, but they all face this shared objection: if God assigned us a purpose, then God would degrade us and thereby undercut the possibility of us obtaining meaning from fulfilling the purpose."[92]

Nozick suggests that meaning may be obtained from God but not necessarily from God's purpose but rather in the form of one's relationship to God as an infinite being.[93] Because we are finite beings, we must draw meaning from other, external conditions. One, for example, finds meaning in

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[88] Metz, 2013.
[89] Affolter, 2007, Cottingham, 2003.
[90] Craig, 1994, cf. Haber, 1997.
[91] Gordon, 1983.
[92] Baier, 1957, pp. 118–20; Murphy, 1982, pp. 14–15; Singer 1996, p. 29.
[93] Nozick, 1981, chp. 6, 1989, chs. 15–16; see also Cooper, 2005.

one's marriage. However, since one's marriage is also a finite condition, it must draw its meaning from another finite condition, and so on. Nozick concludes that such a regress may only end with something infinite, namely, God. God, thus, as an infinite being is presented as the source of all meaning. The objection to this is that there is no reason that finite beings cannot obtain meaning from within themselves, thus defeating the need for any regress, and metaphysical explanation for meaning, at all.[94]

Apart from the problems with particular forms of this theory, God-centred views come up against two other significant problems. For one, several arguments have been advanced that suggest that the meaning-giving function performed by God is just as sufficiently (perhaps more so) met by naturalistic theories. Metz[95] identifies the example arguments of (1) a world that cannot be just without God[96] and (2) that God's love and remembrance is enough to confer meaning on our lives.[97] To these arguments, the counter-arguments have been advanced that (1) the work of balancing the unjust with the just may just as easily be done by a force of nature and (2) the love and remembrance we get from actual people in our lives (as opposed to an impersonal deity) is just as meaningful, if not more so.[98] Secondly, we are able to observe a number of examples which seem to act as counterfactuals to the notion of God-centred meaning. We may, for example, look at the lives of people like Isaac Newton, Nelson Mandela, Leonardo Da Vinci and so on and proclaim that such people have lived meaningful lives without any recourse to a deity as explanation.[99]

The condition of the soul

Soul-centred views on meaning determine that the meaning of one's life is a direct correlate of an infinite, immortal substance that will outlive us when we die. In other words, our soul. To this end, the authentic human identity can be found in the soul, with the body only serving as a temporary, physical vessel. The meaning of one's life is thus invariably focused on its relationship with the soul.

Metz identifies two primary versions of this view:[100] The first is the most popular conception. The

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[94] Thomson, 2003, pp. 25-26, 48.
[95] Metz, 2013.
[96] Craig, 1994, Cottingham 2003 pt. 3
[97] Harthshorne, 1984.
[98] Metz, 2013.
[99] Metz, 2013.
[100] Ibid.

primary notion is connected with the outcome of our actions. Generally, we do something because we desire the outcome. As such, we can say that we do something if it is "worth" doing. However, if we are finite beings and all of our actions will come to nought, what makes anything worth doing? As such, life can only be meaningful if one's soul lives on after one's demise.[101] To this, one may ask whether a finite existence cannot incur meaning just as well as an infinite existence.[102] Furthermore, Levine has posited the notion that one need not have an infinite being in order for one's actions to have an infinite effect.[103] The second conception of the soul-centred view is connected with the notion of justice. One may argue that a life that does not distinguish good and evil cannot be meaningful, and thus for a life to be meaningful, justice must prevail. To this end, one argues that, for absolute justice to prevail, one must possess a soul. A life in which evil is allowed to flourish without consequence seems meaningless - unless one can rely on reward or punishment in the afterlife. Such a view may strike us as intuitively true, but upon reflection, one finds that there is no reason to equate infinite justice with meaning (one can, for example, posit that a meaningful life equates to a life-long pursuit of justice for those that have been wronged). Furthermore, as mentioned by Perrett, if an afterlife is necessary to carry out justice, it seems unnecessary for it to be an eternal one - if anything, it seems excessive.[104]

The criticism that certain naturalistic conceptions are adequate bearers of meaning is also applicable to the soul-centred view. As already stated, actions that have a lasting impact (perhaps it need not be infinite) may still be regarded as meaningful, regardless of whether one will live forever in the afterlife. Furthermore, one may argue that meaning is to be found in the means of living, as opposed to its ends. A further criticism to this view is that, far from making our lives meaningful, the existence of an immortal soul may be the very thing that makes our lives meaningless. It is not hard to imagine, that an immortal life may become very boring after the first few centuries.[105] Perhaps a more detrimental critique is that if one lives with the knowledge that one will continue to live forever after one's death, what meaning does one's actions truly have?106 If one has an immortal soul, what value would one's mortal sacrifices carry?

Metz puts it succinctly:

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[101] Metz mentions this work as suggested by Leo Tolstoy (1884), but see also Hanfling, 1987, pp. 22-24 and Morris 1992, p. 26 and Craig, 1994.

[102] Schmidtz, 2001, Audi 2005, pp. 354-55.

[103] Levine, 1987, p. 462.

[104] Perrett, 1986, p. 220.

[105] Williams, 1973, Ellin 1995, pp. 311-312, Belshaw 2005, pp. 82-91, Smuts 2011. Of course, immortality need not be boring - see Fischer 1994, Wisnewski 2005, Chappell 2009

[106] Nussbaum, 1989, Kass, 2001.

> "[One] could not promote justice of any important sort, be benevolent to any significant degree, or exhibit courage of any kind that matters, since life and death issues would not be at stake."[107]

Naturalism and meaning

It seems reasonable to conclude that notions of the meaning of life originated from a kind of mythical thinking prior to any notions of inherent or artificial meaning. In other words, it seems likely that human beings turned initially to supernatural notions on meaning before entertaining notions of the contrary. However, as has been shown, many supernatural theories of meaning possess a natural counterfactual which serves the same purpose. What lies at the centre of naturalist theories of meaning is the notion that a meaningful life is possible in a purely physical world. Two pertinent questions arise within this theory. Firstly, the question of whether meaning is purely a constituent of the human mind and secondly, if so, is meaning objectively possible or is it a subjective construct? From a purely naturalistic perspective, it is not difficult to infer that meaning is a constituent of the mind. In other words, meaning is something that exists in the mind of human beings and is not to be found from an external source. If this is accepted, to what extent does the human mind constitute meaning and can it be invariable among all people? To answer this question, we turn to what Metz identifies as "subjectivist" and "objectivist" theories of naturalistic meaning.[108] The subjectivist would maintain that meaning is dependent on an individual's perspective. If one has good reason to find meaning in something, then it is meaningful. Such beliefs are thus generally a product of one's desires, ends or choices.[109] Opposed to this, the objectivist would argue that there exists some invariant standard of meaning because meaning is a property that exists beyond purely mental states.[110] We will briefly consider each of these arguments in turn.

Subjectivism versus Objectivism

Subjectivism dictates that meaning depends on the individual and their mental states. Meaning depends on what one finds to be meaningful. The more one partakes in action that one finds

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[107] Metz, 2013.
[108] Ibid.
[109] Ibid.
[110] Ibid.

meaningful, the more meaningful one's life is.[111] Frankfurt, a prominent subjectivist, believes that loving or caring is the relevant mental state, and that this attitude towards something is directly correlated with meaning.[112] Subjectivists are generally sceptical of the idea that meaning can exist outside of the mind.[113] Accounting for such a phenomenon seems unlikely and is accordingly less viable than accounting for the mental states of individuals. Metz attributes the decreasing popularity of subjectivism in favour of objectivism during the 20th century to an argumentative procedure known as "reflective equilibrium". He explains that "more controversial normative claims are justified by virtue of entailing and explaining less controversial normative claims that do not command universal acceptance. Such a method has been used to defend the existence of objective value…"[114]

The objectivist infers that meaning is constituted (at least partially) independent of the mind. As such, certain conditions are regarded as meaningful upon action (such as achieving a certain task) or inherently meaningful. When we observe certain kinds of lives, we may conclude that some are meaningful (a person who devotes her life to curing cancer), some are less meaningful (a person who lives a mundane life) and some are perhaps not meaningful at all (such as a person who devotes their life to eating snow). Such observations seem intuitive. Objectivism does a sufficient job at supporting such intuitions, whilst subjectivism seems unable to account for them. Most objectivists, however, would maintain some degree of subjective concern is necessary for something to be properly meaningful.[115] Meaning for the individual is lost if, for example, one takes up a project that is regarded as objectively important but that one does not care about subjectively.[116] There is some variation among objectivists, with some taking a very strict objectivist, almost utilitarian approach,[117] and others approaching the problem in the manner mentioned above. Attempts have been made to unify objectivist theories by capturing what all meaning giving conditions have in common. Suggestions include that all entail some element of creativity,[118] or that they entail elements of rightness or virtue.[119] However, one still finds examples which seem to fall outside of this scope (such as making a great scientific discovery). There exists a

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[111] Trisel, 2002, Hooker 2008, Alexis 2011.

[112] 1982, 2002, 2004.

[113] Frankfurt, 2002, p. 250, Trisel, 2002, pp. 73, 79, 2004, pp. 378–379.

[114] Metz, 2013.

[115] Wolf, 1997a, p. 211; see also Hepburn, 1965; Kekes, 1986, 2000; Wiggins, 1988; Wolf, 1997b, 2002, 2010; Dworkin, 2000, ch. 6; Raz 2001, chp. 1; Schmidtz, 2001; Starkey, 2006; Mintoff, 2008.

[116] Metz, 2013.

[117] Ibid.

[118] Taylor, 1987.

[119] Kant 1791, Pogge, 1997.

myriad of different objectivist theories that attempt to capture the nature of objective meaning.[120] Yet, it appears that no theory has been able capture all conditions of intuitive meaning. Some objectivists maintain that searching for a unified theory of meaning is pointless and that a pluralist approach is warranted.[121]

Nihilism

In discussing the theories up till now, one sets out from the assumption that (at least some) lives are meaningful. However, the distinct possibility exists that this presupposition is mistaken, and that, in fact, no lives are meaningful. Nihilistic perspectives on meaning pertain that a meaningful life is either not truly obtainable or that it is, from the outset, not possible.[122] The initial signifier of nihilism comes from the denial of supernatural views on meaning. If one finds that there are no spiritual forces at work in the world, one determines that there is also nowhere from which to draw meaning but ourselves. If this is the case, one may just as easily conclude that there is no possibility for meaning.[123] Newer forms of nihilism, reject that meaning is impossible not only because we lack a divine order, but because it is inherent to the human condition.[124] Some claim that this is due to a perpetual dissatisfaction that afflicts us.[125] Another perspective which reinvigorates the discussion on nihilism in recent years is through the lens of anti-natalism. Consider, for example, the above argument made by David Benatar. Benatar argues that life is an inevitable suffering, much better to be avoided.[126] As such, if we are hard-pressed to determine whether Benatar takes life "seriously", it seems relatively easy to conclude that he at least does not find life to be meaningful. To this statement a caveat must be added. Benatar argues that people may very well find meaning in life and that if someone is in the process of living their life, they may as well see it through in a meaningful way. Rather, Benatar believes that the meaning that is available in our lives is not enough to satisfy us. What little meaning can be found is life is not enough to justify the inevitable suffering that comes along with being brought into existence. For Benatar, life is not something even worth bothering with in the first place.

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[120] Nozick - connecting with the organic unity, Nozick 1981, ch. 6, 1989, chs. pp. 15–16, Bond - realizing human excellence in oneself, 1983, chs 6, 8, maximally promoting non-hedonistic goods (Railton, 1984), improving the quality of life of people and animals (singer, 1993, ch 12, 1995, chs 10-11; 1996, ch 4).
[121] Wolf, 1997b, pp. 12-13, Kekes, 2000, Schmidtz, 2001.
[122] Metz, 2013.
[123] Camus, 1955, cf. *Ecclesiastes*.
[124] Metz, 2013.
[125] Martin, 1993.
[126] Benatar, 2006, pp. 18-56.

What is perhaps the best-known nihilistic argument is from Thomas Nagel.[127] Nagel argues that we are capable of viewing the world from a number of different perspectives. These perspectives range from the most internal view to the most external view. At the deepest "internal" level, we may consider our personal desires, affects and the things that affect our individual lives. From here, we may extend our perspective to include our family and friends and their concerns and how we impact their lives. We may extend further to our community, our nation and so on. Finally, we may reach the point of the most external, where we attempt to view the world from the perspective that takes into consideration the entire universe. The argument follows that when one does this, one recognizes the insignificance of one's own existence and the impossibility of having any significant impact on the world at all.[128] Nagel suggests that such a realization implies that our lives cannot really be meaningful. This view, however, is largely criticised both on the basis of it lacking authority[129] or on the basis that its implications are counter-intuitive or simply unacceptable.[130]

The biological conception of life and the "everyday" conception of life.

When the concept 'life' is applied in philosophy and indeed in most intellectual discourse, it appears to come in one of the two forms explored above. The discussion either focuses on an attempt to define what constitutes something as (1) biologically "alive" or (2) it turns to questions of life's value, meaning or other. Indeed, the discussion at hand appears to be of the latter. However, what one usually fails to encounter in such discussions is the same rigorous attempt to conceptualize life as with the former kind. Rather, one works from a somewhat established understanding - what we have referred to above as the anthropocentric conception. Furthermore, as we have seen with the brief overview above, such an approach generally informs the conceptual boundaries of 'life' in accord with the question or discussion at hand. For example, the notion of what a 'life' entails may change once we begin speaking of Theo- centric views of meaning. When we do this, not only need we entertain the validity of 'life' as a construction of a supernatural being for a specific purpose, but we may also encounter the idea of an "after-life". Thus, this type of analysis indirectly informs our understanding of 'life' by adding or retracting from a more or less commonly understood concept. The outcome of the question "what is the meaning of life?" adds elements to the conception of 'life' which may alter our understanding. We may conclude, for example, that "meaning" is a necessary characteristic of 'life'.

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[127] Nagel, 1986.
[128] See also Hanfling, 1987, 22–24; Benatar, 2006, 60–92; cf. Dworkin, 2000, chs. 6.
[129] Ellin, 1995, pp. 316–317; Blackburn, 2001, pp. 79–80; Schmidtz, 2001.
[130] Quinn, 2000, pp. 65–66; Singer, 1993, pp. 333–34; Wolf, 1997b, pp. 19–21.

Having looked at some examples of 'life' as it functions in philosophical discourse, we may now continue the discussion set out earlier. One may argue that the analysis so far is flawed to the extent that at the outset, when engaging in philosophical discourse, the philosopher is generally explicit or implicit in her/his particular usage of 'life' as it pertains to the discussion. The criticism may be that the philosopher of language and the existential philosopher are talking at cross purposes as they are clearly referring to different things. I do not wish to deny that one can restrict oneself to the particulars that constitute biological life. Rather, I wish to claim that such an understanding of life is valuable only in a specified conceptual context and that a more accurate conception of life is life as existence. Indeed, I would maintain that, due to the ontological structure of existence, which will be further discussed below, it is ultimately unsatisfactory to conceptualize 'life' in any manner wholly distinct from existence. However, I need not make such an argument for the purposes of this thesis and thus I put it aside. For the current discussion, it suffices to maintain the following: when one is seeking to answer a conceptual question, one can adequately define life in terms of its purely biological or temporal structure but as soon as one seeks to answer questions of meaning, one invariably refers to 'life' as existence.

Life as existence

Having discussed possible understanding of the concept life, it is now my aim to argue that when applying the concept 'life' we almost always use it in reference to L3 (life as existence) above. Furthermore, when one uses the term in the kind of question or statement that is the topic of this discussion, one can only intelligibly use it with reference to L3 - any other usage of the term would make the statement nonsensical or intellectually vapid. In making this point, it is important to stress the anthropocentric nature of the concept when used in this manner. To this end, one may go as far as to say that a statement such as "biological life is a serious matter" is essentially meaningless or at the very least unable to carry the same kind of meaning that the question "is life (as existence) serious?" does. What is to be argued, is that the conception of 'life' as it functions in statements such as "life is a serious matter", must come in the form of life as existence. Furthermore, such a conception encapsulates other meanings in its application. This conception refers to the notion of existence which includes both the biological and temporal definition. In simple terms, this means that when we speak about 'life' in this way, we speak of human life as a temporal structure of human existence as encapsulated by life as an understanding of (wo)man's immutable and inalienable participation with his/her being.

