

The Colors of Life: Boran Berčić on the Meaning of Life

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ABSTRACT: Berčić's proposal for a pluralistic normative account of meaning of life offers a fine point of entry into the problematic of meaningfulness. When given the coherentist twist he briefly suggests, it nicely fits with intuitions of many wise people from classics in philosophy to contemporary psychologists who work on the topic. In this paper we discuss his normative sketch and attempt to supplement it with a sketch of metaphysics and epistemology of meaningfulness along response-dependence lines. The account proposed here claims that being meaningful in objective sense is being such as to cause the experiential response of meaningfulness in slightly idealized, suitably sensitive observers under suitable circumstances. The response locates the relevant event or item in the space of meaningfulness, analogous to color-space.

KEY WORDS: Boran Berčić, coherentism, colors, intentionalism, meaning of life, normativity, space of meaningfulness.

(I) Introduction

Berčić's two volume book *Philosophy (Filozofija)*, 2012) is an impressive work, with no rivals on contemporary Croatian scene.¹ In this paper I want to comment its first chapter: *The Meaning of Life*. What is a meaningful life? Here is one extreme I have been following in newspapers. Vicdan Özerdem, Turkish human rights activist, going from one unpleasant experience with her home government to the other, but staying upright, energetic and full of determination to fight for the rights of here compatriots

¹ The biggest thanks go to Boran Berčić, who started it all, to Fridi Klampfer who helped me with materials and discussion, and to Danilo Šuster. Nina Iskra has been helping with her enthusiasm, and her understanding of great literary traditions that ask about meaning of life.

(no superstition, her first name, Vicdan, means ‘conscience’, and in this case obviously *nomen est omen*). I assume such life is a highly meaningful one, both for Vicdan herself and for the reflective reader. But is it really? On the other extreme, consider a life that is not publicly oriented, but immersed in the most ordinary details of life, but filled with love and care for one’s family, both returned to a satisfying extent by the persons enjoying them. This life again is meaningful for the person living it, call him Jimmy, and seems quite meaningful to me as well. Or is it?

In the first chapter dedicated to the topic of meaning of life, Berčić offers a fine analysis of meaningfulness. In order to put it on the map, let me distinguish three levels of discussion of meaning of life, in analogy with ethics and the familiar triad of normative ethics, applied ethics and meta-ethics. The normative theory of meaning of life addresses the structure of meaningfulness and meaning (or, in the case of nihilism, their absence). The meta-theory asks three kind of questions. First, the semantic ones, about the linguistic meaning of meaning-of-life statements. Second, the metaphysical ones, about the deep nature of meaningfulness. It tries to answer the “location problem”: where is it located within the world? Third, the epistemological ones: can we come to know the meaning of life, and if yes, in what a way? Berčić’s philosophical story about meaning of life is on the normative level.

In this paper I shall first address his proposal, summarizing his main result, and then point to possible connections with suggestions he gives elsewhere. Then, in the second section of the paper, I start by assuming that something along Berčić’s line on normative status of the meaning of life is correct, and turn to questioning the metaphysical underpinnings of meaningfulness. I will briefly propose my own our account, built on the analogy with secondary qualities, like color, and this is where the title of the paper comes from. The view of both secondary qualities and meaningfulness to be defended is a variant of dispositionalism or response-dependence, that I shall call response intentionalism. In the third part I return to Berčić’s work and his remarks against value-realism; I end by proposing to him the dispositionalist framework as a general view that is very hospitable to the normative story he has been proposing.

(II) Berčić: There are many things that make life meaningful

Berčić starts his fine, very readable and well organized account by presenting a familiar situation: person A is doing something, say cutting woods, and person B is asking A why he is doing it. A gives a reason (say, “I need wood for my stove, to keep me warm in winter”), and B asks again, this time about the reason given (“Why do you want to be warm?”). Berčić

then notes that if we accept such a series of questions, we end up being asked about the meaning of life, and cannot escape this question (2012: 4). In the next section he points to the similarity with the regress horn of Agrippa's trilemma but also notes that the force of questions comes from "the logical structure of our reasons for action" (2012: 7). Next, he analyses the main candidates for the final answer, for the status of Meaning of life with capital M. First, happiness. He notes that what makes us happy is the object of our desire; it is the object, not happiness that we desire. In a footnote he points to the nature of the value of the object; we shall return to it later. And he mentions the problem of the "happy pig", not a good paradigm for a meaningful life for us. Then he passes to the generic category of "objective purpose". God's plan would not do, since we first have to identify our motivation with God's. Next comes care for others; my deep care for A is scarcely meaningful if A is not worthy of such a care, so, we are back at the regress. Similarly the continuation of the species cannot be the final answer: why is *it* meaningful?

The regress worry serves Berčić to introduce the idea of the absurd. Can we live with the absurd, as Camus and Nagel seem to want us to do? Unfortunately, he offers little in the way of answer. Instead, probably assuming the negative answer, he turns to his main task, namely to put in doubt the legitimacy of such questioning. The logical mistake, he claims, is the quantifier switch: from $\forall p \exists g$ (p desires g) one cannot conclude $\exists g \forall p$ (p desires g). "A life cannot have a meaning, only this or that action can", he concludes (2012: 24). But still, he has his reservations: mere logical mistake does not make the quest for meaning of life pointless. Berčić's final answer is to point out that many items have both intrinsic and instrumental value.

