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Autistic Joy as the Meaning of Life

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Abstract

In the following paper, I will pose the cosmic question: what is the meaning of life? I will ask what sort of thing the meaning of life is, of what is it composed, and what activity fulfills it.

In response to these questions, I will argue that the meaning of life has to do with an activity termed *being what we are*, a special activity that involves fulfilling our constitutive capacities, the *universal basics*. These constitutive *universal basics*, I will argue, are simple, unadulterated forms of *thinking* and *feeling*. This activity holds cosmic meaning because, in performing it, we connect with our simplest nature as *parts* or *mechanisms* of a whole universe.

I will finally argue that *autistic joy*, which I will define as a composite concept of *sensory euphoria* and *intellectual immersion*, fulfills the framework of *being what we are* and, thus, the meaning of life.

Autistic Joy as the Meaning of Life

0 Introduction

What *is* the meaning of life? This question has been has grown unpopular among modern analytic philosophers. It is frequently held to be too difficult to answer or simply unimportant. Despite this, at some point in our lives, almost all of us feel called to ask the question. When we do, we experience crises of meaning, religious conversions, and new “leases on life.” We wonder about our existence: “Is there a point to all of this?”, “What is my purpose?”, and “Why am I here?” These inquisitive experiences hold weight for us. Given our nearly universal questioning of meaning, seeking to answer this question cannot be unimportant. Avoiding it out of difficulty is an embarrassingly weak response.

Thus, in this paper, I will address the cosmic question of meaning. First, I will present a descriptive framework of what *kind of thing* the meaning of life is, independent of my specific answer to the question. Then, I will propose an answer to the central question: what is the meaning of life?

I will propose that the meaning of life has to do with a special activity termed *being what we are*. I will then argue that *autistic joy*, a composite concept composed of *sensory euphoria* and *intellectual immersion*, exemplifies this special activity, fulfilling the meaning of life.

The paper will be structured as follows. The first main section (1) will serve as background, highlighting several established philosophical concepts relevant to my theory. The second main section (2) will consist of the theory itself. The first part of the theory will present my neutral framework which will posit what kind of thing the meaning of life is. The second part of the theory section will explore *autistic joy* and how it fulfills the framework. In the third section (3) I will address potential objections, before concluding.

1 Background

Parts of the theory which I will propose may seem strange, abstract, or unintuitive. In this section, I will briefly highlight classical analytic concepts from Aristotle and Leibniz to contextualize my theory in the extant discourse. This brief section serves only to establish points of reference for comprehensibility; the philosophers I mention should not be understood to be authorities, nor am I adopting any of their concepts.

1.1 Aristotle

In *The Nichomachean Ethics*, Aristotle defines human good as “an activity of the soul in accordance with virtue,”¹ resulting in a specific state of happiness termed *eudaimonia*. His “living well” is a special activity of the human soul. Likewise, my concept of *being what we are* will consist of a special activity of our being, which is connected to and in accordance with our nature.

1.2 Leibniz

Leibniz posits that the human mind is composed entirely of *perception* and *appetition*.² Like Leibniz, I see perception and appetite (specifically to information about the universe) as basic, compositional facets of our being, which I explain in my following exposition of *being what we are*.

These philosophers refer to composition and qualities of the *mind* and *soul*, objects with controversial metaphysics. Instead, I will discuss the composition of the essence of our being.

2 The Theory

In this section, I will establish the neutral framework which addresses what kind of thing the meaning of life is. Then, I will examine *autistic joy* in detail, demonstrating how it fulfills the framework of the meaning of life.

2.1 The Framework

To ask the meaning of life, we must know what sort of answer will suffice. I propose that the meaning of life revolves around a special activity, which I have termed *being what we are*. Partaking in activities that represent the most basic, unadulterated fulfillment of our constitutive qualities qualifies as *being what we are*. *Being what we are* is a special activity of the soul – special in its cosmically fulfilling nature and its specificity to our capacities. That is, other things can *be what they are*, but only we can *be what we are*. Because we are a *part* of the mechanism of the universe, fulfilling these constitutive capacities holds cosmic meaning: the meaning of life.

2.1.1 What are we?

To explain *being what we are*, I must specify what it is that we are. I propose that *what we are* is composed of a small set of activities which I have termed *universal basics*. These *universal basics* are activities which, relatively uncontroversially, hold for all human life, or, more accurately, hold for the “we” to whom I am referring. (*It is my goal to include all humans in that group, but my theory will still hold if these universal basics are more limiting.*) The *universal basics* should consist of those actions that we always do, even when we halt more complex activities, thus composing the most basic, boiled-down conception of *what we are*.

These *universal basics* can be defined as two actions, *thinking* and *feeling*, in their most simple conceptions. These actions constitute *being what we are*. These categories do not encompass every action which could be considered “thinking” or “feeling.” Rather, the terms here refer to the specific forms of those activities which are simple and universal.