This does not mean that 'life' conceived purely as a characteristic of organic beings is philosophically untenable. A great deal of concern may go into discerning what warrants a thing as "living". Discussions on what constitutes 'life' may be of importance to inquiries on the scientific understanding of organisms and may even lend significant weight to discussions on matters such as machine ethics.[131] However, when one seeks to answer questions regarding "life's" value or seriousness, such an understanding of life is either entirely unhelpful or leads one towards a hard, untenable physicalist stance. Were one to be a stringent physicalist, one might prefer an understanding of human life, consciousness and lived experience from an entirely micro-biological perspective. In other words, one may conclude that the entirety of one's existence as a human being can be adequately understood and explained in terms of the complex processes and interactions that occur within the body and in the body's interaction with its environment. It may be easy to see how such a stance seeks to undermine the value of understanding life as meaningful or serious by reducing human existence to a purely physical phenomenon. Such undermining may lead one to conclude that the meaningfulness of human life is entirely relative in value or simply non-existent. I am not here attempting to rebuff such an opinion with an argument which bases itself on a supra-physical understanding of life. Rather, I would maintain that such a reduction leaves much to be desired. Such a stance may explain why we regard life as serious as human beings but does little to argue why we ought to regard it as such. Thus, such a stance does not solve the problem, stated at the outset, of reducing life's seriousness to a matter of relativity and, consequently, throwing our understanding of life as valuable into question.

The problem at hand seems potentially to only be one of language. If I am trying to argue that life should be taken to mean existence, why then, do we not simply state the question as follows: "Is existence a serious matter?" For one, existence is not a term used frequently in one's everyday encounters and, when it comes up, it is generally used with reference to "something that is". Even amongst philosophers, the term existence as we mean it here is usually restricted to work in the field of existential philosophy. In discussions on ethics, politics and psychology, the preferred term remains 'life'. As such, the term is applied in a manner which applies to the different senses above in different contexts, generally referring to more than one at a time. Such use of the term generally fails to adequately penetrate to the heart of its reference. In a discussion of the bioethical ramifications of genetic modification, for example, I may refer to the significant impact genetic modification may have on the 'life' of the individual. In such a statement, I may be referring to the

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[131] Not to mention the clear connection such a discussion has with regards to the pro-life vs pro-choice debate surrounding abortion laws.

changes made to the actual biological makeup of the individual, the potential implications for his/her lifespan, the impact on the overall quality or meaning of their lives or all of these together. One perhaps circumvents possible confusion by elaborating on the meaning of one's statement, going on to indicate the extent to which the individual's life is impacted. I may indicate the manner in which genetic modification alters the quality of one's life or gives one's existential struggle less meaning. However, my description may only be partially indicative of existence. Indeed, unless one clearly indicates the meaning of the concept 'life' and restricts it within one's discussion, the implication of its usage remains relatively loose and open to interpretation.

My intention with the discussion that has preceded, is not to suggest that one needs to be overly pedantic in one's discussions on life, nor that most philosophers are wrong in their application of such a seemingly innocuous term. Rather, what is elucidated is that 'life' is a term that appears to be in a conceptually unique position. It is this position which allows the concept to be applied both liberally and sparingly, to be understood intuitively whilst being simultaneously lacking coherent definition. It is such a position which warrants that the question: "Is life serious?" be regarded as intuitively true, absurd, impossible to define, or the source of significant philosophical insight. What is of importance for the time-being, however, is the notion of the value of life, to which the ongoing discussion seems to be pointing. The reason one cannot ask the question "is life serious?" in terms of either L1 (life as biological phenomenon) or L2 (life as temporal structure) above is because it presupposes an analysis of value. It does not really make sense to ask if biological life or the temporal structure of life is serious unless one begins to move away from the purely abstract nature of such conceptualizations. In instances where reference to L1 or L2 seem to indicate intuitive value, for example if I speak of the miracle of life or of the importance of time due to the necessity of death in temporal life, it is only to the extent that they point towards L3. Is it thus possible to think of life in the manner of L1 or L2 above as abstract from L3? In other words, can one do any philosophy about life as a biological construct or temporal structure without at least some reference to existence? Although I would argue that ultimately, when applying the concept 'life', one is unable to remove oneself from instances of 'life' as existence, it is acceptable for certain purposes to conclude that one can safely compartmentalize one's conceptions of 'life' in the manner suggested above. However, what is unacceptable, is the notion that one can do the same with questions of meaning. As soon as one asks a question of meaning with reference to the concept 'life', one inescapably refers to some degree of L3, 'life' as existence.

What we are to conclude from this discussion, is that existence is by all accounts the correct way of

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conceptualizing 'life' in reference to questions of this nature. One can thus say that when asking whether or not 'life' is a serious matter, one is essentially asking whether or not existence is a serious matter. To this end, we may reasonably conclude that the question at hand cannot be rebutted with the idea that it is inherently absurd, intuitively obvious or impossible to answer.

What is left to do, is to clarify the conception of existence and demonstrate why, in the kind of understanding one has thereof, it is implicitly serious. What is concluded from such a discussion is that life must be regarded as a serious matter.

Chapter 4: Existence as understood in the existentialist tradition

Having discussed the concept of 'life' and having concluded that, when we consider life as it relates to humans and in terms of questions of meaning, the only sufficient understanding is that life is equivalent to existence (as understood through existentialism) we must turn to the question of what exactly this understanding of existence entails. In this chapter, we will look at the concept of existence by considering the work of John Macquarrie, which is highly suitable for this task. In addition, we will discuss the work of several prominent so-called existential philosophers, including Martin Heidegger, Jean-Paul Sartre, Soren Kierkegaard, Karl Jaspers and others. First of all, we must consider what we mean by existential philosophy.

Existentialism places the individual existent at the centre of its concern. What this means, is that whatever is analysed or described, is done so from the perspective of (wo)man in his/her subjectivity. The existentialist recognizes that what is of utmost importance, is our concrete existence, and all other concerns, such as knowledge of reality, and investigation into the understanding of our cognition, and so on, come after. Due to the nature of this concern, a non-systemic and indefinite exploration of anything that may be rightly called existentialism is inevitable. However, when one investigates the work of prominent "existentialist" philosophers, one finds shared themes among all of them. As such, existentialism is not wholly non-systematic nor lacking an ontology. Thus, although it may not be possible to say that there is such a thing as existentialism per se, there is a particular method, starting from the individual existent as the centre of concern, which can be referred to as the existentialist style of doing philosophy.

Existentialism begins with (wo)man as subject for the foundation of its philosophical investigation. Unlike traditional rationalism, however, existentialism begins from (wo)man as existing subject instead of (wo)man as thinking subject. In other words, existentialism does not concern itself with the knowledge or truth of phenomena as they present themselves to us, but rather with the presupposition that things (more or less) are as they appear to us, considering the complex interrelatedness of phenomena, with specific reference to the individual existent. One can say, perhaps, drawing on the famous adage of Rene Descartes, that existentialism is less concerned with ego cogito and more so with ergo sum.[132] Existentialism, thus, considers everything that seems to make up the existence of the individual subject. This includes accounts of the emotional state of the

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[132] From Descartes original "cogito, ergo sum" (I think, therefore I am), See Descartes, *Discourse on Method*, 1637.

existent, as well as their passions and desires. The existentialist also realizes that, as a philosopher, they too are an individual existent, finding themselves in the same manner of being as other existents they encounter or do philosophy about.

It is the purpose of the current discussion to analyse and give a sufficiently clear conception of the concept existence which above has been equated with 'life'. Although we will attempt a detailed discussion in what follows, it is useful to nonetheless start with some preliminary remarks. Our primary understanding of existence comes from its relationship to the traditional concept of essence. Dating back to Plato's idea of perfect forms, the essence of a concept is that which allows us to form a definitive, timeless grasp of what it refers to. In this way, the attempt is made to generalize the characteristics of a concept in order to understand it in its purest form. In contrast to this, existence entails the concrete instantiation of a concept in the world and, because it can never be equivalent to an ideal essence, being imperfect in light of it. Traditional rationalism has determined that to understand concepts in the most intellectually proper manner, one must attempt to grasp their essence and, in doing so, one finds the true nature of that which the concept refers to. However, as we will see, existentialists challenge this notion. To this preliminary understanding must be added that when we are speaking of existence, we are not simply referring to it as it functions in linguistic commonality. We are thus not referring to something existing as simply "laying around" or "being real". What is important to understand, is the existence entails the concrete there-ness of an entity and the manner in which it is in the world and in relation to other beings. In this light we begin to understand why the existentialists restrict existence, understood thusly, to that mode of being specific to human beings. This is not to say that nothing else is, but rather that only human beings exist. Existentialists also re-activate the active connotation of the original Latin ex-sistere, to "stand-out". This important element of existence will be discussed below.

These points will now be discussed in greater detail with reference to the work of John Macquarrie and other prominent philosophers who have written in this style.

John Macquarrie on existentialism

The work of John Macquarrie (1917-2007) – a prominent theologian and philosopher at the University of Glasgow - is invaluable in our attempt to concretely conceptualize *existence*. In his book, simply titled *Existentialism*, Macquarrie delivers an excellent exposition of the philosophical

tradition of existentialism.[133] Part of this exposition is an elucidation of what Macquarrie calls the basic structures of *existence*.

I have chosen to refer to these structures as central themes shared between "existential philosophers" in their application of the concept existence. Furthermore, although Macquarrie specifically identifies three characteristics in the relevant section, if we read the exposition found in his book as a whole, we can in fact identify five central themes in existentialism in its application of existence. These are: (1) a restriction on the denotation and an extension of the connotation of the concept, (2) the understanding that existence precedes essence, (3) taking the concept to refer to its etymological root of "standing-out", (4) a focus on the subjective individual existent and (5) self-relatedness. These themes will now be discussed in turn.

(1) Restricting the denotation and extending the connotation of *existence*

John Macquarrie makes the following claim:

"… 'ex-sistence' is taken by existentialists in its root sense of "standing out". If we take seriously this notion of standing out, then a little reflection shows that it is much more apposite to the kind of being that belongs to man than to other modes of being which traditionally have been called existence."[134]

In common modern usage, the term "existence" is used in a manner akin to referring to something as simply "being-there". In other words, when referring to something as existing, we are referring to it as being "real" in some form or another. Generally, we use the term to refer to something as "being the case", meaning that if we were to look for it, we would encounter it physically in the world. Heidegger uses the term Vorhandenheit, usually translated to "presence-at-hand" to refer to existence of this kind. However, we may refer to concepts such as thoughts, numbers and deities as "existing". These things may not physically manifest in our sensory perception, but we may still regard them as "being there" or as "real". One thus encounters difficult conceptual problems in asking whether or not numbers "exist", or "thoughts" exist. It may be simpler to refer to something as existing if it instantiates itself to us in some phenomenological experience. Part of the difficulty of fully grasping the concept "existence" as it is commonly used is due to the wide denotation of the

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[133] Macquarrie is also credited with the well-received English translation of Heidegger's Being and Nothingness, first published in 1962.
[134] Macquarrie, p. 70

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concept in everyday use. Used in the manner described above, arguably almost anything can "exist" in some form or another. In the existential style of philosophy, existence has been utilized to refer to something entirely different than the common usage.

For the existentialist, existence is a concept which applies exclusively to human beings. An existentialist understanding of existence is thus characterized by a limitation of its denotation to human beings. This limitation appears to initially occur in the work of Soren Kierkegaard, generally read as a reaction to Hegel's idealism. This reaction comes in the form of an opposition to the notion that human nature is defined in general concepts or systems. The human being is instead in a unique position with regards to its historical situatedness, finitude and temporality. At the same time, the connotation of the concept is greatly expanded. The existentialist concept of existence does also refer to the instantiations of human beings in the world as encounterable phenomena (as per the common usage of the term). However, the concept additionally connotes the numerous particularities that make up the humans' relationship to its world such as thinking, feeling, acting, being-with-others, being-in-the- world, and so on. Thus, understood in this way, only human beings can exist.[135] This is not to imply a form of subjective idealism. All other beings and things in the world still are, however, none of them exhibit the sufficient set of characteristics which make it capable of existing.[136] Kierkegaard, Sartre and Heidegger all almost exclusively use this term in reference to human beings.[137]

As stated above, the restriction of existence to (wo)man first appears in the work of Kierkegaard. Reacting to the prominent Hegelianism of the time, Kierkegaard maintains that the existent cannot be adequately captured in a system of general, abstract concepts. Rather, as Macquarrie echoes, the existent is particular and contingent. It is exactly that which "refuses to fit into some system constructed by rational thought."[138] Kierkegaard writes that (wo)man is constituted by a "paradoxical synthesis of the temporal, and the eternal…"[139] meaning that to exist is to encapsulate

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[135] It may well be that other beings can exist, given that they exhibit the characteristics necessary for existence. Such a being is characterised by Heidegger's *Dasein*. However, we are currently not able to uncontroversially apply this moniker to any being other than humans. As such, one may very well limit one's discussion to human beings in this regard.

[136] This point brings up an interesting problem which comes up in other areas of existential investigation. Due to the nature of language (or at least English), restricting existence to human beings makes it difficult to refer to the being of other things. One may wish to simply use another term to refer to the unique manner of human *existence* but, as will be seen below, there are specific reasons for the existentialists to use this term and thus I will use it as well.

[137] Although Sartre wrote in French and Heidegger in German and may not have encountered the problem referred to in 7 above. Kierkegaard wrote most of his work in Latin which, as we will see further below, is the etymological origin of *existence*.

[138] Macquarrie, p. 45.

[139] Kierkegaard, *Concluding unscientific postscripts,* p. 267.

the entirety of human being and that any attempt to abstract it is to fail to capture it adequately. Indeed, Kierkegaard continues to state that the unitary whole of the existent can never sufficiently be made sense of by thought.[140] For Kierkegaard, an awareness of existence is exactly an awareness of the paradoxical and unsystematic.[141] Kierkegaard clearly regards the existent to be in a unique position in light of its existence and, as such, it is clear that to refer to existence is to refer to that which applies to the human being, that which defies our attempts to capture it in a system or in the absolute. As (wo)men we will never make sense of our existence fully, exactly because of its intangible nature. An intangibility which is particular to existence and, as such, particular to existents.

Another thinker for whom the restriction of the denotation and expansion of the connotation of existence is evident is Martin Heidegger. The point at which Heidegger differs from his teacher, father of modern phenomenology, Edmund Husserl, is that Heidegger makes his point of departure not the individual as thinking subject, but the individual as acting existing being. Heidegger, primarily an ontologist, analyses the Being of beings. In particular, Heidegger is concerned with that being which stands in a unique position with regards to Being, the Dasein. Dasein is however not an equivalent of (wo)man. Rather, Dasein is an ontological term. Dasein rather designates (wo)man in respect of his/her being. Dasein represents the necessary conditions for the question about being (i.e. the ontological question) to arise as such. The being of Dasein is the effort to make sense of being Dasein's being is the interpretation of Being. As such, if this kind of being were to be found somewhere else, the term Dasein would still apply. In his use of the term existence, Heidegger is explicit in his claim that this refers to a designation of being that is restricted to Dasein.[142] Heidegger states that Being is revealed by the fact the "something is, and in its Being as it is; in Reality; in presence-at-hand; in validity; in Dasein..."[143] The Dasein, thus, is the being who transcends the realm of beings towards Being, doing so through an understanding of being by means of a meaningful design of possibilities. We design our possibilities by continually transcending from what we are at any moment in favour of new possibilities of our being. The existent, unlike the other beings it shares the world with, actively steps-out from the world. In other words, the existent exists by distinguishing itself from that which it is not - mundane beings. Existence is not something that is static like that of a resting substance, but rather ec-static and dynamic in its continual (self-) interpretation. This is an idea which is echoed by Sartre's

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[140] Ibid.
[141] Ibid 7.
[142] Being and Time, p. 67.
[143] Being and Time, 1962, p. 26.

conception of the pour-soi and en-soi (see below). The Dasein occupies a unique position in the world. The Dasein occupies the place from which an understanding towards Being begins to emerge. From this position thinking and language becomes known to the Dasein, and with these tools, it makes sense of its existence. What this means, in tempered terms, is that humans are subject to a unique mode- of-being. This mode-of-being is unique in as far as the human being (or Dasein) is the only being that partakes in an understanding of its being in an attempt to transcend towards Being. This mode of being, unique to the human existent, Heidegger calls existence.