...it is not true that there must exist some final answer to the series of questions Why? Why? Why?, and it is not true that if such an answer does not exist, nothing we do makes sense. A great number of answers are, to some extent or other, final answers, because many things we do are done partly for their own sake! The quest of some final meaning of life is based on a wrong picture of our reasons for action. There simply are no few final reasons that justify themselves and all other reasons. Many reasons at the same time justify themselves. There is no one single thing that is intrinsically valuable, there is no *summum bonum*. Many things that we do in our lives are intrinsically valuable. There is no Meaning of life with capital M, but we should not be disappointed; there are many things in life that make it meaningful. (2012: 29)

And in the *Abstract* to the version of the chapter published as a separate paper he writes: "many things that we do in our lives do not have only instrumental value but intrinsic value as well" (2006: 113). This, however, is not the end of the story. In the footnote he writes:

This attitude is an application of the epistemological model of coherentism to the debate about instrumental rationality and meaning of life. (2012: 29)

The footnote is a bit puzzling. Initially, it seemed that Berčić just wants a plurality of independently valuable items. Now, if we take the requirement of coherence seriously, we seem to be confronted with a slightly different view: coherentism points to connections between the items in the plurality, and derives justification of particular items from the coherence of the whole. A possible reading would be the following: First, “there is no one single thing that is intrinsically valuable, there is no *summum bonum*. Many things that we do in our lives are intrinsically valuable.” Second, for a meaningful life it is crucial that these many things are *coherent among themselves*. (Berčić leaves open the issue of what kind of coherence is required.) I would propose that the coherence can be achieved through a unity of purpose; only one thing matters, and it colors the rest. Jan Žižka died ordering the following: “Make my skin into drumheads for the Bohemian cause” (Guthke 1992: 50). He lived for the Husite movement, fought for it, and died for it.² Or it can be achieved by the unity of manner: “When Oscar Wilde lay dying in the Hôtel d’Alsace in Paris, his last words were, ‘I am dying, as I have lived, beyond my means’.” (Guthke 1992: 4). Or in some other way. Third, the coherence itself is a value, and the coherent system of intrinsically valuable items is itself valuable. Berčić’s statement that his attitude is an application of the epistemological model seems to commit him to the third claim. And I think this is for the good; the picture proposed is quite attractive.

(III) The response-intentionalist view; a sketch

(a) *Metaphysics*

Berčić thus leaves us with a fine and optimistic proposal at the level of normative theory of meaning. If we add the perspective of integration, partial or complete, of meanings into a meaningful whole, we can, I hope, start answering most normative questions. Berčić also sketches an answer belonging to the meta-theory, namely the semantic issue of whether the question of meaning makes sense, and if yes, what it is.

We are thus left with the remaining big questions of meta-theory: the metaphysical one about the nature and the ground of the meaning of life thus understood, and the epistemological one concerning our knowledge of

² I shall, just for the sake of illustration, assume that at least some of famous last words do express a serious stance towards the meaning of one’s, in this case the speaker’s, life.

it (or the lack thereof). Now, in footnote 10 he gestures towards metaphysical matters: what is the nature of the intrinsic value of things? Are they valuable because we desire them, or is it the other way around? He starts by mentioning Wiggins’s answer to this Eutyphro question (1987/1996), and notes that Wiggins’s line is in his opinion “strange”, since Wiggins basically says that both directions hold. Then he quickly passes to the “Buck Passing Account of Value”. First, “X is good because we would desire X if we were rational” (2012: 11). Second, we would desire X not because of its value, but because of natural properties of X that underlie the value; the buck is passed to X’s natural characteristics. Finally, X is not good because we desire it, but because we *should* desire it. The formulation reminds one of McDowell’s line, that value is grounded in the *merited* response. Berčić describes the whole line as “a significant contribution to the discussion” without explicitly endorsing it. (Also, the answer offered turns around the “should” of rationality, but Berčić has little to say about it.) Leaving this aside, we have something that looks like a response-dependant account: X is good *because* it would be desired the rational agent, a fully rational version of ourselves. The basis of the desire are natural qualities of X, what confers value is the rational attitude of the agent.

I very much agree with the line, but I am not sure how seriously does Berčić take it; he just mentions it in passing, and does not explicitly take a stance in favor of it. So, in the second part of the paper I want to propose a sketch of response-dependant answer to the metaphysical questions; of course it will be the merest of sketches, given the requirements of space. (Again, a lot of thanks go to Boran, for inspiration and discussion.) The metaphysical and epistemological stories are needed in the light of the basic threat from the meaning nihilist (“nihilist” for short):

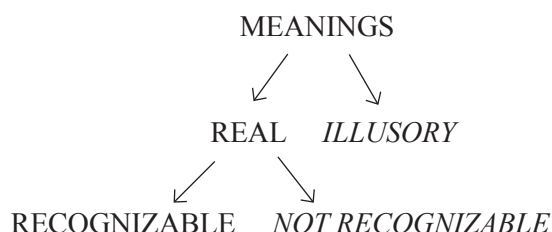
NP1 Meaning of life has to do with availability of fundamental meaning(s) in reality

NP2 Either: a) there are no fundamental meanings or b) fundamental meanings are not recognizable to us. Therefore,

NC1 There is no meaning of life or if there is one, it is not-knowable

NC3 There is no meaning of life and so nothing to be known about it.

To schematize the options, here are the possibilities:



We shall accept NP1 and, of course, question NP2; both on the metaphysical side (we claim that not (a)) and on the epistemological one (we claim that not (b)). Hopefully, there are fundamental meanings and they are (sufficiently) recognizable to us, therefore life has a meaning and we can recognize it. But also we have a task: diagnose the roots of nihilism. We turn to it briefly at the end of section 3.

We shall defend a view based on the assumption of response-dependence. Meanings are not in things independently of us, so there is no purely non-anthropocentric meaning. This stands in contrast with the phenomenology of meaning, but so do many qualities of less sophisticated status, above all secondary qualities.

So, let me pave the way by elaborating a bit the analogy with secondary qualities, like color and the aesthetic ones, like beauty. To have an objective color, I shall assume, is to have a disposition to cause in normal observers a response, namely, intentional experience as of phenomenal color. Start with the usual example of standing color. Lucy is looking at an orange at broad daylight. What is the orange color she is seeing? It is the “seen” property of the orange, not an introspected property of experience. Joining other content intentionalists, I suggest that the color seen is part of intentional content of Lucy’s seeing.