To specify this simplicity and universality, *thinking* should be understood to be simple *contemplation* or *consideration*, rather than complex activities like planning or argumentation. *Feeling* should be understood to be simple *sensory perception*, rather than complex emotional states. These concepts compose “what it is to be us” at its most simple.

2.1.2 *The Cosmic Value of Being What We Are (The Meaning of Life)*

I propose that this activity, *being what we are*, has special cosmic significance. It constitutes the meaning of life, by virtue of its fulfillment of our constitutive capacities as parts of the universe.

Feelings of detachment from the universe are common. We frequently perceive ourselves to be independent actors interacting with an external universe. We are, however, situated fully within the universe. Importantly, we are *parts* of the universe. Along with other things, we *constitute* the universe. The universe is *composed of us*. Just as our noses are the parts of us by which we smell, and our ears are the parts of us by which we hear, so are we the parts of the universe by which it *thinks* and *feels*. In *thinking*, we are the way in which the universe understands itself. In *feeling*, we are the way in which the universe perceives itself.

When we participate in these activities, in *being what we are*, we do so much more than simply experience *for ourselves*. We also experience for the universe, for all creation, in a manner unique and specific to our capacities.

Our current social constructions alienate us from our simplest constitutive capacities as mechanisms of the universe. Our goals are exceptionally complex compared to other life forms and objects, as we understand them. For example, we use our sensory perception to operate heavy machinery to travel to “work.” At work, we use our cognitive capacities to create objects of production. These products are usually sold for “money,” a social construct that we use to represent value. We receive some reduced quantity of this value in wages. Then, we can use trade these wages for our basic necessities (food, shelter, water), as well as for other objects of production which serve more complex desires.

Animals and objects, generally, do no such thing. When a frog needs to eat, it uses its sensory capacities to locate a fly. A rock sits on top of a mountain; it simply *is*. Their fulfillment of their capacities is direct and unalienated. They need not wonder what the meaning of life is; they simply *be what they are*. We, however, understand ourselves to be distinct from other parts of

creation like these. We use term like “nature,” “animals,” and the “universe,” which, in their use, imply a separation between us and these concepts.

Thus, in most aspects of many human lives, our constitutive capacities of *thinking* and *feeling* are alienated from the basic simplicity of the universe. We do not, simply, *be what we are*. Our capacities are instead performed for the sake of production of complex human social constructs. This adulteration compromises our connection to the universe, contributing to the sense of detachment that we feel from it.

The universe does not necessitate, by way of our capacities, that we *produce* in these exceedingly complex ways, toward exceedingly complex goals. It asks only that we *be*, as the rest of nature does. *Being what we are* is a realization of our simplest constitutive capacities. It is simply being, free from the alienation which has made our lives so complex. This realization enables connection to the universe, wonder at its creation, awe for the simple fact that *something exists!* And that that something is, in part, us: *we exist! I exist: I perceive, I sense, I feel, I think.* And this is, cosmically, the meaning of life.

2.2 Autistic Joy as the Meaning of Life

Autism is a neurotype characterized by variations like differences in exteroception, interoception, proprioception, emotional intensity, communication, and executive function, to name a few. Autistics may experience these variations as *more* or *less* intense than allistics (non-autistics); an autistic person might be emotionally *hypersensitive* or *hyposensitive*, likely oscillating between the two. Autistic people enjoy many positive experiences from these attributes, such as heightened senses, impassioned special interests, high levels of empathy, enhanced creativity, and analytical thinking. Autism can be disabling or impairing, especially when comorbid with intellectual disability, but it isn't necessarily constantly so. Negative autistic experiences have been extensively discussed and are outside of the scope of this paper.

Autistic joy is a concept which refers to a phenomenon in which immense euphoria, joy, and pleasure is derived from certain specific autistic activities. *Autistic joy* celebrates the most beautiful aspects of autism: the pleasure attained from stimming and hypersensitivity, the mindset and perspective which admires the intricacy of creation.

I did not create this term – it an established topic of autistic discourse. I have, however, defined the concept in terms of two explicit experiences: *sensory euphoria* and *intellectual immersion*. I will begin by defining these experiences and contextualizing them with examples. Then, I will show how they fulfill the framework of *being what we are* and, thus, the meaning of life.

2.2.1 Sensory euphoria

Sensory euphoria is an experience related to the autistic phenomena of altered sensory perception. Autistic people are frequently hypersensitive to sensory stimuli. This can be distressing in the event of overstimulation, but it provides opportunity for immense euphoria. This euphoria is often achieved by “stimming,” a term used to describe autistic behaviors that involve engaging in sensory stimulation for the sake of emotional regulation, comfort, or pleasure.