(2) The understanding that existence precedes essence

The notion of the essence of things dates back to Platonic idealism and (more prominently) the philosophy of Aristotle. The essence of a thing refers to the essential nature of a thing, those characteristics which allow us to define a concept in an abstract manner, removed from its concrete existence. The cornerstone of metaphysics and Cartesian rationalism is the notion that the essence of a thing can be understood and rationalized prior to or in spite of an encounter with it in our subjective experience. Jean-Paul Sartre, generally accredited as the first thinker to explicitly advance a definitive understanding of existentialism as a philosophical discipline, posits a reversal of the aforementioned notion as a key component of existentialism.

In Being and Nothingness and Existentialism is a Humanism, Sartre states that there is at least one being whose existence precedes its essence, this being is (wo)man. What this means, is that the human being is the only being who first of all finds itself in the world prior to any understanding or classification thereof. Sartre posits what is perhaps the best-known and most explicit application of this theme in his well-known lecture Existentialism is a Humanism. After distinguishing between the theistic and atheistic existentialists, he states that the one thing atheistic existentialists have in common is the understanding that, for the human being, existence precedes essence. If there is a God, it may very well be the designer of the existent and, as a result, its essence would precede its existence. To illustrate this, Sartre uses the example of an artisan knife-maker. When making a knife, an artisan knows what it is he/she is making beforehand, even if he does not know exactly what the knife he is making will look like, he knows what a knife does, what its form looks like, what its usage entails, etc. In other words, knives have an essence which the artisan is aware of and which determines the eventual existence of the knife. In this analogy, God is the artisan and we (the

human existents) are the knife.[144] If God existed as the holy artisan, he may very well have designed us according to some implacable blueprint - the essence of humanity. However since, according to Sartre, God does not exist, there can be no divine depiction with which to understand the human essence. However, according to Sartre, not only is there no God to act as the perfect artisan, but His absence means that we are "abandoned" in the world.[145] Because there is no God, there is no way for us to know what our essence entails and, subsequently, no way of knowing what/how we ought to be. There is nowhere to turn but to ourselves to determine how we ought to live, and what we ought to be living for. Since (wo)man has been abandoned by God - so to speak - he/she is left with no recourse with which to define and understand itself. This lack of supernatural design of our being is not to be taken as a matter of despair, however, but rather as the revelation that the human existent is the one being that may make of itself what it chooses. Indeed, the notion that our existence precedes our essence lies at the core of Satrean existentialism. The human existent emerges as the only being that first of all is, before it is known. This emergence from nothing into the world, is what defines existence.

Thus, what is imperative for an existentialist understanding of existence, is the concrete "being-there" of the human existent. The human being is able to observe the phenomena in the world it encounters, constructing an essence through which to understand and define it. However, the human being is unable to define itself in such a manner. As the centre from which all things are understood, the human being is primordially confronted with its state of being-in-the-world and must, from this state, define its own essence. What this means for an existentialist understanding of existence, is understanding existence as something which defies conceptual tangibility of the kind that other phenomena in our experiences yield. This is not to say that existence refuses conceptual clarity entirely, but rather that the human existent must inevitably be confronted with the phenomena of his/her existence before being able to instantiate such conceptual clarity.

(3) Taking *existence* in its etymological root of "standing out"

The etymological roots of the word "existence" (as it is used in English today)[146] can be traced back to the Latin term ex-sistere which can be translated as "to stand out", "to emerge", "to step forth" or "to appear". In this sense, the word can be understood to refer to something as "standing out from the world". Such an understanding of existence is much more active and participative than the

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[144] Sartre, *Existentialism is a Humanism*, 1956.
[145] Ibid.
[146] See the comments in the discussion of (1) above.

understanding of the contemporary common usage of "encounterable in the world". It is the more active and participative understanding of ex-sistere which the existentialists draw upon to describe their understanding of existence. The reason this conception of the term is so appropriate to the particular nature of human existence, is owing to its allusion to something dynamic. What is commonplace in understanding this theme is the manner in which the existent not only transcends beyond itself but does so by distinguishing itself from the world and the other beings that co-inhabit it. Biologist Theodosius Dobzhansky highlights this phenomenon with the following words: "Man is a self-reflecting animal in that he alone has the ability to objectify himself, stand apart from himself, as it were, and to consider the kind of being he is, and what it is that he wants to do and to become."[147] Certainly, all things, animals and plants included, "stand out" in relation to nothingness in the sense that they are, but the human existent is an active participant in his/her "standing out". The human existent actively defines itself in contrast to nothingness through self-awareness and active participation. Thus, the human does not simply exist in the way that a tree or an animal does, but exists, it stands out from nothing, constantly projecting its being beyond itself into the possibilities of its being.

It seems uncontroversial to claim that most of the so-called existential philosophers, including Kierkegaard, Heidegger, Sartre, Camus, Jaspers, Buber and even (although one may solicit disagreement if one refers to him as such) Nietzsche use the concept in a manner apposite to this understanding. Although one may debate about the humanism controversy as per Sartre's Existentialism is a Humanism and Heidegger's Letter on Humanism; one can maintain - as Macquarrie does - that none of these thinkers (even Heidegger) regards the human essence as fixed. We have seen already how Kierkegaard regards human existence as something entirely dynamic and malleable and Sartre's insistence that (wo)man is not like the paperknife, but rather constantly in the process of defining its own essence. We note also that Heidegger states that the Dasein is being that is always transcending itself towards the possibilities of its being. Jaspers, in his analysis of existenz (he writes it thus to distinguish it from the common usage), writes that "Existenz is not a kind of being; it is potential being. That is to say, I am not Existenz but possible Existenz. I do not have myself but come to myself."[148] It is clear from this statement that Jaspers requires this ec-stasis of (wo)man into the potential of its being for an understanding of existence. This is also why Jaspers writes it as existenz as he regards existenz as the fulfilment of mere existence.

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[147] *The Biology of Ultimate Concern*, (New York, 1967), p. 52.
[148] Jaspers, pp. 63-66.

The en-soi/pour-soi distinction drawn by Sartre is especially useful in understanding this theme.[149] By pour-soi, Sartre is referring to a being that exists for-itself as opposed to the en-soi, a being that exists in-itself. The pour-soi can be found in the type of being constituted by (wo)man. Pour-soi is that being which is characterized by consciousness. The en-soi is that contingent being that is represented in mundane objects in the world. The en-soi's being is static, consistent and essential. In contrast, the pour-soi's being is represented as an active negation of the en-soi. The pour-soi's being is active, purposeful and self-determined. The being that exists pour-soi is that which exists as an end in and of itself. In contrast, the en-soi is that which can only be defined by its situatedness in the world. Pour-soi can, according to Macquarrie, be related to the Dasein of Heidegger. The pour-soi is defined by its freedom and in negation of the en-soi.[150] Macquarrie states that "The pour-soi comes into being (exists, emerges) by separating itself from the en-soi."[151] The en-soi is that which has essential being, which is determined by its factuality, by its instrumentality and, most important, as less than, below the pour-soi. The pour-soi is not defined by any essence, but rather defines itself by that which it is not - the en-soi - and places itself firmly in the centre of its being. The existent pour-soi is then unique in the world as it defines everything around it by its essence and is defined by everything else due to its own lack of essence.

What is important here is that the pour-soi's existence cannot be understood from the outside, from its relation to the other, not even its relation to other pour-soi. Rather, the pour-soi finds itself as the emergent, stepping forward into the world in order to define its own essence along with all that it encounters. Yet the existent is not only free to define itself but condemned to do so. The nature of existence, for Sartre, is that, because the existent has no predetermined essence, it emerges into existence with the burden to create its own. This is, for Sartre, what it means to exist. Macquarrie continues by stating that "The en-soi has its being in itself, and this is essential being. The pour-soi is free to choose its essence. It's being is its freedom. Yet, paradoxically, its freedom is also its lack of being."[152] Sartre places the individual existent at the centre of his existentialism. Existence is something that befalls all of us, to be sure, but the burden of existence is, at the end of the day, my own. The individual existent carries the burden to define him/herself, to bring forth his/her essence from existence.

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[149] See "Key to Special Terminology" in *Being and Nothingness*, p. 629.
[150] Macquarrie, p. 47.
[151] Ibid.
[152] Ibid.

Sartre sums it up as follows:

> "In short, the For-itself is free, and its Freedom is to itself its own limit. To be free is to be condemned to be free. Thus, the Future qua Future does not have to be. It is not in itself, and neither is it in the mode of being of the For-itself since it is the meaning of the For-itself. The Future is not, it is possibiIized."[153]

With regard to the freedom of the individual existent, Sartre explains how one may live in either good faith or bad faith. One of the most poignant explanations of living in bad faith is found in Sartre's analysis of one particular waiter in a Parisian café:

> "Let us consider this waiter in the café. His movement is quick and forward, a little too precise, a little too rapid. He comes toward the patrons with a step a little too quick… trying to imitate in his walk the inflexible stiffness of some kind of automaton while carrying his tray with a recklessness of a tight-rope walker by putting it in a perpetually unstable position… All his behaviour seems to us a game. He applies himself to chaining his movements as if they were mechanisms, the one regulating the other; his gestures and even his voice seem to be mechanisms… He is playing, he is amusing himself. But what is he playing? We need not watch long before we can explain it: he is playing at being a waiter in a cafe. There is nothing there to surprise"[154]

This waiter lives in bad faith because he has resigned himself so definitively to his identity as a waiter that he has failed to avail himself of the possibility of being anything else. The waiter does not accept himself as the free existent that he is, instead of living according to an identity that has been constructed for him. What lies at the heart of living in bad faith, is the relationship of the existent to her/his identity. One lives in bad faith when one lies to oneself about who one really is, what one really believes, and how one really ought to behave. Most prominently, however, one lives in bad faith when one denies the absolute freedom that one is availed to.

Thus, we conclude that existence is always transcending beyond itself and in negation of what it is

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[153] *Being and Nothingness*, p. 129.
[154] Ibid, pg 59.

not. However, as Macquarrie points out, the key difference among the existentialists is what they regard it to be transcending into. Heidegger, although perhaps not explicitly a theistic thinker, seem to belong in a similar camp as them to the extent that human fulfilment lies within existence itself. For Heidegger, this lies in the transcendence towards Being and for other theists, such as Jaspers, it lies in a transcendence towards God. In contrast, the atheistic thinkers, Sartre and Camus, regard existence as transcending into nothing. As Macquarrie writes: "There is no God. So, man is entirely abandoned to fixing his own norms and determining his values and what he will become."[155] This difference is a significant one and one that is not easy to solve. What we can conclude, however, is that when the existentialist uses existence, we know that she is (among other themes) referring to the dynamic, transcendental being that is particular to (wo)man.

The human existent thus not only exists as instantiated phenomenon in the world, but also exists according to ideas of itself, memories of where it has come from and projections of where it wants to go. This understanding undermines an explanation of the human existent in accordance with a "human nature", and, in its stead, affords the human existent the total possibility of its existence. Looking at the work of the abovementioned thinkers, it is clear that this original understanding of the term is more apposite to an understanding of the manner in which they apply the term and definitively more apposite to others in our understanding of 'life' as existence.

(4) A focus on the unique subjectivity of the individual existent

John Macquarrie writes the following:

> "[Another] basic characteristic of existence is the uniqueness of the individual existent. An existent is not just an "it"; the existent says "I", and in uttering the personal pronoun lays claim not just to a unique place and perspective in the world but to a unique being."[156]

An imperative element of both the concept *existence* and existential philosophy in general, is the manner in which the human existent is regarded in its subjective individuality. The human existent is the only being that cannot be regarded solely as abstracted from its individuality. Heidegger's conception of *Jemeinigkeit* (usually translated as "unique mineness") is applicable here. Indeed, one may argue that it is *Jemeinigkeit* in particular that most notably distinguishes

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[155] Macquarrie, p. 72.
[156] Ibid, pp. 72-73.

our understanding of life as *existence* from other conceptions of it. *Jemeinigkeit* refers to the unique inner experience of *existence* - as my unique sphere of inner consciousness - that each individual has. However, even though this phenomenon appears to be shared among existents I may never have access to the particular experience of the other. "I" am "I". Only "I" have access to my particular 'mineness' as the centre of being and the place from which my entire relationship with *existence* emanates. Only from the "I" can I comparatively know the world and understands objects as separate from myself and the other. This 'mineness' allows us an ontological insight which is available only to us. I may never understand the world or my inner being from the perspective of another "I", only from my own.

When we concern ourselves with a thing such as a stone or a newspaper, we can do so with any stone or any newspaper. Certainly, all things will exhibit some difference from another of its kind (even if one needed to observe the most minute details), but in our conceptualization of anything (that is not a human being), one instance of it is as good as another. However, as soon as we try and do this with the human existent it becomes untenable. We may construct an abstract notion of the concept "human being" and identify the characteristics which connote this concept. One may, as Macquarrie notes, argue that the true difference between individuals is simply no more than a complex physical one. Nevertheless, when concerned with the human existent, one is not able to replace one instance thereof with another in the same manner one can with a rock or a newspaper. The reason for this is because our understanding of the human existent is inextricably tied up with its individual identity - both in relation to others and to the self. When I think of other existents, I do not simply think of them as singular instances of the concept "human being", but instead think of them as complex beings with self-awareness and identity - just like myself. The human existent says "I", and understands, in its interactions with other existents, that they do the same. Karl Jaspers, furthering his analysis of existenz, states that it is the "ever-individual self, irreplaceable and never interchangeable".[157] Macquarrie states that to these two one may add that there is also an inexhaustible interest in human beings.[158] Given these three qualities one recognizes the manner in which existence signifies a mode-of-being which is inalienably personal, subjective and inextricable from our understanding of it.

(5) Self-relatedness

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[157] *Philosophical faith and Revelation*, trans. E.B. Ashton (New York 1967), pp. 63-66.
[158] Macquarrie, 1972, p. 73.

The final characteristic which Macquarrie identifies is what he refers to as "self-relatedness". The cornerstone of this theme lies in the inner relationship the existent has with itself and the understanding that it sits in a predicament in which it must navigate the complexity between the actual self and the possible self. The existent is concerned with its "inner-being", it's self-identity, who he/she is and what he/she may be. We have seen this theme already in our discussion of Sartre's analysis of the Parisian waiter. Indeed, an imperative part of Satrean existentialism lies in his position that we, as existents, are condemned to be free and must therefore make a choice, for better or worse, which defines who we are. The existent is not a being that simply is. Rather, the existent is a being that is always on its way to becoming what is may be. As we have discussed above, with regards to Heidegger, the existent understands its being and lays out its existence according to a meaningful design of possibilities. Karl Jaspers states that (wo)man is in a permanent state of self-formation.[159] As the existent exists, the possibilities of its being are continually realized in different ways. This is in contrast to other beings and objects who have contained within them a static identity. A chair, for example, contains a constant identity as a chair. One may change the chair's shape or size, but a chair can never be potentially anything but a chair. In contrast, (wo)man's identity is malleable and self-determinable. Not only can the (wo)man make decisions that influence the potentiality of his/her being, he/she must do so. (Wo)man is placed in situations which call up him/her to take certain, often risky, decisions in order to obtain certainty of being. Important (we may say, serious) decisions in our lives, such as choosing a life-partner, being confronted with a serious illness and having to make a decision about it, committing to a vocation or speciality, etc, are decisions which we must make as unique, irreplaceable individuals which act as conditions for the formulation of our self-identities. When we make such decisions, we become what we were not before we made the decision.