The version proposed here is a variant of the dispositionalist or traditional response-dependence view, combined with intentionalism, and to be called here for short “response-intentionalism (RI)”. It specifies the response as intentional, as opposed to merely sensational or qualitative, but it does not deny the possibility of there being also a sensational or qualitative element to color experience. It thus combines a moderate intentionalism about subjective color content with a version of the traditional dispositionalist or response-dispositionalist characterization of objective color. It is to a large extent conservative, since it follows the lead of traditional Lockean dispositionalism, but diverges from the post-Lockean tradition in its characterization of the subjective state involved: while the tradition stresses sensation, RI stresses intentional experience.

The dispositionalist takes into account the fact that the commonsensical notion of color is different from the scientific one: on the commonsensical line the fruit not only looks simply-and-manifestly orange, but the color visaged or presented is seen as *the* color of the object. Neither dispositions nor reflectances are literally seen as such: the surface of the orange does not look like disposition, nor do various orange surfaces exhibit the actual dramatic differences in reflectance profiles to the naked eye.

1. Full phenomenal orange is being intentionally experienced as being on the surface of the fruit. (*A transparency datum*)

2. Full phenomenal orange is not on the surface of the fruit. (*From science*)
3. Full phenomenal orange is not a property of subjective state (*From Transparency*).

Therefore (*by principles of charity and by inference to the best explanation*)

CC. Being Orange in scientific sense is being such as to cause the response of visaging phenomenal orange in normal observers under normal circumstances. (*Response-intentionalism*)

The response-dependence theorist will go on and claim that value properties are themselves response-dependent. Let me take the lead from ethical debate in which response-dependence has been discussed more thoroughly. The main idea is that value is constitutively dependent on evaluators' responses or dispositions to respond. David Lewis, for example, proposes the following general schema:

(L) x is a value iff we would be disposed to value x under conditions of the fullest imaginative acquaintance with x (Lewis 1989: 113).³

To generalize further, non-primary qualities are humanly important: our surroundings resound with them, our very survival, and most of our art and amusement depends on them. But they are not part of basic physics. And as I already said, qualities that interest us in our normal human lives, such as, for instance goodness vs. wickedness, beauty vs. ugliness, attractiveness vs. repulsiveness, and being humanly meaningful vs. being meaningless and empty do not appear in manuals of science. Where can we locate these qualities, the secondary and the just listed ones? The ancient optimistic answer—from Heraclitus and Plato to Stoics and great Christian philosophers—is that they are right here, in the cosmos surrounding us; we just have to be attentive enough to recognize them and let ourselves be guided by them, a kind of answer that has been revived by thinkers like Heidegger in a much less perspicuous manner. The more idealist answer has been that we just project them into our world, the cosmos of our making. The best we, physicalists in the widest sense, can do is to claim that these features are metaphysically response-dependent in contrast to those that are metaphysically basic and not response-dependent. Colors and other secondary qualities are paradigmatic denizens of the manifest image of the world. The same goes than for aesthetic value.

- a. Beauty (phenomenal) is being intentionally experienced (visaged) as being a property of the picture. (*A transparency datum*)

³ Lewis's further proposal is the following: "I say that to be *valued* by us means to be that which we desire to desire" (Lewis 1989: 116). It does not seem to fit artistic value.

b. Beauty is not a viewer-independent property of the picture. (*From science*)

c. Beauty is not a property of subjective state. (*From Transparency*)
Therefore (*by principles of charity and by inference to the best explanation*)

CB. Being Beautiful in objective sense is being such as to cause the response of visaging phenomenal beauty in normal observers under normal circumstances. (*Response-intentionalism*)

This brings us to meaningfulness. To take the extreme cases, Ivan Ilych experiences his life to have been meaningless, Vicdan experiences her bitter struggle to be meaningful in spite of risks, dangers and uncertainty of success.

Call the experienced meaningfulness property meaningfulness_e. What about meaningfulness “out there”, in Vicdan’s struggle, or in Gauguin’s artistic effort? The response-intentionalist proposes that such meaningfulness in “things” is the power to produce the response of “this makes sense” in suitably sensitive humans.

1. Meaningfulness_e is being intentionally experienced as being a property of an action, or state of affairs. (*A transparency datum*)
2. Meaningfulness_e is not a mind-independent property of action, or state of affairs.
3. Meaningfulness_e is not a property of subjective state. (*From Transparency*)

Therefore (*by principles of charity and by inference to the best explanation*)

CM . Being meaningful in objective sense is being such as to cause the experiential response of meaningfulness in slightly idealized, suitably sensitive observers under suitable circumstances. (*Response-intentionalism*)

Let me briefly comment each step. Step one, intentionally experiencing. We need a term for the experience of items as meaningful, or almost meaningful, or as absurd; I will help myself to the term “existential” (with apologies to real existentialists), and will call such experiences “existential experiences”. They range from everyday experience of fulfillment in simple tasks, like making your child happy, or even making your beloved pet animal content, through more demanding tasks (like helping “Orient”, the football club from Berčić’s example) all the way to the heroic deeds of Vicdan and Martin Luther King type, to mention another of Berčić’s examples. On the side of absurd let me mention the feeling of rolling a boulder uphill with the perspective of seeing it roll down in a few minutes, or, in matters academic, at least in Europe, the attempt to cope with the

Bologna version Sisyphus-task, namely coming to terms with a new administrative university reform every second year, with the perspective of seeing it replaced by an equally absurd one within predictably short time. I have no doubt that most academic readers will recognize the existential experience in question.

Step two. The phenomenology of meaningfulness tends to be objective, like the phenomenology of color. To take one more example from Berčić, the person who wants to go and preach in Africa probably sees the value of her effort as something objective, out there, visible to all believers. However, there is little place for such a completely mind-independent meaning in the world, at least in the widely naturalistic picture of the world. We have to do with less, and we shall address the issue a few lines below.