Sensory euphoria, as I define it, goes beyond stimming. Stimming is a term frequently used by allistic psychology providers or teachers. Some harmful therapies, like Applied Behavior Analysis (ABA), seek to eliminate stimming behaviors entirely, ignoring the great pleasure and comfort that they bring to autistics. Although the term can be used positively by autistic people, it is often used specifically to identify behaviors which strike allistics as strange, repetitive, or otherwise undesirable; activities that allistics consider “normal” are not usually identified as stimming. When used this way, it often refers to distinct events, such as spinning in a desk chair or flapping hands.

Sensory euphoria, however, is not limited to distinctly identifiable behaviors or events. It involves an attitude or affect of pleasurable sensory engagement. Autistic people do not need to “decide” to start a stimming event; it is an intuitive behavior. It is not limited to things which may appear abnormal to allistics. It also includes activities that most people, autistic or otherwise, engage in, but with a special attention to sensory pleasure, such as laying under a soft blanket, looking intently at a beautiful flower, or listening to music intensely. It does, also, provide reason to engage in behaviors that allistics may find confusing, like continuously rubbing a soft cloth, staring into a kaleidoscope for an extended time, closely examining the details of the needles on a pine tree, or making repetitive sounds.

In a 2018 phenomenological analysis, Till Grohmann described autistic experiences similarly, characterizing hypnotic trance states in which individuals “withdraw into intense sensorial and perceptive experiences” and “become highly alert to and awake for an experience of a totally new kind.”³

2.2.1.1 Primary Example

In her blog, *Undercover Autism*, Emma Reardon describes autistic *sensory euphoria*. She says:

My senses work differently to many people’s. I can feel pain and fear from sights and sounds that others find mundane or inconsequential. This can be overwhelming – and other people frequently don’t notice the extent of my suffering. But I can also become overwhelmed by the joy and beauty I discover through my senses. Sometimes I secretly smile inside because I know that I may look calm, bored, or even detached to a casual

observer; but in my soul I am full of joy, I am experiencing psychedelic colours; orgasmic noise; and fragrances that cleanse and purge my body and mind.

Reflecting on the value of this experience, which “reconnect[s] her to the world”, she says “This means I have a whole world open to me that others miss – it is like a great, exciting secret between me and the Universe. It feels special and precious, and an honour.”⁴ The meaningfulness of these experiences is readily present to autistic people.

2.2.2 *Intellectual Immersion*

My concept of *intellectual immersion* explicates and elaborates on a specific autistic trait termed “special interests,” which involves intense *contemplation* toward the details of the universe. Special interests are an integral facet of the lived experience of autism and one of its most celebrated aspects. This term refers to the phenomenon in which autistic people engage in impassioned activity toward an interest. These interests can consist of either immense dedication to a broad topic or attention to an especially niche or rare interest.

Autistics often prefer to discuss and engage with their special interest over topics considered more “appropriate” or “normal” to allistic society. It brings them immense joy to learn new things about their special interests, collect related objects, engage in relevant activities (like events or conventions), and to share information or facts about their interest with others. Autistic people engage with their special interests with a level of intensity and detail that goes far beyond allistic hobbies. It may seem to others that their entire personality revolves around a special interest. Autistic people can easily spend hours engaging with their special interest. Frequently, autistics pursue careers and greater life goals related to their interests, but they are drawn to the interest out of its own intrinsic value, not any extrinsic goal.⁵ This level of detail and intensity is inspired by awe, wonder, curiosity toward the topic and results in joy and fulfillment.

Special interests can be very broad or very niche, very abstract or very specific. One could have a special interest in the concept of sound, architecture, flying mechanisms, names of crayon colors, music in the key of G, toilet brushes, bobbleheads, rugby statistics, ants, resonance, ancient Egypt, or even autism itself.

An integral part of the beauty of this phenomenon is the great diversity of topics. Special interests are personal and specific; they do not rely on traditional goals or notions of value. The special interest can elevate any topic to the highest intrinsic importance, no matter how traditionally boring or unimportant it is deemed. No topic is too small to care about passionately. Every aspect of the world has the potential to be worth *contemplating* for hours. It is a miracle that there is so much detail and specificity to the world for our exploration, and special interests celebrate this.

Like stimming, the medical profession often describes special interest in a negative light. The diagnostic criteria, for example, defines this phenomenon as “highly restricted, fixated interests that are abnormal in intensity or focus (e.g., strong attachment to or preoccupation with unusual objects, excessively circumscribed or perseverative interests)”.⁶ Just as stimming is often discouraged or actively conditioned against, special interests are also discouraged and “combated” in harmful therapies like ABA.

2.2.2.1 Primary Sources

In her blog, *Just Stimming*, Julia Bascom describes special interests. This excerpt highlights the joy and intensity characteristic of this *intellectual immersion*.