The existent is confronted with the possibilities of its being and is required to make decisions to affirm its understanding of its own inner self. This situation is the cause of a great nausea for the existent, hence the title of Sartre's novel with the same name. This feeling, in the face of our possible being, comes forth in existential thinking by different names including anxiety, anguish and dread. Because of this, the existent often avoids the burden of making such decisions. In doing so, the existent makes recourse to the ideas of "them" (Das Man) to make these decisions for us and without carrying the responsibility of having to do it ourselves. However, to make such recourse is to, in the words of many existential thinkers, live *inauthentically*. To live *authentically* would be to

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[159] Macquarrie, 1972, p. 73.

make our own decisions as unique, irreplaceable, free existents and to live with the consequences. I find it apposite to continue the discussion of *authentic* and *inauthentic* existence in my discussion of Heidegger's analysis of death below and place it on hold for the moment.

Conceptualizing *Existence*

From the discussion above, we have determined that there are at least five themes that are pervasive throughout the use of the concept existence within the existential style of philosophy. What we gather from this analysis is that existence is something unique to a particular kind of being, a being which is signified by (wo)man (or Dasein). This kind of being is determined by a great number of complex characteristics which are characterized by its particular ontology. It is true that the experience of the existent is important in developing an understanding of existence, the subjective experience of the individual existent is paramount to the kind of being exemplified by (wo)man. However, the ontology of existence entails constituents that are inadequately understood through the subjective experience of the existent alone. We recognize this in our deliberations on the facticity and 'mineness' of being as well as our understanding of death as existential phenomenon. We are thrust into existence, and as being-there we must emerge from the world in order to define ourselves and make sense of our existence. Furthermore, our existence is demarcated by an ineradicable subjectivity. I can never know what it is like to be another existent. My entire understanding of everything, past, present and future, my entire existence is determined by my own personal being.

Death plays a central role in our conceptualization of existence. It demarcates the end of existence and, without it, we would not signify the kind of being that we do. Indeed, one is left with a problem if one attempts to understand the existence of (wo)man in a situation where (s)he may never die. According to John Macquarrie, Heidegger has carried out the most detailed study of the existential meaning of death and incorporated it into his Philosophy of existence. This analysis is most evident in his magnum opus: Being and Time.

Heidegger claims that death is a central characteristic of the Dasein, and, without it, one cannot understand what it means to exist. In his analysis, Heidegger relates death as central to the concept of care for existence (what he calls Sorge). The 3 aspects of Sorge he elucidates are (1) Possibility and the future, (2) Facticity and (3) Falling into the "they" - what we may perhaps rather refer to as

Das Man. I will now discuss each in turn.[160]

(1) Possibility and the Future

Heidegger, in *Being and Time*, says the following:

> "*Dasein's* facticity is such that its Being-in-the-world has always dispersed itself or even split itself up into definite ways of Being-in. The multiplicity of these is indicated by the following examples: having to do with something, producing something, attending to something and looking after it, making use of something, giving something up and letting it go, undertaking, accomplishing, evincing, interrogating, considering, discussing, determining…"[161]

In essence, care or Sorge refers to our concern with being-in-the-world. A uniquely human characteristic, we are invested within the world in a manner which extends beyond the pragmatism of survival. Heidegger states that when we first come into contact with a phenomenon our initial mode of concern is with its instrumentality. As he states, upon our initial encounter with the world and its beings, we first ask "what is it for?" before asking "why it is or what we ought to make of it." Yet, as Dasein, we find ourselves in the unique position in search of answers to the latter. Thus, as the Dasein overcomes his/her natural environment and begins to understand his being, so too does the Dasein's mode of concern begin to change.

One of the most important aspects of Sorge (like many other characteristics of Dasein) lies in its inalienability. What Heidegger is saying is that to be Dasein and to care are one and the same. I (the Dasein) stand in a continual relationship with the world with which I must necessarily be concerned. Even the utterance: "I do not care about anything" is a verbal expression of Sorge. The Dasein's primary mode of being is care. The human can never not be in this way, he must always concern himself with existence and he must choose how to do so. This is not to say that the Dasein "cares" about everything or treats everything with the same level of concern but rather that the nature of the Dasein's existence is that it cannot otherwise but be in a mode of concern with the world. Whichever form it takes, what is undeniable is Dasein's inherent relationship with Being and, consequently, its necessary concern with existence.

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[160] It is important here to emphasise the importance of what is to follow for the upcoming argument in Chapter 5. *Sorge* plays a central role in the extension of the concept *concern for being*, which is developed in full below.
[161] Heidegger, 1962, p. 56.

Some of the most pervasive themes in existential thought are those of freedom, choice and possibility. The existent is steeped in the possibility of his existence. Unlike other things that are (such as animals or objects) the existent (Dasein) is confronted with the possibility of his being. For the existent, there is always the possibility of being in another way than he now is. The Dasein is always living beyond itself, determining itself in relation to projections of its possible being. However (all problems of the possibility of free will aside) death is undeniably the ultimate possibility. As Macquarrie puts it: "There is a kind of hierarchy of possibilities with death occupying the key position."[162] Death then, is the "ultimate" possibility as there is no possibility beyond death. This concern may be posited even more strongly when we accept that there is no way (as of now - or the near future) to evade death nor to come back from it.

(2) Facticity

Facticity refers to the existential theme of being thrown into existence (what Heidegger calls Geworfenheit, sometimes translated as "thrown-ness"). We must distinguish 'facticity' from 'factuality'. Factuality refers to the state of things/beings as present in the world - the "fact" that they are. This applies most readily to objects (such as chairs or tables) or to mundane beings (such as animals). Although there are similar elements of factuality in the being of the Dasein, the facticity of its being is of such a nature that the Dasein stands in a unique position - distinguishable from other beings - with regards to its factual presence in the world. Coming into existence, we are presented with realities over which we have had no choice. How we look, the colour of our skin, our sex, our height, our economic circumstances, etc. are things which we are born into and must confront. Another important element of facticity is the apparent contingency of these characteristics we are thrown into. There is no readily apparent reason why I should have been born into the life that I was. There is no apparent reason for why I am I, and not someone else.

Regardless, there seems to be no greater defining characteristic of our existence to exemplify facticity than death. From the moment we are born (or perhaps even before!), we face the possibility of death. Heidegger puts it strikingly when he says "...we are born old enough to die…" Although death is a characteristic (and perhaps the only one) shared by all existents, it does not present itself equally to everyone. Some may die incredibly young or with great suffering, others may live long and fruitful lives before death comes upon them. Thus, with regards to death and facticity, we are

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[162] Macquarrie, 1972, p. 196.

thrown into an existence which appears wholly contingent, from the traits which define us and our lives to the moment it comes to an end. Macquarrie puts it as follows: "From the very beginning of life, the human existent is already in the situation of mortality. He is always old enough to die."[163]

(3) Falling into the 'they' (*Das Man*)

This characteristic is defined by the existent's relationship to the self and other beings in the world in terms of two distinct modes of being. These modes of being can be referred to those of authentic and inauthentic existence. When the existent exists authentically, s/he exists as the unique individual that s/he is, standing out from the world and projecting itself into the possibility of its future being. Thus, to live authentically is to embrace oneself as unique existent and the responsibilities of freedom, action and decision it entails. On the other hand, inauthentic existence entails the existent sinking into the background along with other mundane beings and things in the world. In this way the existent denies their unique existence and becomes just another object among others in the world. The existent falls away from his/her position as free acting individual, allowing things to simply happen to it instead of making decisions. Macquarrie states: "Either he is himself, he is existing as this unique existent, standing out from the world of objects and going out from any given state of himself; or he is not himself, he is being absorbed into the world of objects as just another object, he decides nothing for himself but everything is decided for him by external factors."[164] Thus, in the existence of the human being, it either actively emerges from its surroundings, defining itself in opposition to other mundane beings, projecting itself into the future of the possibility of its being, or it sinks into the background of its world, becoming one of the many objects that co- inhabit the world, defying the potentiality of its being-into-the-future by allowing things to simply happen to it.

The existent may move in-between these two modes of being but is always in either one or the other. The existent is always living either authentically or inauthentically. One may agree that there is such a thing as to exist authentically as opposed to inauthentically and that such a relationship is pertinent to our existence. Heidegger makes the useful distinction between being-in-the-world (In-der-Welt-Sein) and 'innerworldy being' (das innerweltliche Seiende). Dasein exemplifies the type of being that is being-in-the-world. This is opposed to 'innerworldy being' which is the type of being that is generally exemplified by mundane beings such as animals and objects. Although the

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[163] Macquarrie, 1972, p. 197.
[164] Ibid. p. 74-75.

existent is being-in-the-world, (s)he is always in constant danger of sinking into 'innerworldy being'. This occurs if the Dasein fails to adequately "stand out" in its being and loses his/her distinctive existence. If the Dasein fails to avail itself to its unique position in the world then it is absorbed into the level of the mundane, what Macquarrie refers to as the "subexistent, unreflective [and] irresponsible being."[165] One persistent threat to our authentic being as per Heidegger is what he refers to as Das Man (translated directly as the man but more adequately translated perhaps as the 'they'). This notion may also be directly related to the discussion on the subjectivity of the existent above. The idea of Das Man may be related to Kierkegaard's "the crowd" or even Nietzsche's "the herd". To conform to the ideas of Das Man is to take recourse in our designs to the general will of 'them'. To do so is to deny our unique position as an existent, to make our own decisions and to live their consequences, in favour of the safety that is afforded by doing as others do.

As existents, we stand out from the rest of the world. We are able to recognise ourselves as beings-in-the-world and maintain an acute awareness thereof. We are, however, always in danger of losing this perspective. We are in danger of being absorbed into existence of the everyday, absorbed in the problems of the practical and immediate. When this occurs, we become part of what Kierkegaard first termed "the crowd." Heidegger later refers to this as the "they" and Nietzsche terms it in even more unflattering terms with: "the herd." We lose sight of our existential condition, engaging in "idle talk" and mundane existence. When we think of death, we are once again arrested with the pith of our existence. However, just as death is the (seemingly) critical element for circumscribing our existential narrative, just so is it a topic avoided by the "they." Death is a taboo, a reality which is to be pressed from the mind and replaced with meanderings of practical immediacy.

Macquarrie sums it up well:

> "Care implies … "falling", absorption into the instrumental world and into the impersonal collectivism of the "they". This shows itself in the everyday attitude to death, which is one of flight and avoidance."[166]

Death lies at the centre of our concern. All that we do and all that is important to us lies in the inevitability of our deaths. To understand this idea, we may refer back to our discussion of

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[165] Macquarrie, 1972, p. 83.
[166] Macquarrie, 1972, p. 83.

Heidegger. As Heidegger states, we as Dasein experience being-towards-death. In other words, our existence is determined and demarcated by death. Death is a constant which presents itself to all and must be confronted by every individual. Heidegger states that the Dasein's particular mode of being involves the possibility of its being. In other words, the existent lives towards ideas of itself, realizing or faltering in the possibilities it my attain. The existent recognizes that the possibility of the world is thrown open to them and that they may act with the intention of realizing the possibility of their being. However, there is one thing that lies beyond all other possibilities, and that is death. As Heidegger states, death is the possibility of the final possibility of our being.

Understanding existence in this manner, in all of its complexity and ontological significance, it is once again clear that this construction is more apposite to our understanding of 'life' in the question "is life serious?" than any other. This is important to emphasise as, having concluded that by 'life' we mean existence, we must investigate the nature of existence to determine if seriousness is indeed applicable. What we will find in our analysis is that the concept seriousness is dependent on a particular understanding of 'life'. This understanding lies in the claim that life has inherent value. To determine the validity of this claim, we find that existence is constituted by a mode-of-being which we term a concern-for-being. We recognize that the existent cannot but exist in this mode of being and, as such, we must conclude that seriousness is a necessary element of existence.

Chapter 5: Why Existence cannot but be a serious matter

Firstly, we are reminded of the problem at hand: It is apparent that we are able to use specific statements of meaning, specifically - life isn't a serious matter - in an intelligible way. This statement, in the face of rational thinking, seems to lead to certain substantially undesirable implications. To say that life isn't a serious matter is to say that we need not take life seriously and if we need not take life seriously, then why do we need to take anything seriously - including violence, poverty, racism, and so on. This problem is posed as it seems entirely possible to make an argument that life is indeed not serious. One may argue, for example, that in the absence of the supernatural, the significance of the outcome of all human endeavour is entirely contingent and, because it is contingent, it doesn't ultimately matter whether life is treated as serious or not.[167] One may further, as an extension of Benatar's argument, argue that the inevitable suffering of human beings makes it permissible to take life less (or not at all) seriously. This is certainly an odd kind of philosophical problem but one that pertains to significant implications and that is sufficiently distinguishable from questions on the meaning of life. To address the problem at hand, we simply ask the question plainly: "Is life a serious matter?"

Having discussed some of the most prominent concepts around existence, we have a somewhat concrete understanding of what we are referring to when we refer to 'life'. For human beings, when we are deliberating on questions of meaning, 'life' necessarily means existence. Up until now, we have been working with a very limited understanding of 'seriousness' which is insufficient for the purposes of this thesis. As such, our first task is to elucidate the concept 'serious'.

What it means for something to be serious

Seriousness is generally used to denote an expression of a certain attitude. We generally refer to a matter as serious if we regard it as important or significant. The concept is generally used to refer to how we think about a certain matter. If I take something seriously, it means that I am treating it with the implied care and caution that it deserves. One may say that he/she "takes their work seriously,"

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[167] If we reject any notions of life continuing after death (in whatever form), we know that, one day, our star (the sun) will burn out and, if we have not by then learned how to space travel and colonise other worlds, all that we *are* or might have achieved will come to nought. It seems thus that everything we do is ultimately frivolous. This particular nihilistic argument (first brought forth by Nagel), poses a problem to the argument in this thesis and will be addressed once more in chapter 6 below.

for example "this is a very serious meeting". We generally juxtapose serious matters against trivial ones. We usually determine such matters based on the consequences of treating them seriously or trivially. A serious matter is usually one that needs to be treated as such to avoid an unfavourable outcome. We recognise that our attitudes towards certain matters as opposed to others seem to indicate that there are matters that are objectively more serious than others. We can investigate this idea to try and get to the core of what exactly makes something serious. We use the concept frequently and in a number of different contexts, but at the heart thereof lies a reference to some objective measurement of some kind. Most people agree that certain matters - such as violence, poverty and racism - are serious matters whereas others - the colour shirt I am wearing, the type of coffee I drink - are not. Furthermore, we generally criticise outliers who take something seriously that we believe they need not to or vice versa. To this end it appears that we are able to construct an objective model of seriousness. How can we define seriousness? To say that something is serious is - in the linguistic convention - to say that something is worthy of careful consideration or application. Working with this understanding, we can define seriousness as the quality of a state of affairs which determines that it is worthy of our concern. Put simply, serious things matter whereas non-serious things do not. In this thesis, we will avoid the conventional meaning which points out that we are speaking in earnest - for example, "I am not joking, I am being serious" - because this use seems to be altogether more straightforward and without application to the question "is life serious?"

As has previously been suggested, what correctly constitutes seriousness has generally either been played off as either intuitive or subjective. States of affairs that impact significantly upon a life are generally regarded as serious and the greater the impact the more serious it is. For example, the real-world suffering of people due to poverty, illness or war is regarded as utterly serious due to the potential and actual severe implications it has for human lives. Given this intuition, we begin to suspect that 'seriousness' exists in a direct correlation with two determiners: (1) the lives affected and (2) the type(s) of effect. To further explore this intuition in the hope of developing a substantial framework, we can turn to simple observations of matters that are generally regarded as serious by most people.