Step three. The meaningfulness is not seen as the property of the experience itself; the experience is the experience of meaningfulness of something (action, state of affairs), not of the experience itself. The experience might have a particular quale or no (I stay agnostic on the issue), but it is not about the meaningfulness of such a quale. The theory should follow the lead of commonsense, and in general philosophers who write about the issue talk about experiencing the meaningfulness of the items judged by the experience, not about meaningfulness of the very experience. We shall have more to say about the form of experience a few lines below. Why are we rejecting the phenomenal objectivity in step one, but accepting the intentional-object intuition in step two? We try to be as fair to the naïve experience as possible, and sticking to its structure is not problematic, whereas following to the letter its phenomenology is very, very difficult. But we shall rescue some of the later in a moment.

Step four, conclusion on meaningfulness, CM. Take the characteristic activities of Žiška, Mother Theresa and Gauguin. What brings them together, and puts them apart from those of Hitler? Not the subjective sense of meaningfulness, since Hitler obviously thought of his own life as fantastically meaningful. Not particular types of activity: painting Tahitians (or painting people in general) is a very different activity from fighting a (religious) war, and there is little observable that they have in common. They are all valuable, let us agree. But being valuable is very close to being meaningful, so the metaphysical story should be roughly the same. So, we are left with the only remotely plausible candidate that will give us a unified picture: the experiential response of meaningfulness in slightly idealized, suitably sensitive observers under suitable circumstances. (We shall say more about the suitable sensitivity in the next section.)

The response-intentionalist account thus combines the subjective component of existential experience with the more objective demand that the experience be such that an idealized, and in this sense objective expe-

rience would have it upon confronting the item under discussion. It thus come close to what Susan Wolf called Fitting Fulfillment View (Wolf 2010: 43), according to which “meaning in life arises when subjective attraction meets objective attractiveness, and one is able to do something about it or with it.” The objective attractiveness is what we called meaningfulness “in things”: my life is meaningful if my subjective attraction really hits upon something that is objectively, though response-dependently attractive, and when I am properly engaged with this something. The parallel with colors is clear: my perception of the color of the fruit is objective if it would coincide with the perception of a normal, or indeed a very good, color perceiver. S. Wolf herself does not accept the response-dependent view, and we shall discuss her criticism below, although she in fact remains agnostic about the metaphysical status of “objective attractiveness”.

Why do we need the objective component? Consider a concrete example, call it Hitler The Monster. Wai-hung Wong has recently (2008) offered an alternative characterization of meaningfulness. It encompasses the following claims: (P1) I have some identities that I identify myself with. (P2) Among the identities that I identify myself with, there are at least some that I value non-instrumentally. (P3) I have reasons for valuing these identities non-instrumentally. (P4) At least some of these identities that I value non-instrumentally are also valued non-instrumentally by others. (P5) Those who value these identities of mine non-instrumentally have reasons for valuing them non-instrumentally. Of course, he noted that if “reasons” in P3 are interpreted as subjective, internal reasons than even Hitler’s life could satisfy these demands; he was satisfied with most of it (P2), and had good internal reasons for his satisfaction (P4), and his fans as well (P4). His reaction to this Hitler The Monster problem is honest and straightforward, namely to claim that Hitler’s life was a meaningful one: “Even those who find it repulsive to refer to Hitler’s life as meaningful would, I think, agree that his life was not meaningless.”

For many of us, this is just not enough. Hitler’s life was less-than-meaningless: it was fulfilling for him, and attractive to others in a perverse way. But suppose a young person asks you if it would be meaningful to embark to a Hitler-inspired life-project. Would you really say Yes? I think that the intuition that Wai-hung Wong proposes, namely that we would not say that Hitler’s life was meaningless, comes from the weakness of “meaningless”: it’s all right for characterizing an Oblomov, but it seems to imply that there way nothing worse than mere meaninglessness around, by a kind of scalar implicature mechanism⁴. Here is an analogy: Borgia poisons Cardinal Della Rovere at dinner. You are asked: Did Cardinal have

⁴ For a longer account see Geurts (2010).

a bad meal? Well, you would not say this, because this would imply only that the meal was not tasty, and it was much, much worse than that. It was lethal. Hitler's life was not a meaningful one. The subjective component went well, but the objective one is a catastrophe.

Our proposal manages to save a certain amount of objectivity badly needed for the meaningfulness. Another important feature it has is that it allows for accessibility of meanings: the objective meanings might be accessible to an experience, normally with a lot of effort, to the extent to which her existential experience coincides with the one that the idealized experiencer would have.

Of course, there are other, closely related proposals for meaningfulness. For instance, an account inspired by Sartre from the *Being and Nothingness* (2001) period would focus upon our presumed absolutely free fundamental choices. It is them that make the world meaningful for the chooser. Following this somewhat extreme option, the Sartre-inspired account would claim the following:

A way of life is meaningful in objective sense if it could be freely chosen by a responsible agent performing the fundamental choice of one's life.

Let me now briefly discuss the response-dependence proposal and taking S. Wolf's relatively recent criticism as the starting point.

More promising, I think, are accounts that link value to the hypothetical responses of an idealized individual or group. Whether something is valuable on such a view is associated with the claim that it would be valued by someone sufficiently rational, perceptive, sensitive, and knowledgeable, to be, as John Stuart Mill would say, "a competent judge." Yet this view, too, seems inadequate as it stands, for if it is interpreted as claiming that what makes something valuable is its being able to evoke such a reaction in such an individual, the view needs further explanation and defense. Why should an object's capacity to be valued by an imaginary individual make the object valuable if its being actually valued by me or my friends or my fellow countrymen does not? If, on the other hand, the reference to these hypothetical responses is understood as a way to track value rather than as an account of what constitutes it, then the view seems to leave the question with which we are most concerned—the question of what is being tracked (or, if you will, of what value is)—untouched. (2010:46)

She then proceeds to an admission:

On my view, then, finding an adequate account of the objectivity of values—that is, of the ways or respects in which value judgments are not radically subjective—is an unsolved problem in philosophy, or perhaps better, an unsolved cluster of problems. Though I believe we have good reason to reject a radically subjective account of value, it is far from clear what a reasonably complete and defensible nonsubjective account will look like. (2010:47)

Two kinds of points are in order. The first is negative: Wolf leaves us with no response to the fundamental metaphysical question about value. Her slogan about the meeting of attraction and attractiveness is brilliant, her analyses of cases also; but if we are not told what makes items objectively attractive we are left in dark about the fundamental meta-theoretical question. Worse, if epistemology is to follow metaphysics, we are left in dark as regards epistemology. How do people recognize objective attractiveness? Hard to say something philosophically relevant about it if we don't know what such an attractiveness really is.