Sometimes being autistic means that you get to be *incredibly happy*...You get to persevere. You get to have just about the coolest obsessions. (Mine are: sudoku and *Glee*. *I am not ashamed*.)

...Maybe you do not understand. Because “obsession” and even “perseveration” have specific dictionary and colloquial meanings which everyone uses and understands and which do not even come CLOSE to describing my relationship with whatever I’m obsessing on now. It’s not just that I am sitting in my room and my heart is racing and all I can think about is *Glee* and all I want to do is read about it and talk about it and never go to sleep because that would take time away from this and that has been my life for the past few days. It’s not just that I am doing sudokus in my head or that I find ways to talk about either numbers or *Glee* in any conversation, including ones about needing to give a student a sensory break so he’ll stop screaming and throwing things.

Being autistic, to me, means a lot of different things, but one of the best things is that I can be *so happy, so enraptured* about things no one else understands and so wrapped up in my own joy that, not only does it not matter that no one else shares it, but it can become contagious.⁷

2.2.3 The Fulfillment of the Framework

These concepts which compose *autistic joy, sensory euphoria* and *intellectual immersion*, are the pleasurable fulfillment of the *sensory perception* and *contemplation* which compose *being what we are*.

In *sensory joy, perception* is engaged as an end in itself; we look only to see, without extrinsic goals. We observe the universe with awe and wonder. Consequentially, the universe observes itself. In *intellectual immersion*, we *contemplate* the universe out of appreciation for the intrinsic value of the specificity and detail of creation; this is the only impetus. In doing so, the universe *contemplates* itself. This is a hedonism of sorts, but one unmarred by the usual vices of sex,

drugs, and rock and roll. It is a simple hedonism which rejoices in the basic pleasure of the existence.

Often, *sensory euphoria* and *intellectual immersion* can co-occur, resulting in ecstatic autistic joy and the fulfillment of the meaning of life. As Reardon says, “Sometimes my interest and curiosity are stimulated, and I observe and study and wonder at the natural world.”⁸ Likewise, Bascom says, “I flap a lot when I think about *Glee* or when I finish a sudoku puzzle. I make funny little sounds. I spin. I rock. I laugh. *I am happy.*”⁹ In these moments, especially, the meaning of life is fulfilled and readily present to us autistics.

3 Objections

One might be tempted to object to my argument on the premise of exclusion. An objector might say, “*Are allistics excluded from fulfilling the meaning of life?*” My primary answer is that, if so, it does not matter. Autistics have long been excluded from traditional theories of meaning and even denied possessing theories of mind. Indeed, ABA therapy even discourages these meaningful behaviors so that autistics appear less strange for the comfort of allistics. The traditional narrative holds that autistics are at a deficit, experiencing lesser existences, and ought to try to be more allistic. Suggesting that autistics have something that allistics do not, something that allistics ought to strive toward, is part of the praxis of this theory. Additionally, my answer to this question of meaning is not exhaustive. If some other activity fulfills the structure of *being what we are*, it could conceivably be a meaning of life. At this time, I cannot remark on whether it is possible for allistics to achieve *autistic joy*; I do not have experience of the allistic mind.

Another objection might be that I have erred in my universalization of *thinking* and *feeling*. This concept of *what we are*, however, is intentionally exclusive: if one can conceive of some individual who does not fit within this concept, the theory of this paper does not apply to him, and it is not intended to. “Being what [he is]” might still be applied to this individual as a framework for a meaning of life, but he would have a different “what he is” than “what we are.”

Finally, one might object to the notion that these activities hold cosmic meaning. If the described experiences of *autistic joy* are not sufficiently convincing that there is profound meaning in simple connection to the universe, I can say no more.

4 Conclusion

The meaning of life can be encompassed by a special activity, *being what we are*, which consists of universally basic concepts of *thinking* (contemplation) and *feeling* (perception). This special activity is fulfilled in *autistic joy*, a term which describes autistic experiences of *sensory euphoria* and *intellectual immersion*. Partaking in this activity, fulfilling *being what we are*,

results in connection with our most basic and specific constitutive capacities, insofar as we are parts of a whole universe. This fulfillment is euphoric and cosmically significant; it is the meaning of life.

¹ Aristotle, and H. Rackham. *The Nicomachean Ethics*.

² Curley, E. M., et al. *The Continental Rationalists*.

³ Grohmann, T. Hypnotic experience...

⁴ Reardon, Emma. "Sensory Joy and Healing."

⁵ Grove, R., Roth, I. and Hoekstra, R.A. (2016), The motivation...

⁶ American Psychiatric Association. (2013). DSM V.

⁷ Bascom, Julia. "The Obsessive Joy of Autism."

⁸ Reardon, Emma.

⁹ Bascom, Julia.

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