We may regard the following few examples of serious matters to illustrate this point:

- Losing large sums of money

- People getting terminally ill (illnesses such as cancer, HIV/AIDS, Ebola, etc.)

- War and famine

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- Unethical treatment of people and/or animals

- Political unrest and upheaval

This list is by no means exhaustive, but with reference to the examples given it appears uncontroversial to claim that most people would regard these matters as at least somewhat serious. This would support the idea that an objective measurement of seriousness is possible and that such a measurement depends to some degree on the severity of impact of an occurrence on people's lives - although what exactly this means remains to be determined. On the other hand, what constitutes a serious matter is often regarded as subjective. If I regard my lifelong dream - to hold the world record for largest pinecone collection - as serious, at least for myself, who may tell me I am wrong? It seems that the most effective counter to such a position is the argument that any matter that does not infer significant implications upon one's life (such as the ones above) cannot be said to be a serious matter. And, since holding the world record for the largest pinecone collection is unlikely to drastically affect my life in any significant way, we conclude that it is not actually serious. If we conclude that the seriousness of a matter depends on its impact and the severity of said impact on a person's life, we must determine what exactly this means. To further develop a model for seriousness, I will posit that there are three particulars which determine a matter as serious or not. I will begin by naming these particulars and then continue to discuss each in turn.

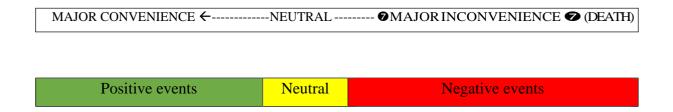> The seriousness of a matter depends on three particulars, namely:
>
> (S1) the content (or type) of the concern
>
> (S2) the severity (or impact) of the consequence
>
> (S3) the magnitude (or scale) of the investment

Of these three, we will see that (S1) and (S2) carry the essential weight. As has been noted above, (S3) the magnitude of one's investment, may simply come down to a subjective measurement. I may invest all of my energy and time into researching different types of adhesive cement, however, the mere magnitude of my investment does not make types of adhesive cement a serious matter (at the very least, not nearly as serious as other matters).[168] Rather, the type of concern a matter brings forth is essential in the evaluation of its seriousness. For example, the most popular colour in the world seems to carry much less weight than the leading cause of untimely death in the world.

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[168] Of course, it may be that my research into cement leads to the discovery of life-changing building strategies that lead to an entirely new kind of living situation for many poor and underprivileged communities. However, such an argument rests on the problem of prediction. Who is to judge the ultimate outcome of our actions? This is relevant concern which is discussed further in chapter 6 below.

Clearly, the kind of concern here is not the same. What then, is the adequate kind of concern that warrants seriousness? Observing examples of the kind of thing that gets taken seriously in contemporary discussions - the indication is towards the significance of an event's impact on one's life. Many things can impact one's life in many different ways. What is central, it seems, is the extent to which this impact undermines the value of human life. Events that seem to harm an individual are usually regarded as serious and events that are the cause of people's death are generally regarded as being of the utmost seriousness. If one accepts that human life is valuable and needs to be preserved, the most clear and significant impact upon life is the most straightforward negation of this idea, namely death. In an attempt to understand the content of the concern that is adequate to seriousness, we may construct a spectrum upon which we can place instances that are generally regarded as having a positive impact on one's life or a negative impact on one's life.

Consider, for the moment, the following spectrum of life impacting events:

MAJOR CONVENIENCE ◄-------------NEUTRAL --------- ❼MAJOR INCONVENIENCE ❼ (DEATH)

| Positive events | Neutral | Negative events |

(Diagram 1 - spectrum of life impacting events)

A life impact may range from a positive, major convenience all the way to what may possibly be regarded as the most severely negative impact on a life: death. Thus, keeping the spectrum in mind, it seems that the kind of concern which is adequate for (S1), the content of the concern, is a concern which falls somewhere on this spectrum. However, almost any life event may fall on such a spectrum and thus we must turn to (S2), the severity of the impact, to further define the model. We find that events that fall on the negative side of the spectrum are generally those regarded as more serious than events that fall on the positive side. As such, we may say that events of which the outcome constitutes a harm to a person(s) is to be regarded as serious whereas an event of which the outcome constitutes a benefit is not necessarily to be regarded as such. Although one may consider a state of affairs which grants a major convenience as something worthy of our concern, we do not consider the outcome of such a state of affairs as necessarily serious.

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Consider the following examples:

(a) Fred loses a lottery ticket which, as it turns out, could have won him a substantial amount of money.

(b) Fred loses an important document which, as it turns out, loses him his lucrative job and subsequently places him in serious debt.

In situation (a) above, we may say that Fred is particularly unlucky for losing what could have been a lot of money, but we would not usually say that such a situation is particularly serious. The reason for this is that there is no real severity to this outcome. Nothing intrinsically bad has happened to Fred. All that has happened is that Fred has been denied something good. Nonetheless, Fred is in the same state that he would be in if he had simply not known that his ticket had won or if he had never bought a ticket in the first place. In contrast, situation (b) depicts a scenario which has much more severe consequences for Fred. We can easily say that such a situation is serious as Fred loses his job and subsequently finds himself in financial difficulty. In such a situation, Fred suffers a clear harm (albeit one of his own doing). Thus, we may conclude that (b) is a serious situation but (a), albeit quite unfortunate, is not and - if one argues that it is - it is surely of such a minor nature that it is trivial in comparison with (b).

Thus, knowing what we do so far, we can state the following: When considering a person's state of affairs, an occurrence which does (or could)[169] place a person in a *worse* state of affairs than they were in before is serious whereas an occurrence that places them in a *better* state of affairs is not *necessarily* so. We add the qualifier *necessarily* as we will find below that there appear to be instances in which no harm occurred but that one may still regard as serious. We will discuss these below.

Let us now consider the following diagram:

B<<----------------------<-------------------------N------------------------->------------------->>H

(Benefit)   (Neutral)   (Harm)

(Diagram 2 – severity of consequence scale)

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[169] When considering such occurrences in the abstract, such as we are doing here.

A state of affairs may be said to ultimately constitute a benefit or a harm. Some scenarios may not constitute a clear benefit or harm whilst other scenarios may constitute relief from harm or a deprivation of a benefit. We will attempt to consider the model in its simplest form and address the potential complexities of such instances below. In scenario (a), Fred loses his winning lottery ticket. In this scenario there is at most a deprived benefit. In (b), one the other hand, Fred loses the documents that costs him a job. In this scenario, there is a clear harm. The severity of a state of affairs may thus be said to correlate to their instances of harm but not to their deprivation of benefit. In other words, states of affairs that have a potential or actual positive outcome, constituted by a benefit, do not warrant the same credence as states of affairs that have a potential or actual negative one, constituted by a harm. We may conclude that this is due to the severity of the consequence of the event/occurrence. Therefore, a state of affairs with a negative outcome or a potentially preventable negative outcome may be called severe, whereas a state of affairs which provides a pure benefit is not.[170]

So far, we have set up the following particulars which determine seriousness:

(S1) the content (or type) of concern

(S2) the severity (or impact) of the consequence

(S3) the magnitude (or scale) of the investment

To explain (S1), we have relied on the observation of phenomena which are generally regarded to be fitting of the term 'serious'. From this, we have constructed a spectrum upon which the 'seriousness' of phenomena may be judged. From this we observe that, generally, 'serious' phenomena fall on the negative side of the spectrum. In other words, events that are regarded as inconveniences are more likely to be regarded as serious than those that appear to be conveniences. To help us identify what exactly classifies an occurrence as an inconvenience, we rely on (S2), the severity of the consequence, and to this we conclude that what constitutes a harm constitutes an inconvenience, which we may also call a negative occurrence. Furthermore, we observe that phenomena that come closer to instances of physical harm and ultimately death are judged proportionally more serious than others.

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[170] In other words and with reference back to diagram 2 above, any event that ultimately moves (or, in the abstract, has the potential to) the scale towards Benefit is less severe, and any event that moves (or has the potential to) move the scale towards Harm is more severe.

To this conclusion we can make the following claim:

> Situations which implicate (or potentially implicate) the death of an individual (or individuals) are more serious than situations which do not.

This statement relies heavily on one agreeing with it intuitively. What one needs to substantiate such a claim is an argument which supports the notion that human life has value and, as such, death would be regarded as the worst possible occurrence as it constitutes the ultimate diminishment of such value. However, perhaps there are occurrences that are worse than death. We may imagine the life of an indentured slave who is frequently beaten and abused. One may argue that such a person is better off dead. In this instance, can we not say that this person's continued suffering is perhaps more serious than if they were to, for example, take their own life? Furthermore, we will discover that there are scenarios that appear to present positive outcomes which may be regarded as serious despite the absence of harm or death.

We will consider these problems below. Firstly, we will consider the validity of the statement above in light of a number of axioms:

- Two people have an accident. The one dies and the other survives but is paralyzed. Both are serious situations, but the former is more serious than the latter.
- The birth of a healthy child is less serious that the death of a new-born infant.
- War is (usually) more serious than a drought.

One may wish to ask what one ought to make of situations in which several hundred people die as opposed to only a handful, or, where a very important and influential figure dies as opposed to someone who did not achieve anything particularly significant in their lives. It is not the purpose of these axioms to elucidate the nature of the quantitative value of life, nor the qualitative. In other words, we are not concerned whether lives are comparatively of the same value or not. What is enough for now is to show that it is generally accepted that the death of an individual(s) is more serious than most other matters. One may argue that claiming something is serious is akin to no more than simply adopting an opinion on the matter. As has already be stated, such an argument defeats the potential for anything to be concretely serious and reduces seriousness to the emotional state of an individual. The way to counter this most efficiently is by stating that matters exist on a

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spectrum towards death, with those coming closest to death being regarded as the most serious, with death occupying the position of most serious. Placing seriousness on this spectrum, not only do we reliably hit the mark with matters that are generally regarded as serious, but we also prevent seriousness from being reduced to an attitude relative to an individual.

Another point which may be raised is that, with regards to the complexity of specific circumstances, it is not viable to treat the concept 'seriousness' with too much gravity. For example, in the second example, we say that the death of an infant is regarded as more serious than the birth of a new one. What if, however, we add in a number of details that seem to change this outcome? For example: what if the new infant that is born turns out to be a great doctor who goes on to find a cure for cancer? From this example, we may find at least one situation in which death is less serious than something else, which leads us to believe that there are other such examples and, subsequently, that the above conclusion does not hold true. In addition, we have considered that there may be situations which act to diminish the value of life in a manner worse than death - such as the example of someone living a life of slavery. In countering these criticisms, we will elucidate the core principle which upholds (S1), the content (or type) or concern and subsequently supports the entire discussion: Take the example of the child who goes on to cure cancer. Why does this example seem intuitively more important and more serious than a situation in which a single infant passes away? We have stated that it is insufficient to reduce such an understanding to merely an individual attitude.

However, the claim posited above:

> "Situations which implicate (or potentially implicate) the death of an individual (or individuals) are more serious than situations which do not."

seems to be defeated by such an example. Indeed, one can think of numerous other examples which seem to perform the same function. For example, a life-changing scientific discovery (such as the invention of industrial machinery) or the immigration of a large group of people to another area, are two examples of events which one may call significantly serious (or at least, take more serious than many other matters). In addition, these examples appear to be serious without there being any clear instance of harm befalling any person(s).

There are three responses to this problem one can put forward, the latter being the most apposite to the discussion at hand. First, one could rely on linguistic convention to argue that, looking at the

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spectrum above, one generally does not refer to something as 'serious' if it does not have at least some negative (or potentially negative) impact (with death standing as the ultimate negative impact). Rather, examples such as the ones above may be referred to as "significant", "important", "great", "impactful" and so on, but not 'serious'. However, I believe that such an argument is relatively weak. Secondly, we may abstain from our earlier reluctance to quantify or qualify lives and state that the only reason these examples hold up is because they are relative to lesser instances of death. For example, no matter how many people are saved by the cure for cancer, a plague that kills the exact same amount of people that are saved would still be regarded as more serious. We could thus say that depending on the magnitude of the situation, there is an always comparatively more serious situation and, in comparison, the situation in which death is an occurrence would always weigh more seriously than the alternative. Although this argument appears to work, it is not one that I believe to be very reliable. This argument implies that if the number of human lives affected are equal, the situation in which the lives come to an end is always more serious. Such a perspective will come down to a continual comparison between different conditions, requiring one to be aware of all the details in a situation before one can adequately judge it to be more or less serious. Not only does this present the practical problem of discerning such details each time but, there seems to be conditions which are not as straightforward, which make such an analysis unreliable. Such a case would be, if one compares the ongoing climate crisis, for example, to the ongoing problem of violent crime world-wide. Some believe the latter to be more serious because it has been and continues to affect the lives of real people daily whilst others believe the former to more worthy of our concern as it presents the possibility of affecting all life on the planet now and to come. Regardless, I find this kind of approach to be unreliable but also to be unnecessary in favour of what is to follow.

What is required of (S1), is that the type of concern required be what I will call a death-concern. To demonstrate this, we may refer back to the three of axioms above which appear to show that death is regarded as more serious than anything else. The examples above, of finding the cure for cancer and of the indentured slave, seem to defeat this conclusion. It may be true that given specific instances, certain situations may be regarded as more serious than counterfactuals in which people die (or may die). What will become evident in this discussion, is that the death- concern does not simply mean that what is relevant is whether people may or may not die, nor simply how many people may or may not die. Yet, as I will explain below, I maintain that death still pertains to the pinnacle of our concern. To understand this, we must elucidate our understanding of the death-concern.

The argument that is to follow attempts to show that death occupies the position of our ultimate concern and, as such, we take everything seriously as considerations towards death as the final possibility of our existence. Referring back to diagram 1 above, we see how this can be put in perspective in accordance with our other concerns. Our considerations on what makes something serious are ultimately conditioned by an ultimate concern with death. This is not to say that our lives are constituted by a continual morbid obsession with our deaths but rather that, because of the position death occupies in terms of our existence, we are unable to construct our concerns in a manner that is not ultimately considerate of death. One can only live towards death as the ultimate possibility. Thus, when considering the outcome of any situation, one cannot consider a possibility that falls beyond death. The cure for cancer may fall somewhere on the spectrum of serious events (above) but the plague that kills just as many people occupies the position of death. Nothing good nor bad can occur after such an event, at least not for the people who die. The final possibility has already occurred. This is the same in the scenario of the indentured slave. During their lifetime, any number of events may occur that fall anywhere on the spectrum of life impacting events yet only one can occupy the position of absolute impact, death. This would be the case even if one were not intently aware of death as the ultimate possibility of ones being. What is argued is that, directly or indirectly, what informs us to what makes the type of concern we have serious or not serious, is death.