The second is positive. When the response-intentionalist claims that the "order of determination" goes from the positive reaction of the "a competent judge" to the meaningfulness-in-things, he does not have to rest content with the simplistic slogan that the reaction *makes* the things meaningful. (As Wiggins has recognized and argued decades ago, in the mid-seventies (1987/1976).) He noticed that dependence goes in both direction, and we shall see that this diagnosis is not as strange as Berčić suggests. Take color again. The response-intentionalist is well aware that it is the objective property of surface (reflectance) that causes the right intentional experience (as of orange). However, given the complications of color vision, he stresses that the only unifying thing that brings together all the orange surfaces is that they cause the orange_e experience. So, many things "make" the surface orange, including its reflectance, but the ultimate unifier is the experience.

The issue of unification has been recognized by the critics of dispositional account. Frank Jackson mentions it in discussing ethics:

... can ethical objectivists cast values and disvalues in a more anthropocentric light? Can they see them for example, as features of the world that assume shape and salience, and that attract our attention, only in virtue of producing certain responses in us? Can they see them in the way most of us see colors: as properties of things and perhaps independently describable properties of things, that are unified and important only in virtue of their association with our color sensations? (1998: 243–4).

The phrase "properties of things, that are unified ... only in virtue of their association with our color sensations" is crucial. Clearly, properties are not unified "epistemically", this would not make sense. The realizer color or moral properties are an extremely heterogeneous lot. What makes such a lot into property "good" is its association with something in us (analogous to "our color sensations"). However, if states of our mind have such *metaphysical* clout, that goes way beyond epistemology then it is hard to argue for the mind-independence of color or goodness, or meaningfulness. Moreover, this unifying role is modally very strong: value and color

and meaning terms are *rigidified*, so which properties are in fact redness (goodness, meaningfulness) is tied with a certain amount of necessity to our actual reactions since it is the actual sensitivity of humans (or other animals) that determines what counts as red (good) *in all possible worlds*. Such modally strong metaphysical anthropocentrism is not very far away from passing into pretty solid response-dependence, if not already identical with it.

Similarly, a life of, say, kindness, will appear meaningful to the competent judge in virtue of its many characteristics, and this is the direction of dependence from characteristics to reaction. This preserves the Buck Passing idea that Berčić is sympathetic to: the natural(-social) characteristics of the life would make it appear meaningful to the judge. But the trait that brings together all the meaningful items (and the natural characteristics) is the appearing meaningful to the judge; nothing else *in the world* does the job. Very disjunctive properties are not causes, any more than dispositions are. In contrast as a good example, kinetic energy is, or participates in a cause, because it is a well-behaved item, with central examples, and not individuated essentially relationally to our experience. This gives the order of determination. X is good because we would desire X if we were rational; Berčić would probably agree.

A final brief comment, in between the normative theory and meta-theory. The views that involve an objective component of meaningful are sometimes being criticized for elitism (e.g. by Haidt in his comments to S. Wolf in Wolf 2010). The line is simple: if we do not rest content with the experiencer's happiness and satisfaction we shall risk becoming paternalistic. And in fact, the accusation continues, the objective-component theorists routinely come up with exclusively high-brow examples of meanings. Nothing in the account proposed forces this bad choice. In the next section we shall be taking enjoyment as a specific dimension of meaning; this leaves space for simple enjoyments having quite a high value. Here is Guthke (1992: 8):

On the day of his suicide in 1972, French novelist Henri de Montherlant ... had dinner in his customary restaurant; when the waiter, as always, brought him his decaffeinated coffee, he instructed him: "Today I'll have a real coffee."

The reader is supposed to understand; the banal, real coffee is the last real thing the novelist can afford himself, after years of caution. And it makes sense to have a cup of real coffee at the end one's life. But if you disagree with the relevance of the example, there are plenty of others. We either have been or shall be mentioning the praise of gardening as a meaningful central activity of one's life, by both Montaigne and Voltaire. We shall also mention care for the family members, taking our leaf from R. Dwor-

kin, a meaningful activity compatible with otherwise quite an undemanding life. And we agree with Wittgenstein and Tolstoy that peasants might have more meaningful lives than businessmen. In short, we should not be too demanding of what counts as a meaningful life. Again, taking the last words as a (potential) indicator of meanings, we can conclude by the quip of the American writer Charles Wertenbaker: "I'm running out of last words," he said after various failed suicide attempts (Guthke 1992: 88).

(b) Epistemology and the meaning space

We now have to say more about the subjective side of the matter and about one's access to meanings. How do people know about the meaningfulness of their lives, or the lack thereof? The metaphysical picture, and the assumption that people do have access to some kind of relevant space of alternatives suggests the following proposal.

Let me take for my example a person, say our Vicdan. She surely has the impression that the things she is so actively engaged in do make a lot of sense. If she reflects a bit, she probably has the impression that her life is a meaningful one. Now, we assume that what is happening is that her life appears to her meaningful, she has the existential experience whose intentional object is the meaningfulness of her life. For sure, Vicdan knows that this is a way of life that *appears (to her)* to be meaningful; her conscience tells her this, from taking a look at her internal meaning-space. We have used the subscript "e" for this experienced property, so we can write, using "this*" as an internal indexical:

MK 1. Vicdan knows that this* is a meaningful_e way of life. (or the most meaningful_e way)

We use MK for "knowledge of meaningfulness". Of course, such kind of knowledge of one's experiential (intentional) objects is not tied to the meaningfulness only. With colors, the knowledge comes from the internal representation of the color space. Emotional properties have the same feature; for instance, standing at the funeral

Jane knows that this* is a sad_e event.⁵

Call her experience of meaningfulness M. Vicdan also knows with introspective certainty the following

MK(2) The meaning-property presented in M is positive.