Concerned with death

The argument that I have made is that with regards to (S1) the content (or type) of concern, one understands it with regards to what I call the death-concern. Before developing what, this term means, it serves us to briefly turn back to Heidegger's analysis of being-towards-death, to substantiate the existential nature of this concern. All of our endeavours are undertaken on the basis of the realisation that one day we will die. Death thus is the final context or horizon that confers urgency, importance and, thus, 'seriousness' to our existence. We may partake in a great number of different things in our lives, constantly pushing and shaping the boundaries of what is possible. Yet, what is inalienable from each and every existent is his/her finitude. Because death is the inevitable and ultimate possibility of our being, all of our actions are necessarily conditioned by it. Death also necessarily completes our existence. As Heidegger states, an existent is always in the process of existing; this is a process that can only come to a completion upon its death. We cannot comprehensively define the life of an individual whilst they are still alive; we must wait until they are dead; only then can we construct a narrative of their existence. Most of our life is spent avoiding

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death whilst simultaneously preparing for it, whether that means leaving behind a legacy or a family or simply coming to terms with our own mortality. We need only observe the life of most individuals to recognize this. From these notions we may conclude that existence is essentially being-towards-death (Sein-zum-Tode). As such, we cannot truly understand our existence without regards to human mortality. Indeed, it is hard to imagine the conditions of *existence* if, for example, we were to uncover the secrets to immortality. How would one *exist* if one never stopped *existing*? Nevertheless, what one understands from *Dasein* as being-towards-death is the notion that human concern always falls within a *death-concern*. Because death acts as an essential element for formulating an understanding of our *existence*, all of our concerns (and thus anything we take "seriously") is done so in light of the anticipation of our deaths (and the death of others). Understood in this way, we recognize that the range of our concerns fall within the spectrum (diagram 1) above. The spectrum consists of life-impacting events, with death standing as the ultimate impact. All of our concerns are always contextualized by a *death-concern*, with those that come closest to death regarded as more worthy of our concern and thus more serious. Death occupies the position of our ultimate concern and is taken most seriously.[171] It may seem that we are only saying that death is the worst possible thing that can happen to someone, and thus the closer an occurrence comes to causing a death, the more serious it is. However, it is unnecessary (and inadequate) to frame it in this manner. Rather, death, as the defining characteristic of *existence*, stands at the edge of the possibility of our concern. As such, death necessarily stands as the arbiter of all that is potentially serious. Conditions which bring one closer to this final possibility of concern are regarded as more serious matters - those that do it violently, abruptly, unfairly or in great magnitude more so.

When we employ this understanding of human concern, we can easily understand both the appeals of the axioms above whilst simultaneously proving that the apparent outliers - situations which seem to not involve death but are nonetheless regarded as serious or situations which present death as a better alternative - fall within the same type of concern. Does this mean that anything may be regarded as serious? Understanding the argument above, we may say that any concern possibly falls on the spectrum above and, as a result, may pertain to a degree of seriousness. However, we have seen that matters that do not adequately implicate the possibility of death are not necessarily serious. As the problem has been framed thus far, it seems that any event - even one as seemingly innocuous as deciding what soup to buy - falls on the spectrum above. It seems absurd to conclude

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[171] To be distinguished from Paul Tillich's "ultimate concern" which he identifies with religious faith. See *The Courage to Be*, 1952.

that such an occurrence is objectively serious. To get around this problem, one may adjust the requirements of the spectrum to be more in-line with the discussion above. One may argue that an occurrence is not serious only if it exists on a spectrum towards death, but that it depends on the potential implications towards death. Thus, the greater the (potential or real) implication an occurrence has for implicating the outcome of the final possibility of possibilities (death), the more serious it is. This explains why we may regard certain positive occurrences as serious whilst maintaining that they cannot be as serious as those that implicate events closer to death. Nevertheless, we have already determined that (S1), the type of concern, alone is not enough to define the seriousness of a matter, (S2) the severity of the consequence and (S3) the magnitude of the investment, is required in tandem. As such, it is not the purpose of (S1) to show that a matter needs to be of sufficient severity or magnitude of concern to be serious. Rather, what is argued is that, first and foremost, seriousness falls within a specific type of concern, which is a death-concern. Having established the type of concern which informs a matter as serious, one needs to recognize (S2) the severity of the consequence. Referring to diagram 2 above, we understand that matters that fall within Harm are generally regarded as being serious (or potentially serious) whilst those that fall within Benefit are regarded as not. However, we have found that there are a number of examples which seem to imply that situations exist that may be positioned as Neutral or even Beneficial that are also observed to be generally taken seriously. Take, for example, the process of raising a child. For most people, having a child (one that they desire) is regarded as a joyous occasion. As such, most people are likely to regard having a child as a definite benefit. Yet similarly, having a child is usually regarded as no laughing matter, something that must be treated as utterly serious. What this indicates is that, similar to the conclusion reached from (S1) above, we conclude that the (S2) the severity of consequence is not merely dependant on the amount of harm that a person(s) experience but rather the capacity of potential harm that a matter sustains. Having a child is regarded as a serious matter not because it is beneficial to the parents but because it entails severely harmful ramifications if one does not treat it with adequate care. We may regard any other number of 'serious' matters in the same light.

For example, the discovery of a new alien species may be exciting but also serious, not *only* because it furthers our understanding of the universe, but because of the anticipated potential ramifications. Discovering alien life may have a significant impact on every facet of our understanding of the universe, yet if such a discovery was accommodated with the threat of human extinction, we would take it more seriously than if it wasn't. Even conditions that appear to only have a positive outcome - such as the birth of a child who will go on to cure cancer - may be understood to be serious along

these lines. Cancer is the cause of much real and potential harm; thus, the discovery of its cure is serious not because it is good, but because of the great potential harm that stems from the counterfactual. In other words, if we never find a cure for cancer (or, in this scenario, if the child was never born), the *capacity of potential harm* remains great.

Finally, we must take heed of (S3), the magnitude of the investment. We have already discussed that simply having a high magnitude of investment in a matter does not necessarily make it serious. (S3), thus does not actually seem necessary to determine something as serious but is useful as it serves to help us recognize matters that are serious. It is unnecessary because if it were, we would be placed in a position where a matter could not be regarded as serious if no one took it to be serious even if it met the requirements of (S1) and (S2). However, it may thus be that everything has the potential to be serious. However, we have determined that this isn't the case and thus we need a way to determine what exactly determines the seriousness of a matter.

To conclude this discussion, we maintain that the following two particulars determine seriousness:

>(S1) The type of concern - a *death-concern*

>(S2) the severity of the consequence - the *capacity of potential harm*

We may thus posit the following:

>To determine something as serious is to adopt a specific attitude towards it in light of its *death-concern* and the *severity of the consequence*.

However, what becomes evident in our discussion of seriousness, is that its validity is based on a particular attitude towards the concept 'life'. It seems that the seriousness of any particular situation is dependent on the impact it has on one's life, with death being regarded as the ultimate impact. If this is the case, what happens when we ask if life itself is serious? Does this question become untenable? Are we not taking the seriousness of life for granted in order to determine the seriousness of all other matters?

Life and Seriousness

Throughout this discussion, in an attempt to determine what exactly makes something serious or

not, a clear problem begins to emerge. The problem at hand is, the manner in which the concept 'serious' (as it thus far has been understood) appears to function and seems to be conceptually dependant on a specific understanding of the concept 'life'. It seems to be the case that the concept 'serious' can only function properly upon a particular understanding of the concept 'life' and with an understanding of the relationship between them. The task at hand has been to lay out a set of particulars with which to understand the concept 'serious', in order to determine its suitability as applied to the concept 'life', which we understand to mean existence. However, the problem arises that 'seriousness' is a concept which seems dependant on a specific understanding of 'life' for it to function in a coherent manner. It seems to depend thereon to the extent that one may conclude the following: any matter may be regarded as serious due to the impact it has on 'life'. As such, we may say that if life is not to be regarded as a serious matter then nothing is to be regarded as such. Or, in other words, our understanding of 'life' is what makes something serious or not. Let us attempt to elucidate this understanding further.

It must be noted that the manner in which we use 'life' above must necessarily be in the way that it has been assessed in chapter 3 and 4 above. It has been concluded that one may abstract the concept 'life' to a sufficient degree so that it refers to a characteristic which is shared by organic entities. However, it has also been shown that, unless understood in very specific circumstances, the concept changes meaning when used in most instances of the English language. In most instances, as we have concluded above, when we use the concept 'life' we are using it synonymously with existence. It has been stated that, according to (S1) and (S2), the seriousness of a matter is dependent on the degree to which it impacts a person(s) life as well as the potential negative value (or severity) of the impact. As such, the concept serious as it has been developed thus far, appears to rest on a presupposition.

This presupposition may be laid out as follows: (LIV) *Life is something with inherent value*

Thus, we may lay out the argument as follows:

We have two particulars with which to define a state of affairs as serious:

(S1) A state of affairs is serious if it is with a death-concern.

(S2) A state of affairs is serious if it has severity of consequence.

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Finally, as has been stated above, these two particulars are supported by an underlying presupposition:

(LIV) Life is something with inherent value

The particulars of seriousness may very well be defensible on their own merits, provided one accepts the underlying premise of (LIV) – that life has inherent value. What exactly does this premise posit? The notion that life is inherently valuable is one that can be traced back to the work of Plato and Aristotle.[172] This idea shows up more readily in the philosophy of the 18th and 19th century. Perhaps the most famous example of such an idea comes to us from Immanuel Kant. Kant posits that (human) beings ought not to be treated purely as instrumentally valuable to our own lives but are to be regarded as having intrinsic value in and of themselves.

As Kant writes:

> "Act in such a way that you treat humanity, whether in your own person or in
> the person of any other, never merely as a means to an end, but always at the
> same time as an end."[173]

Although this passage refers technically to humanity, it is clear from this sentiment that what is implied is that (at least, human) life is something that has value in and of itself. In other words, life is valuable because of what it is. The "good" of life does not come from instrumentality alone, it simply is. Having established the nature of the principle (LIV), it falls upon this discussion to defend it. If taken as true, (LIV) does a sufficient job at substantiating premises (S1), the death-concern and (S2) the severity of impact. However, what substantiates (LIV) itself? Why does life have inherent value? It is this question which I hope to answer throughout this chapter. This question is vital as, as we will see further below, if one cannot substantiate the claim (LIV) with sufficient additional reason, the argument becomes circular. Thus, the primary concern of this paper is the defence of proposition (LIV). Thus the question becomes, "does life – specifically human life – contain value and if so, is this value inherent or is it artificial?"[174] We need not consider that the

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[172] Both were proponents of the idea that pleasure is intrinsically valuable and, as life may be regarded as coming down to the pursuit of Eudemonia, life's value may be inherent also.

[173] Kant, 1785, *Groundwork for the Metaphysics of Morals*.

[174] As alluded to above, one may readily conclude that life is valuable but that the extent of such value comes either from a subjective individualism or, perhaps, from some form of pragmatism.

value comes from somewhere supernatural as we have, at the outset, rejected any form of super-naturalism in this discussion.

Let us address the connection between the premise "life has inherent value" and the question "is life serious?" as they, on face value, appear to be different claims. We have laid out a series of particulars that need to be met if one wishes to regard something as serious. We have stated now that to defend these particulars, we need to substantiate the premise that life has inherent value. If the seriousness of something, X, is dependent on a characteristic of human life, then it seems straightforward to conclude that life itself is serious, based on its value. If we conclude that X is serious because life is inherently valuable, it would be absurd to also conclude that life itself is not serious. The argument that is to follow thus poses the following: Seriousness (including the seriousness of life itself) depends on the statement life is inherently valuable, this statement is supported by the argument that the existent always exists in a mode of being which is with a concern-for-being and cannot but be in such a mode of being. Thus, we say that the ontological structure of our existence determines the inherent value of human life which determines the seriousness thereof.

We posit the following: the ontological structure of human existence – as a wholly and immutably anthropocentric conception – determines that value and 'life' are inextricably intertwined concepts that cannot be separated from one another. As such, the conclusion becomes that we are essentially unable to state that life does not have inherent value and – is by implication – not serious. Such an idea is not possible as it requires us to conceive of a state of affairs that falls outside of our ontology.

The ontological structure of existence

Let us consider, momentarily, a phenomenon which we may term an "existential revelation". There are moments, ranging from life altering (such as the death of a loved one) to seemingly inconsequential events (such as the simple observation of a chair in the living room) that contain the potential to pull us out of our mundane, day-to-day lives and reveal to us the stark and strange nature of our existence. In such a moment, we all at once become aware of the peculiarity and wonderment of our existence. Such a realization takes on many different forms for different existentialists. What is evident in such an occurrence, is the understanding that existence entails the inalienability and inevitability of being human. When we are born, we come into existence at a time

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that is not of our choosing, into a body that is not of our choosing, in a place that is not of our choosing and in a world that is not of our choosing. As we live, we begin to realize that there are limitations upon our minds, our perceptions, our senses, our language, our knowledge and everything else. And even when we begin to overcome some of these limitations in some form or another, we must still concede that our very being is limited by its cessation in the form of our death. Ontology generally determines that we may categorize reality as either being or as not being. Thus, we have two categories within which we must categorize entities: being or nothingness.

We understand being to be that which encompasses the entirety of our existence, including the world and everything in it. Nothingness, despite seeming like a clear concept, is something which is deceptively difficult to understand. Nothingness cannot be understood as some-thing in the world. Nothingness, as a conceptual tool, serves only to point out the absence of what is. Nothingness, in the simplest form, can be understood as the absence of being. As such, we are only able to understand nothingness as the counterfactual to being, and never as a concept which is ontologically identifiable. We can never know what it is like to experience nothingness. We can only understand it as that which is not within our understanding of being. To this end we may conclude that there is an unbreachable epistemic distance between being and nothingness.

When we apply our understanding of ontology to the Anthropocene, we recognize the human centric categories of existence and non-existence. We may thus categorize the ontology of human beings as either *existing or non-existing*. However, just as with being or nothingness - the only way we are able to make sense of non-existence is as a *negation of* existence. In other words, we only understand non-existence through the lens of that which exists. We can never understand non-existence as such. We only understand non-existence as *that which does not exist*. It makes sense to, for example, speak of a being that does not exist, but in order to do this, we must first think this being into existence. I may say that Y does not exist but before I can do this, I must know what Y is. I must conceptualize Y as an existing being before I can understand what it means for it not to exist. We cannot speak of non-existence as a state of affairs - we cannot say that a human being is non-existent - we can only say that a human being ceases to exist or never exists. This problem is most notable when we attempt to speak of a being that never exists. I have a friend, F. I imagine a scenario in which F never exists. I can do this because F does exist, and I can understand what the world would be like if he never did. However, to speak of a being that never exists is actually impossible. As soon as I begin to do this, I must necessarily imagine a fictional character whose being I thus negate. If my friend F really never existed and I had no knowledge of him, I would

never be able to even imagine a scenario in which F never exists as F is not a concept which exists in the world, let alone in my mind - and never will. The reason for this is the cognitive and phenomenological limitations placed upon the human being. To explain this, I will refer to two different approaches. Firstly, I will lay out a critical analysis of Benatar's *Better Never to Have Been* and secondly, I will analyse Thomas Nagel's *What is it like to be bat?*

David Benatar and the Categories of existence

The weight of Benatar's primary argument rests on the limits of human experience as determined by our existence. If one does not exist, one cannot be exposed to the pleasures or pain of existence. One of the stronger criticisms that have been made against Benatar is that the development of his argument in terms of these limits is logically inconsistent.[175] One may ask why Benatar says that the absence of pleasure is not bad (since there is no one to be deprived of it) yet the absence of pain is good (even though there is no one to be spared)? Benatar acknowledges this problem,[176] yet does little to counter it. Although I agree with this criticism and find that it essentially defeats Benatar's argument, it is not the purpose of this essay to promote such a notion. Rather, the criticism along with Benatar's original conception of existence and non-existence, is useful in understanding the core mechanism that makes up the current argument.

Benatar presents two categories, existence and non-existence. Although Benatar refers to animals and other life during his discussion,[177] it is safe to assume that these categories are restricted to human beings. We are, however, confronted with an immediate problem. The category of existence entails all that is in being (at least, as far as human beings can experience). As such, it is easy to speak of existence and to consider beings as being in existence or coming into existence in the future. On the other hand, non-existence entails all that falls outside of being. As such, it is difficult (if not impossible) to even speak of the state of non-existence. We have encountered this problem in the discussion above. We cannot speak thereof as a mode- of-being as existence is, in fact, it may be best to speak of non-existence as the absence-of- being. We may avoid the linguistic complexities of this problem by conceding that non- existence entails all that is not within existence. Non-existence is thus the absence of all being - as far as human ontology is concerned. In particular, what is of relevance to this discussion, is that non-existence constitutes the absence of experience.

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[175] See Harman, E. 2009. "Critical study of Benatar (2006)". *Noûs* vol 43: pp. 776–785.

[176] Benatar, 2006, p. 31, footnote no. 23.