⁵ And, hopefully, it works for moral properties:

Jane knows that this is a good_e deed (action, ...).

Jane knows that this is an action that appears to be good.

For this, her cognitive apparatus again needs the meaning-space, the ordered representation of alternatives. So, we now want to propose, again in analogy with color, the idea of a subjective space of meanings. Let us start again with analogy with colors. The idea of a “color space” encompassing the color structure(s) of experienced color, our color_e. In the standard, oversimplified picture, the color space is organized along three dimensions of hue, saturation and brightness: our perceiver, Lucy, is able to see that the orange color of the fruit is in between the yellow and the red color, as far as hue is concerned, and that it is way lighter than, say, the color of her dress.

Such experienced colors_e are usually presented as organized into a “color solid”; in our example psychologists would assume that such a solid is accessible to Lucy and it enables her to compare colors with each other (see Kuehni 2003 for a detailed and learned account). The color_e is presented to Lucy with introspection-grade certainty. This is the color_e she can recognize from many experiences, and she routinely calls it “orange”. She can compare it to another color_e, she knows as “yellow”, and see, with introspection-grade certainty, that it is similar to it. This is what “yellowish_e” is supposed to stand for, as a label for a shade. Distances are not given unmistakably to the observer, but with introspection-grade certainty. She can see that the color_E presented in her experience is, for instance, less yellowish than that presented in some other visual state.

I would like to propose an analogous picture for subjective meaningfulness. An agent would have at one’s disposal a range of options differing in the degree of meaningfulness. Someone like Žižka (or Joan of Arc, for that matter) would place at the top of his or her hierarchy of meaningful options the struggle for (true) religion and one’s people. Probably, preaching would come closely after the two, and praying would not be far away (but less meaningful than active engagement). Music, poetry and philosophy would not play much of a role. Call each of the positive components “a meaning”. The soldier-king of Prussia Frederick William I had even more restricted space of meanings. On his deathbed, he listened to the hymn “Naked I came into the world, naked I shall leave it” and died “claiming a royal exception to the human rule”: “No, not quite naked, I shall have my uniform on.” What else could the soldier-king have said” writes Guthke (1992: 5). King’s son, Frederick William II, the great Enlightenment monarch, praised by Kant, probably had a much richer meaning space: love for music, for philosophy and for military expeditions must have been at the top. Also, he very probably had homosexual leanings, and derived a lot of pleasure and inspiration from associating with his male friends. Religion seems to have been very low on his agenda. Judging by his remark in the *Essais* (1: 20) that he would like to die “while planting cabbages,” Mon-

taigne had a very different top-list of meanings, with peace of mind close to the top. Moritz Schlick famously preferred the free play as the focus of the meaningful life. But the ordering of meanings is not a privilege of the famous people.

Each of us has, I submit, such a representation, a network of “meanings” one uses to judge the options life offers to one. By analogy with color space I shall call it “meaning space”. If “presented” “means “presented to me”, then the meaningfulness is presented to the thinker with introspection-grade certainty. This is the meaningfulness_e she can recognize from many experiences, and she routinely calls it “meaningful” or describes the relevant item as “making sense”. She can compare it to another meaning-status_e, she knows as “tolerable”, and see, with introspection-grade certainty, that it is similar to it. This is what “tolerable_e” is supposed to stand for, as a label for a meaning- status.

We now confront the related and difficult question of ordering. Some pursuits and domains are more meaningful than others, some are absurd. But can we neatly compare meanings, or is there an incommensurability? Incommensurability would fit more particularized accounts: cabbage is meaningful, and working on people’s enlightenment is also such, but there is no common denominator. Meanings just pile up together. Commensurability would favor more structured accounts, and make meaning-space literally more like color-space. In order to explore this possibility, let me assume some degree of commensurability, and raise the issue of dimensions. The color space has at least three dimensions (hue, brightness and saturation) along which one can classify a given color(-presentation); does meaning-space have some independent dimensions?

The question has not been discussed explicitly in the literature, as far as I can tell. However, Ronald Dworkin offered in his *Sovereign virtue* (2002: Chapter Six) an account of two kinds of well-being, which I find germane to our problem. He distinguishes the more subjective component or kind of well-being, which he calls “volitional well-being” from the more objective one, called “critical well-being” (2002: 242 ff.). His example of the first category is, on the negative side, his pain in the dentist chair, and on the positive his pleasure in sailing well; “volitional” because he does not really want the first, but does want the second. The second category encompasses the projects that are worth-while for him in a more solid, durable and reflective, criticism withstanding way; he mentions the importance that his relation with his children has for him.

Let me borrow the general idea, and take something like Dworkin’s division of kinds of well-being to stand for *two dimensions of the meaning-space*. I shall not distinguish them along subjective-objective lines, but in a different manner. Take the pain in the dentist chair on the nega-

tive side, and enjoyment in watching an entertaining but rather superficial movie on the positive side. They can make some moments of one's life better or worse, and there is some point in avoiding the first and pursuing the other, just for the enjoyment sake. Contrast this, in the spirit of Dworkin, types of what is durable and solidly worth while doing, like a sporting activity, or flute-playing, or cultivating a variegated and attractive garden or caring systematically and deeply for one's children, or fighting for human rights. On the negative side we would have absurd and unredeemable projects, like the infamous counting of blades of grass. The first kind gives us then one dimension, call it the enjoyment-suffering dimension, or ES-dimension for short. The second gives another one, call it the engagement dimension, or E-dimension, for short.

Of course, events can presumably be evaluated along each of the dimensions. Take for example, the episode in which a rights-activist is painfully hit by a policeman. The episode is very low on the ES-dimension, but probably rather high on the E-dimension. My watching the "Suleyman the Magnificent" series on TV stands for me rather high on the ES-dimension, but relatively low on the E-dimension. I know now that if I entered tomorrow the Experience machine my life would flow marvelously on the ES-dimension, but, at least from perspective of today, at zero at E-dimension. Of course, there are complications. Don Giovanni makes enjoyment his life project; he is ready to die for it, as the last act of Mozart's opera documents. One way to represent this choice is to assign a very high E-grade for every experience he finds intensely pleasurable, so that the good standing on E-dimension is accompanied by an equally high the grade on ES-dimension. Chekhov passed on after saying "champagne"; perhaps for him, the exquisite pleasure of drinking champagne did figure very high on ES-dimension, sufficiently to offset its low E-dimension value.

Of course, some thinkers would reject counting the ES-dimension as seriously meaningful. For stoics, it encompasses (the subset of) things that the wise person should be indifferent about (thanks go to Danilo Šuster for reminding me). But pleasure does somewhat affect the meaningfulness of life, and pain does affect it strongly; only a very high standing of an episode on the E-dimension would make it worth while enduring long, excruciating pain (on the negative wing of the ES-dimension). The idea of variation along a dimension, as well as counting ES-dimension as significant immunizes our proposal further from the threats of elitism. Some lives are less authentic, less impressive than others, but the less authentic ones might still be meaningful in the sense of having some (amount of) meaning; they are far from being meaningless, as an elitist would be forced to say.

Note that both dimensions can appear as characterizing one's subjective meaning-space, as well as characterizing the objective space or a small collection of spaces, that would accrue to the idealized experiencer.

So much about possible dimensions; I leave the proposal at the most tentative. Let us return to our experiencer. We noted that the typical experiencer would be able to situate her experience *M* on the meaning space. Using Vicdan as our example, we noted that the following holds in case of the way of life that is subjectively acceptable for her:

MK 1. Vicdan knows that this* is a meaningful_e way of life (or the most meaningful_e way).

MK(2) The meaning-property presented in *M* is positive.

But, our hero might also know the following:

MK(3) The meaningfulness presented in *M* is of higher standing than that presented in another existential experience presenting another option that is merely tolerable.

If this holds, Vicdan also knows with introspective certainty the following:

MK (4) The meaningfulness property presented in *Mis* of higher standing than that presented in another experience *M'* of an absurd alternative.

MK (5) The meaningfulness presented in *M* is of higher standing than that presented in another existential experience *M'*.

A critic might wonder how is such rich knowledge with introspective degree of certainty possible if meaningfulness is a partly objective property. She might even suggest that the epistemology of dispositionalism is deficient and wrong. However, this is not what we are claiming. Vicdan has only access to the subjective e-aspect of meaningfulness. Here, her knowledge is of an introspective a priori kind. But she has no such access to the objective side, to what an ideally rational observer, our competent judge would find meaningful. She can guess and hope that the judge would find her life meaningful, but there is no certainty, let alone introspective certainty and apriority in these matters.

And indeed, people do wonder about their deep engagements: how would the friend or the teacher whom I appreciate react to my identification with this particular long-term task? To put it in our artificial terminology, is my meaningfulness_e indeed meaningfulness and not an illusion? This brings us to two questions, first, the one about the degree and kind of idealization, and second, the one about the kinematics of the meaning-space(s). I will leave the first one for another occasion, just mentioning the breath of the problem. Our response-intentional account would insist on comparing subjective meaning-spaces with a more neutral, impartial

meaning-space of the idealized experiencer. She would have to make place within her meaning-space(s) both to Montaigne's cabbage and to Frederick's passion for flute, and to many other meanings available.

I can here address only one worry. How parochial are meaning-spaces? Let me take a simple autobiographical example: I have been endlessly watching samurai movies, starting from the classical ones in which Toshiro Mifune played a rōnin, samurai without master, for instance Sanjuro in the *Bodyguard (Yojimbo)*, which I remember having watched and loved in sixties when in high-school. Question: how could I, with no experience of Japan, not to speak about feudal Japan, judge the meaningfulness of samurai's doings? Initially, my meaning-space certainly did not contain items like "following the Bushido code"; I had no idea what a Bushido code might possibly be. Still, Sanjuro's doings did seem highly meaningful to me, and, four decades later, I still like watching the movies of this kind. So, what should the theory say? Let us set aside the pessimistic hypothesis according to which I only imagined I could find a meaning in the story; too many Western film critics and movie goers did find a lot of meaning therein, so we should keep pessimism only as a last resort. One can go contextualist, propose that doings have meaning in contexts, and then optimistically claim that some kind of empathy could have transported me into the Yojimbo context. One would then say that the hero's act A has been "highly meaningful in-Japanese-feudal-context", and that a good spectator can bring oneself to penetrate the Japanese-feudal-context and see the contextualized meaning.

Finally, and this is the option I find most attractive, one can speculate that the meaning accrues to action kinds, relatively broadly conceived. Sanjuro's particular action would then have meaning as a token of a wider type, not limited to Bushido and the Japanese-feudal-context; for instance, staying faithful to your principles (no matter whether taken from Bushido, or from Kant or from Peter Singer), even in the situation in which institutional structure is tumbling down right before your eyes. A good artist, like Kurosawa or Mizoguchi can make the viewer recognize the relevant type, beyond narrow cultural limits.⁶ Much more needs to be said about idealization, but let me leave it for some future time.

⁶ For those who like old Japanese movies, another good example is *Life of Oharu*, again situated in a feudal framework. The suffering of Oharu, and her attempts to find a meaningful life for herself, can be easily re-categorized under more general happening- and action-types. The semi-forced descent of a former upper-class girl in lower and lower ranges of prostitution makes one think of tragedies of young women in Eastern Europe, forced into similar occupations by the decline of life-standard and desperate lack of alternatives. In this perspective Oharu becomes a next-door-girl, and the cultural distance gives place to more universal evaluation.