[177] Benatar argues that ideally, all life would become extinct, however, even if only human life were to go extinct, it would still be much better than it is now.

This gives rise to what I call the problem of non-existence.

The problem of non-existence

We may make use of Derek Parfit's non-identity problem in terms of Benatar's asymmetry along with some examples to elucidate the problem of non-existence. Before we can discuss the problem as it is, we must understand Parfit's NIP (non-identity problem).[178] The NIP is a problem which is generally found in discussions of anti-natalism. We understand that each person is made up of a unique genetic blueprint. As such, we can say that no two people are quite the same.179 In addition, we understand that human conception is an incredibly complex process which is dependent on several factors to be successful. Given this information, we understand that a specific individual, made up of a unique genetic code, is the product of a unique moment of conception.

We may illustrate this in the following manner:

1. Tim and Mary conceive a child on the 25th of August at 7:30pm. They name the child Jacob. Let us call this person Jacob-1.

2. In an alternate scenario, Tim and Mary conceive a child on the 25th of August at 7:31pm. They name this child Jacob. Let us call this person Jacob-2.

In both occurrences, a child is conceived and named Jacob. However, due to the nature of a human's genetic makeup, Jacob-1 and Jacob-2 are not the same person. The single minute of difference between the time of conception has resulted in an entirely new genetic individual. This pertains to an interesting problem with anti-natalism arguments when one considers children who are born with disabilities. Consider the example above again but with some differences:

1. Mary is on medication which her doctor tells her bears the risk of giving her child a disability. Mary decides to conceive anyway, and Jacob-1 is born without the use of his legs.

2. Again, in another timeline, Mary is on the same medication but decides to forego it and wait several months before conceiving, as a result, Jacob-2 is born without any disabilities.

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[178] See: Parfit, 1984, *Reasons and Persons*, p. 359.

[179] Except, perhaps, identical twins. Such twins have the same genome but are nonetheless identifiably different. Although this doesn't actually matter as the NIP would in such an instance be concerned with tracking *sets* of twins instead of the individual twins themselves.

Popular anti-natal arguments would suggest that Mary is committing a wrongful act by knowingly and intentionally bringing a disabled child into existence whose quality of life is likely going to be lower than one without any disabilities. However, according to the NIP, if Mary waits to conceive, the child she ends up having is Jacob-2 and not Jacob-1. As such, the only chance Jacob-1 has to ever exist takes place in occurrence (3) above. Thus, it seems that Jacob-1 is never done a harm by being brought into existence as any counterfactual to a life with a disability means that he in fact never comes into existence. This is the essence of the NIP.

Although an interesting conundrum, Benatar's argument avoids the problem that the NIP posits. Benatar argues that, based on the asymmetry between existence and non-existence, it is always preferable not to exist. According to Benatar, it is always worse to exist, so the question of whether it is right to knowingly have children who would suffer becomes moot. The argument comes from the observation that existence contains a significant amount of pain (which is bad) which - in a counterfactual - would be absent were we not to exist (which is good).

However, Benatar's argument does face a problem that is similar to that of the NIP. The problem can be described as follows: due to the experiential limits placed on human beings by existence, it is impossible to make moral claims about beings that never exist. In other words, we cannot say that non-existence is better or worse than existence as there is no existent for whom it can be better or worse. It is conceptually impossible to think ourselves into a situation in which we do not exist, let alone to say that it is preferable. Although I find this criticism compelling and I would maintain that it defeats Benatar's argument, we need not pursue it further. Rather, it will suffice to explore this problem as it relates to the discussion at hand, in particular, the ontological structure of existence. The experiential limits of the human being clearly demarcate the categories of existence and non-existence. As such, one either exists, with pleasures and pains, or one does not exist, without either. As such, we cannot say that a non-existent is better or worse off than an existent as the being never is in the first place. Perhaps we can make moral statements about future possible people. We may, for example, argue that we should preserve the environment as to not do so would be to commit a harm to future people. These statements only work because we are speaking of people that we reasonably believe will actually exist in the future. We do not do this with fictional people nor are we able to do this with people that never exist. What remains clear from this distinction is that a being must exist for it to be a being. Future possible people only make sense as real people - any moral problem with future possible people falls away when we conclude that they will never

actually exist. What this means is that the categories of existence and non-existence cannot be broached in certain manners. Existence only makes sense in terms of actual beings. Only beings that are - exist. Along with existence is the entire range of being, including our experiences of pleasure and pain. Non-existence does not entail any category of being. Rather, non-existence entails the absence of all being. To this end, we may conclude that future possible being actually belongs to the category of existence, as we conceptualize them as real people. People who never exist cannot belong to this category and, as such, we cannot say anything substantial about "them". We may thus conclude that the entirety of human concern is definitively limited to the category of existence. To speak of ideas of meaning, value, seriousness or otherwise with regards to non-existent beings is to speak nonsense. We can only use non-existence as a counter-factual from which to understand existence more clearly. We can understand it as the negation or lessening of our being, but we can never be non-existent. From this, we draw the conclusion that to exist is to exist with the entirety of one's concerns - good and bad - as there is ontologically an absence of everything outside of our being. The argument that is ultimately presented in this thesis is that due to the schism between existence and non-existence, human life is necessarily serious. Arguments such as that of Benatar, seem to suggest that one can place an individual outside of a state of existence and say anything significant at all. My argument is that because we are beings that either exist or do not exist, and that the nature of our particular existence determines that we always act from a position of concern (as discussed below), arguments such as that of Benatar simply cannot hold true. Existence determines the entirety of our being. To argue for any position which places us outside of existence (such as not or never existing) is to place us in a position which is ontologically closed to us.

We have already concluded that our experience is tied up with our existence. Furthering our understanding of existence and non-existence, we may infer that their existence necessarily implies certain conditions of being which cannot be different as it is a necessary element of our ontology. The experiences of pleasure and pain are found within being alone and as such it makes no sense to say that we are better off not-existing, whether one is speaking of actually "existing" in a better off state (which, admittedly, Benatar isn't saying) or whether one is speaking simply of states of affairs. To this insight, I advance the notion that concern, as a mode of being, is tied up with our being in the same way experience is. From this the conclusion will be drawn that to speak of 'life' as "not-serious" is akin to speaking of being better off never existing. However, I would like to defer the details of this argument to a later stage and engage with another idea that I believe will provide insight into this problem - Nagel's What is it like to be a bat?

Thomas Nagel - What is it like to be a bat?

Thomas Nagel, in this well-known article, attempts to solve the mind-body problem by arguing that consciousness is inextricable from the physical body. Particularly, Nagel takes aim at reductionism, claiming that the idea of consciousness cannot be adequately explained using the current concept of physics. As a result, consciousness and consequently the experience of every conscious being is one and the same as its physical being. He does this by performing a physicalist reduction of the mind/body problem. He states that the mind-body problem essentially refers to the existence of consciousness.[180] Human beings have consciousness and we may imagine that many other animals do as well. Although we cannot know for sure if other animals possess similar consciousness to our own (or even at all), we may conclude, based on our observations of them, that they do possess consciousness of some kind. What is uncontroversial is to conclude that, if a being has a consciousness, then there must be something that it is like to be that being - what Nagel calls the "subjective character of experience".[181] In other words, every being has an experience of its being - whether it be the higher order awareness of human beings or (we may imagine) the limited consciousness and sensory experience of some. What if, however, human beings are the only beings to possess consciousness as we understand it? Other animals, especially more complex ones like whales and apes, exhibit behaviour which indicates that they possess something similar to human consciousness. However, what if there is nothing that it is "like" to be another animal? What if is not "like" anything to be a bat? This is an interesting problem which may ultimately defeat Nagel's point. However, it does not defeat the point I am trying to make in reference to Nagel. Nonetheless, we must put this point on hold until the argument has been exposited below.

To collapse the mind-body problem, Nagel proceeds in an analysis of the above-mentioned experience, with the intention to give a physical account for the phenomenological features of experience. As the name of his paper suggests, to address this problem, Nagel refers to the subjective experience - agreeing, as many probably do, that they have such experience - of bats. Bats experience the world primarily through a form of built in sonar. Due to the nature of its experience, there is nothing closely relatable through which we can attempt to understand how a bat

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[180] Nagel, 1974, p. 434.
[181] Ibid p. 436.

experiences the world.[182] We can understand the function of sonar and even use it in the same manner that a bat uses it (to discern objects we cannot see or hear), but we can never know what it would be like to experience the world through sonar. All that we can know, is what it is like to experience sonar as experienced by a human. There thus appears to be a great cognitive dissonance between the understanding of our own experiences and those of a bat. One can, perhaps, imagine what it is like to have the characteristics of a bat (wings, poor vision, etc.) but this is nothing more than to imagine what it would be like for a human to have bat-like characteristics. This would be akin to imagining what it is like for a human to be a bat but not what it is like for a bat to be a bat.[183]

Nagel writes:

> "So, if extrapolation from our own case is involved in the idea of what it is like to be a bat, the extrapolation must be incompletable. We cannot form more than a schematic conception of what it *is* like. For example, we may ascribe general *types* of experience on the basis of the animal's structure and behaviour… But we believe that these experiences also have in each case a specific subjective character, which it is beyond our ability to conceive."[184]

What Nagel is essentially saying is that it may be possible for us to know everything about bats and how their brains work but that there is an additional element to a bat - it's being - that we will never be able to fully grasp. This problem is by no means exclusive to bats. Nagel argues that such a dissonance is even possible between human beings (such as for example, trying to comprehend the experiences of someone who was born blind).[185] Nagel maintains that what is described in this problem is not akin to a subjective idealism, but rather that there are types of subjective experience which, because of the structure of our being, are unobtainable to us.[186] Although the problem of other minds remains a real one, one may still understand the being of other human beings. We know what it is like to be a human being and, as such, it is a much smaller leap to understand what it may be like to be deaf or blind than what it would be like to be a bat. Still, I may never know what it is like for a person who was born deaf, and has never heard any sound, to dream or think or experience emotion without recourse to verbalization. And if I can never know what it like to be a person who was born deaf, perhaps I cannot know what it is like to be anyone else. Perhaps I can

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[182] Ibid. p. 438.
[183] Nagel, 1974, p. 439.
[184] Ibid.
[185] Ibid, p. 440.
[186] Ibid p. 442.

only know what it is like to be me. The problem is one of ontology. There is an ontological schism between different beings. There is a difference in being a certain being that cannot be overcome through epistemology. What Nagel points out in particular is that when one begins to change the type of being that one is, so too does one begin to alter one's ontology.

I may (technology permitting), for example, undergo a process where I am slowly turned into a bat and then back into a human being. When I am a human, I will not have access to my bat being and when I am a bat, I will have no access to my human being. It would also be impossible to carry the experience of being either a bat or a human across to the other. There are simply modes-of-being that are impossible to experience as the kind of being that I am. The only being that seems to be potentially capable of such a feat is one that appears to undermine our understanding of physical laws and logic. Such a being would thus be closer to something omniscient than any being in existence (that we are aware of). In our attempts to better understand the world, one criticism of Nagel posits that it is perhaps amicable to leave the specie-centric viewpoints aside and study the experiences of beings in terms of the common reality. However, as Nagel points out, such an account requires an objective concept of mind and - since we are still subjective existents who think from the perceived human mind - there appears to be no answer as of yet as to how this can be achieved.[187]

From Nagel's argument, we gain insight into the argument that there are inexorable limits placed on the human phenomenology. Nagel deliberates on the problem of consciousness as it pertains to the mind/body problem, reducing it to a pure physicalism by elucidating the impossibility of experiencing the same reality as that of a bat. The importance of Nagel's argument to the current discussion is his description of the problem of the subjective mind. We may potentially be able to obtain access to the minds of other beings epistemically but, as Nagel points out, they will always be ontologically closed to us. If we agree with Nagel, then we accept that the essential characteristics of existence are tied up with the physical structure of the human being. Even if we feel that this is granting too much, one may still hold that the nature of our ontology is of such a nature that, when one begins to fundamentally change the being that experiences said ontology, one comes up against a kind of being that is wholly different to our own. Beings are a certain way. There is something that it is like to be a human, a whale, an ape, a cat, a bat, and so on. Above we raised the problem that it might not be like anything to be a bat, or a dog, and so on. However, it seems that this potential fact makes the point all the stronger. How would we ever avail ourselves of

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[187] Nagel, 1974, p. 445.

this knowledge without actually being anything different to what we are? What is enough for Nagel's argument is not to show that a bat is like this or that, but that whatever it is like to be a bat is impossible to know as a human.

As such we recognize that, just as there may be a mode of experience which is cognitively closed to us - such as being a bat - so too may there be modes of experience that are necessary to our being - such as, as will be argued, the concern-for-being. Following this discussion of Nagel, I will argue that there are elements to this mode-of-being that is unique and limited to the human being. It may be that we share some of these elements with other beings. However, Nagel's argument shows us that this is something we can never know. What we can know, is that the human being entails a concern-for-being. The human being exists in a manner in that they are always engaged in some form or another with their existence, not merely as presence- at-hand, but as projections of the possibility of its being. What this means, is that human beings always care about their existence, even if such care is reflected in its apparent negation (such as saying "I don't care about anything"). What is argued from this point, is that this inextricable concern-for-being means that we cannot but take life seriously. It is an inalienable part of our ontology. We may thus say the following: just as we cannot know what it is like to be a bat, we also cannot know what it is like to not take life seriously (not actually, anyways). This argument will now be explored further below.[188]

The ontology of existence and the limiting concern

We find ourselves in a situation where we are limited by the ontological structure of existence. In the above arguments, we recognize two things. Firstly, it seems untenable to make certain knowledge claims about non-existent beings. In fact, it is impossible to say anything substantive about non-existents (except that "they" don't exist). What this means, is that we cannot make any significant claims about non-existence or about entities that never exist. To do so is to imagine such beings as existents and is thus akin to entertaining a fiction. We may well consider future or past existents, or entertain the notion of non-existence or fictional beings, but only with the understanding that such understandings only serve as analogous to existence or understood as negations of existence. In my criticism of Benatar, I have constructed what I call the problem of non-existence. This problem dictates that we cannot make moral statements about beings that never

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[188] The reader may, at this point, ask what of a person who decides to take their own life? Does such a person necessarily take their life seriously? Although I will argue that they still do, this consideration needs to be postponed until chapter 6 below.

come into existence as if they were existents or potential existents.

Thus, although it may seem intuitively valid to say that "X is better off never existing because if X existed X would suffer" this statement is actually nonsense. We cannot say the X is anything because to speak of X in this manner is to imagine X into being. We can only intelligibly say anything of X with the understanding that we are referring to X as a counterfactual to a real existent (or potential existent). This indicates the ontological schism between existence and non-existence. Secondly, because of the way that consciousness functions, we are necessarily at a cognitive loss to certain types of experience. We determine that, just as there are certain elements to our being that determine that other modes of being are unavailable to us (such as being a bat), so too do we determine that there are certain elements that are necessary to our existence - one such element, which is essential to our understanding of our existence, is a concern-for-being. The ontology of the human being is such that it is impossible to construct an understanding of reality without framing our being in terms of care. Care makes up an essential part of our existence. It is not possible to understand our relationship to the world (or even ourselves), without some kind of care for it. This includes feelings of indifference or apathy. Indifference or apathy are simply ways of making sense of the world as negations of care. One apparent indicator that our concern-for-being initially stems from a positive position comes across in the language we usually use in such instances. We are more likely to point out, for example, that "X doesn't care about anything" than we are to point out that "X cares about something." However, the point that is being made here is that even apathy or indifference constitutes concern-for-being. In this deliberation, we come across a potential obstacle. Apathy, indifference and care are also understood as emotional states of an individual. Does this mean that concern-for-being simply entail how we feel about our lives? I will argue that this is not sufficient. However, I place this discussion on hold for the moment. We may wish to develop this point further; this will be done in chapter 6 below.