Finally, what about angst and disappointment? The optimistic strategy sets them aside. Here is Blackburn (thanks go to F. Klampfer for pointing Blackburn's strategy to me (Klampfer 2011)):

Thinking concretely, suppose we desire a good dinner, and enjoy it. Should it poison the enjoyment to reflect that it is fleeting (we won't enjoy this dinner forever), or that the desire for a good dinner is changeable (soon we won't feel hungry), or only temporarily satisfied (we will want dinner again tomorrow)? It is not as if things would be better if we always wanted a dinner, or if having got a dinner once we never wanted one again, or if the one dinner went on for a whole lifetime. None of those things seem remotely desirable, so why make a fuss about it not being like that?

We similarly abstract when we ask whether life, en bloc as a single lump, 'has a meaning', imagining, perhaps, some external witness to it, which may even be ourselves from beyond the grave, looking back. We may worry that the witness has the whole of time and space in its gaze, and our life shrinks to nothingness, just an insignificant, infinitesimal fragment of the whole. (Blackburn 2001: 68)

But if the optimistic strategy is so simple, why do people worry about the possible absurdity of life? There might be many causes, but let me point to one which is well known, and challenging for the idea of meaning-spaces. It is the temporal or kinetic structure of our motivation: the goals normally see more attractive when and while not achieved, and once achieved, tend to be undervalued. The dinner is not a good example, since hunger works reliably, and in the case of dinner we look at types, not so much at tokens. People don't remain faithful to a particular token dinner, at least not normally. Romantic love is a much better example: "It's nicer when just forboding is near" warns the poet Desanka Maksimović.⁷ The objects of their

⁷ Here is the poem my generation read in the high-school:

APPREHENSION

No... don't come to me! I want to adore
and love your two eyes from far, far away.
For, happiness's beau just while waiting for—
when only allusion comes out of its way.
No... don't come to me! There is more allure
in waiting with sweet apprehension, fear.
Just while seeking out everything is pure;
It's nicer when just forboding is near.
No... don't come to me! Why that, and what for?
Only from afar all stars spark and glee;
Only from afar we admire all.
No... let not your eyes come closer to me.

Translation: Dragana Konstantinović, at <http://www.angelfire.com/art/decjisvet/neven2.htm>

The fine thing about it is that it summarizes the main aspects of the problem: "Only from a far we admire all". Of course the solution, "don't come to me" is not very promising.

non-requited love seem to many people maximally attractive, certainly way more attractive than the same person would normally be after ten years of a stable relationship. (Hegel claimed that marriage is the solution of the problems of romantic love, just for the reason stated.) Similarly, if Žiška had won his battles, he might have, at the old age, got completely disappointed by the normal and boring life of a young, once heretic, state, with merchants taking the upper hand, with new faith becoming a routine rather than a revolutionary call, and so on, as has happened to many revolutionaries and reformers. Call the phenomenon post-facto devaluing bias (see for instance Haidt 2006: 82 ff; he calls it optimistically “the progress principle”). Now, if we are so prone to such a bias, isn’t our meaning-space dramatically unstable? It might be; psychologists, psychiatrists and some philosopher urge people to learn to take distance from both extremes of enthusiasm and feeling of absurdity, and they report that the job is not very easy. But there is no need to worry as regards theory: the subjective space of experienced meaningfulness can vary in time, and no deep theoretical problem arises from this. Landscapes change their color with different times of the day. The idealized space is anyway assumed to be stable, and the contrast between the two is what we would expect from several thousands of years of search for stable meaning. Let us now return to Berčić’s work.

(IV) Conclusion

Berčić’s proposal for a pluralistic normative account of meaning of life offers a fine point of entry into the problematic of meaningfulness. When given the coherentist twist he briefly suggests, it nicely fits with intuitions of many wise people from classics in philosophy to contemporary psychologists who work on the topic. We have tried to supplement this normative sketch with a sketch of metaphysics and epistemology of meaningfulness along response-dependence lines. But would our proposal fit the framework of Berčić’s work? The fact/value gap is there, but it is not deeply worrisome, he is telling us. Elsewhere he did take a stance (Berčić 2006), and did criticize the tough realist stance on values (taking Devitt as his target). Moral claims have no explanatory value, (tough) realism does not work, and naturalized realism is hopeless. However, Berčić’s optimistic stance about meaningfulness does require some acceptance of values inherent in meaningful acts: a nihilist about value could hardly agree with his claim that “many things we do in life are intrinsically valuable” (2012: 29). So, his stance seems to require some sort of realism, albeit not the tough one. And the footnote we discussed above seems sympathetic to the view that “X is good because we would desire X if we were rational”

(2012: 11). So, a dispositional (response-dependence) account might be the right option at this point, for Berčić and for everyone else.

The account proposed here claims that being meaningful in objective sense is being such as to cause the experiential response of meaningfulness in slightly idealized, suitably sensitive observers under suitable circumstances. The difficult and counterintuitive accompanying idea is that it is the reaction of such observers that *make* the relevant items meaningful; I have tried to mitigate the counterintuitiveness by introducing a two-way dependence; existential experience is causally dependent on particular traits of actions and states of affairs, their meaningfulness as the unifying property is dependent on the final experience of the competent judge.

Where do we go from here? In introducing dispositionalism, at the beginning of Section Two we suggested that, hopefully, there is a common story to be told about the whole response-dependent area, including color (sound and taste), emotional properties, moral and aesthetic properties, meaningfulness and the like. In short, while from practical, cognitive and semantic points of view these non-primary qualities are on equal footing with the primary ones, metaphysically they are not. What is their ontology? Where should we locate them in relation to primary qualities?

The location question is extremely general, and the project of answering it extremely ambitious. Here is then a shot in the dark: *most humanly important properties, emotional, aesthetic, moral and the meaningfulness-related ones, are response-dependent, I would claim*. In any case, we should strive for a unitary account of problematic properties; and if one is for response-dependence in one area, it is reasonable, at least *prima facie* to be on the same side for others. Berčić's encyclopedic and encompassing work is a fine inspiration for such a project.

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