First, we need to develop the concern for being. I will begin by making the following claim:

> *Existence* entails a mode of being which all existents are in. Any understanding that lies beyond this mode of being is not *actually* possible.[189]

We have argued above that for something to be serious it needs to permit at least two particulars - (S1) the type of concern being a death-concern and (S2) the impact of the consequence possessing

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[189] This would include an actual understanding of life as not serious.

sufficient capacity for potential harm. We have also found that for such particulars to be defensible, one has to rely on a single principle, that (LIV) life (as akin to existence) contains inherent value. Before considering the conditions in support of such a principle, as well as its bearing on the question "is life a serious matter?" we may briefly turn to its content. We have above stated that the inherent value of life lies in the recognition of life as being valuable for its own sake and is not based on its instrumentality or utility. Such a claim also denies that the value of life is to be found externally (such as from God) or is to be created artificially. In other words, life is not valuable because there is an entity who imbeds it with meaning, nor because we may find its value through our own designs. Rather, the value of life is inextricable from life as a concept. As life emerges, springs forward, so too do we come to recognize its value. It is presented throughout its entirety. As such, we say it is inherent. How can one defend the principle that life has inherent value? One may argue that such a principle strikes as intuitively true. Indeed, it seems counterintuitive to argue that life is not valuable – even more so than to argue that life is meaningless. The very phenomenon of life, its wonderment, its beauty, its awesomeness, appears so incredible to us that it seems difficult to conclude that it is not at least to some extent valuable. Arguments such as these are, however, notoriously unreliable. Without much more than a recourse to intuition, such arguments tend to strongly polarize opponents and proponents thereof and, if one is to err on the side of philosophical rigour, one is better off rejecting such ideas. Rather, the argument at hand attempts to substantiate life's inherent value by arguing that our ontology necessitates such value.

To this end, I attempt to defend the following claim:

> The ontological structure of *existence* necessitates a mode of being, a concern-for-being, which implicates the inherent value of life.

Firstly, we must reiterate that in this statement, reference to life must be equated to our understanding of existence given above. It may be that we regard life as a quality of organic beings is valuable, but one is unable to maintain such an argument with the points that follow. For the discussion that follows, we require an anthropocentric conception of life as existence. In our analysis of the arguments above, including the work of Heidegger, Sartre, Kierkegaard, Benatar and Nagel (each somewhat different philosophies in their own right) we come to recognize something inextricable about human existence. Existence entails a particular mode of-being which determines the conditions of human being, and consequently, its ontological structure. This particular mode-of-being is one of necessary concern and the constitution of our ontology determines that any appraisal

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of an alternative mode of being is essentially impossible. In other words, the structure of our ontology suggests that we exist with inalienable concern for our existence. As such, the attitude that denies a concern-with-existence requires us to think outside of our ontology, which is impossible. What this means, is that statements such as "life is not serious" are themselves utterances of concern. However, as we will see below, one cannot actually conclude that life is not serious as to do so would be to conclude that life is not inherently valuable and, since our ontology necessitates that it is, this conclusion is untenable. This point will now be considered further.

Existence entails the human's engagement with being. As existents, we find ourselves in a spacio-temporal condition from within which we make sense of reality. Existence entails the tools with which we may know the world but also indicates the limits of our experience and the conditions of our being. Existence entails the entirety of the human being's access to its ontology, what we have hitherto referred to as the ontological structure of existence. Such access comes in the form of a temporal structure between the birth of an existent and its death. Indeed, existence without death is a foreign concept, and entails a number of complications which may alter our understanding altogether. As such, we conclude that existence is demarcated by its finitude and facticity. We exist according to a design of possibilities, with death occupying the final possibility. Furthermore, existence presents to us from our subjective experience. Our existence constitutes certain necessary modes of being which act as both the defining characteristics of existence as well as the necessary limitations. We recognize, for example, that we cannot intelligibly speak of beings that never come into being as to do so would be to make claims that are in contrast to our ontology - for example, to make moral judgments about non-existents is akin to speaking nonsense and can only be entertained as counterfactuals to actual or possible existents. We understand also that existence presents to us as actual beings with a mind-body which, for whatever reason, presents us with unbridled limitations to our experience, limits that also serve as the only manner for interpreting and making sense of the world. From our analysis of the existentialists above, we come to learn of the conditions of existence. We understand that existence is concrete and pervasive. Existence is not something we can abstract. To speak of existence is to do so from within existence itself. We cannot consider our existence from anywhere outside of our existence, we cannot consider before or after the fact. We cannot make sense of our existence as a period of time that occurs anywhere else than when it does (except perhaps in an unobtainable fantasy) and we cannot choose when, how or where to exist when we are brought into existence. The ontological framework of the existent, the information at hand, the possibilities of its being and its relation to being are all encapsulated, supplied by, defined within and found throughout existence.

In light of the above, we claim the following:

> To *exist* is to *necessarily exist* with a *concern-for-being*.

As Heidegger states, a fundamental characteristic of the Dasein is its concern with the world. However, whereas Heidegger elucidates this primarily to reveal to us a mode of being which is more authentic in the face of Being, I proceed that the existent has no choice but to exist with a concern for the world, for its existence, for its being. To exist as being-in-the-world is to exist with concern-for-being. Since existence entails the entirety of my being, I have no choice but to participate in some mode of concern with it. Put simply, upon being thrown into existence, we are called upon to reflect on it in some way. I exist at all times of my existence; I am not at any time able to not be in existence (until I cease existing- but if this happens, I am no longer existing) and any decision to alter my state of existence constitutes a declaration of concern - such as the decision to take my own life. The essential point is this, because existence - as a result of its ontological structure - circumscribes and determines the elements of our concern, there is no conceivable instance in which we can exist in a mode outside of a concern-for- being.

As such, we find ourselves again at the following:

> The ontological structure of *existence* necessitates a mode of concern which implicates the inherent seriousness of life.

To solidify this point, we must consider it in terms of its counterfactual. What would an argument against the seriousness of life look like? The most (seemingly) straightforward understanding of such an argument would be one in which we assent that life is not serious as it lacks inherent value or meaning and, as a result, we need not take any part of life particularly seriously - this is the argument that has been identified at the outset of this thesis. Such an argument need not be countered here as the argument at hand implicates that even such an argument falls within an attitude of concern-for-being. The crux of the current argument can be laid out as follows: the human existent exists in a manner in which it cannot remove its concern from its being. We are always, at all times, thinking about something, doing something, acting towards something, appreciating or negating something or participating in our existence in some or other mode of concern. We may say that we are always invested in our existence, or that we always care (or

declare not caring) about something or another. Even in the conditions where I say, "I don't care about anything!" I am only doing so from my inherent concern for being. Feelings of apathy or nihilistic tendencies are in and of themselves particular modes of concern. To speak towards a true non-concern for being, is to do so from a perspective in which concern is ontologically inalienable and, as such, not actually possible.

To this end, any claim that life is not a serious matter is akin to no more than saying "I feel like life isn't serious". What then, would a true counterfactual of the argument above look like? The point is that we cannot know, and as such, we are restricted to a mode of concern-with-being. To say that life isn't serious, we need to be in an ontology which allows us to demarcate seriousness outside of existence. However, since this is unavailable to us, we cannot. Given existence thusly, we conclude that, indeed, life cannot but be a serious matter.

Chapter 6 - Critical Reflection

Due to the unique nature of the problem at hand, there are a number of complexities that need to be addressed. Part of the problem is that the question at hand attempts to unravel what appears to be a straightforward problem. Asking the question "is life serious?" may be something done in conversation or in writing with a tacit understanding of what it means and perhaps even an intuitive grasp of the answer. However, when one tries to sit down and work through the question philosophically, one begins to understand the depth required to give anything close to a satisfactory answer. As such, the question may appear absurd or - if one begins to understand the numerous complexities in trying to answer it - not one that can be satisfactorily answered. I may qualify this statement with a brief personal remark. When I first started to develop the argument of this thesis, I was in danger of falling down a great number of different rabbit holes that would have failed to constitute an ultimately cohesive argument. Even now, having developed what I believe to be a convincing argument, there still remains a number of qualifiers that must be stated in order to maintain better cohesion. We must also recognize the value of the argument with regards to further development or research.

The first qualification is one that has already been stated explicitly. This argument presupposes a metaphysics which rejects notions of the supernatural. The argument that (human) life can be meaningless, not significant or not serious cannot (usually) work if one ascribes to a reality in which supernatural forces are seemingly at work. This is especially true in a religious context. Religions, especially monotheistic ones, place the human being in a unique and special position. This position necessitates the seriousness of our lives. We don't need to ask whether life is meaningful or serious because it has already been given to us by an external supernatural force. As such, we must simply accept that no such supernatural forces are at play. The difficulty in trying to navigate the problem of life's seriousness in light of the any particular religion (let alone all of them) would be too great a task to achieve in such a thesis.

As stated above, we turn again to the argument that the contingency and finitude of life determines that it is ultimately devoid of meaning and that there is no real *seriousness* present. We have already seen, in chapter 3, that counterarguments can be made that life need not be *infinite* to be meaningful. Finitude and contingency may by themselves provide a sufficient basis for life's meaning. The argument that nothing ultimately matters also does not defeat the argument I have made in this thesis.

The argument I have made is that life is necessarily serious. This is not because of the *outcome* of our lives (or lives to follow, or the Anthropocene or even the continuation of life in any form) but because of the kind of being that we are. Our *being* determines that we cannot *not* be in some state of concern or another. This ontological fact lays the foundation for the inherent value of life and, in turn, life's seriousness.

Another of the more significant problems with this argument is that of the three particulars which are laid out in definition of the concept serious. One may ask how convincing such particulars are and, if one rejects them, what becomes of the proceeding argument? It is difficult to conceptualize the notion of seriousness without taking account of those phenomena generally regarded as such. One may attempt to model the concept on an objective measurement. Perhaps using a utilitarian or deontological approach. However, to such a suggestion one must ask if the results will be much (if at all) different, I do not believe they would be. Furthermore, one may reiterate that the validity of the particulars relies primarily on the underlying premise. What is then to be done, is to defend this premise. If to defend the premise "life has inherent value" is to equate it with "life is a serious matter", then one need not question the accuracy of the observations above nor the integrity of the proceeding argument. A criticism which I believe to be less powerful is that we may be making a mistake in our use of the concept serious. Perhaps, as discussed in chapter 5 above, seriousness is no more than a denotation of one's attitude towards something or the attitude one ought to have. We usually say X is serious because of what it means to us. However, we have already seen that we use the concept in a way that attempts to qualify objective virtue. We may try to convince someone that X is serious and that they ought to take it more seriously. Furthermore, we have seen that a reduction of the concept to a mere subjective attitude undermines certain ideas that would consequently lead to undesirable circumstances - such as the idea that murder, war, famine etc. is not serious.

The argument that has preceded attempts a unique approach to the idea that life has inherent value. Such a notion may generally be regarded as something to be taken for granted. In this thesis, I have attempted to show that life's value and hence its seriousness simply *are* because of the impossibility of conceiving it otherwise. To say that the *ontology of our existence* is what determines life as valuable is to call upon the reader to try and conceive of a situation in which they are not at any given time in some or other mode-of-concern. It is my view that this is simply not possible. Perhaps, given time, modern technology will give us an avenue through which we can begin to *actually* conceive of *what it is like* to not take life seriously at all. We may perhaps do this by

altering the brain, changing it into something far more advanced than what it is now. Perhaps through such a design, the human mind can transcend human consciousness as we have it today. I will not deny that such a situation is possible (even if in the far future) but I would maintain that such an alteration would change the kind of being we are significantly and consequently change our ontology. I can say nothing about what this situation would be like as I cannot conceive of it. This is exactly the point. Once I am able to conceive thereof, I am no longer this being that I am. I am not longer a human. Perhaps human is the wrong word, as this concept is much more flexible, and it seems acceptable to still refer to such a being as a human. However, what I believe to be clear, is that such a being can no longer be Dasein. It no longer exists in the manner that we do and, as such, it is in an ontology that is wholly different to our own.

Perhaps saying that we simply always are in a mode of concern-for-being is granting too much? This statement has implied that even utterances such as "I don't care about life" or attitudes of indifference or apathy are still constituents of this mode of being. Isn't it clear that someone is capable of truly not caring about their life? What of someone who decides to end their own life? Imagine our concern for anything, including our own lives, exists on a measurable scale. We may either be invested utterly in something or we may be relatively indifferent. Either way, our concern necessarily falls somewhere on this scale. This includes feelings of apathy and the decision to take your own life. The person who is about to commit suicide may appear to not be taking life seriously. One way to get around this problem is by referring to the existentialists again and saying that the decision to takes one's own life is akin to existing inauthentically. Although I agree, I do not believe this counter is necessary. The argument again is that no mode of being that the existent is in can be outside of a concern-for-being. If we regard the experiences of someone who wants to commit suicide, we may recognize this. Such a person is feeling great misery, depression, sadness, anger, etc. The decision to take one's own life is a decision of concern. To be concerned for life (and thus to take it seriously) does not necessarily mean to care about it in a positive way. It is not only to cherish it but also to encounter the hardships of life. To this end, we recognize that someone who wishes to take their own life is still existing in a mode of concern for their being. Indeed, suicide may thus be regarded as a very serious matter. This is not to undermine the psychological suffering of such a person, but to make an ontological claim. The decision to take one's own life is not a diminishment of life's seriousness - if anything, it is an affirmation thereof.

Another response to the argument may be to state that the position that life is necessarily serious, implies that one cannot truly know what not taking life seriously is like. If this is true, how then

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does one know what it means to take life seriously without at least some understanding of what it means to not take life seriously? To this I would respond that although it is possible to have an inclining of what not taking life seriously is like, it is a condition which is unavailable given our ontology. I compare this to our understanding of nothingness in light of being. In other words, we understand what not taking life seriously alludes to. It alludes to everything that is not 'taking life seriously'. However, since 'taking life seriously' entails that entirety of our being, it is something we can never really experience.

Chapter 7 - Conclusion

In this thesis I have endeavoured to answer the question "Is life a serious matter?". I have found this question to be deceptively difficult to answer. To answer this question, we worked towards elucidating the concepts 'life' and 'seriousness'. In our work on the former, we conclude that the most intelligible use of the concept - with regards to problems of meaning - is equated to the concept 'existence'. With regards to existence, we determine that we are referring to the concept as it appears in the tradition of the existential style of doing philosophy, thus written as *existence*. Proceeding, we turn to the concept 'seriousness'. In our analysis of this concept, we turn to observations of phenomenon that are commonly regarded as serious matters, we look at what these are and why they are regarded as such. We observe that the seriousness of a phenomenon is dependent on two particulars that must be met in line with certain criteria. To substantiate this criterion itself, however, we find an underlying premise that must be accepted - that life is something with inherent value (value, we find to be the determiner of seriousness and, as a result, we may also say life is inherently serious). Thus, we have the following premise that must be substantiated: *Existence* is inherently serious. To substantiate this premise, we turn to an analysis of the phenomenological structure of *existence* as it pertains to human ontology. In our analysis, we draw on one particular criticism of Benatar, as well as Thomas Nagel, to direct us, from different starting points, to the same conclusion - the human being, due to the limits placed upon it by its ontology - necessarily exists in a mode of being that is a concern-for-being. This mode of being necessitates the value or seriousness of life because to attempt to conceptualize the counter-factual requires that we think ourselves in a position outside of the limits of our ontological structure, which is impossible. As such, we conclude that, for the human being, life is necessarily a serious matter. We recognize as per this conclusion that even though we are able to *feel* like life is not serious - such as feelings of indifference or even suicidal tendencies - such *feelings* only substantiate the claim that we invariably *exist* with a concern-for-being. Although people may still conclude that certain important matters (such as violence, racism, etc.) are not particularly serious matters, it is illogical to conclude that *life* itself is not serious. As such, we have a foundation from which to support our intuitions that important matters (such as violence and racism etc.) are indeed serious matters.

Having concluded the discussion which has preceded, we may finally answer the question "is life serious?" with the answer "yes, necessarily so".

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