

Correspondence concerning this comment should be addressed to Harris L. Friedman, Department of Psychology and Counseling, Goddard College, 123 Pitkin Road, Plainfield, VT 05667. E-mail: harrisfriedman@hotmail.com

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## Life Seems Pretty Meaningful

Austin John Jeffery  
and Todd K. Shackelford  
*Oakland University*

Heintzelman and King (2014) argue that, contrary to popular perception, our lives hold a great deal of meaning. When asked whether one's life has meaning, significance, purpose, or direction, participants around the world in various conditions of age, health, and economic status often report that their lives do have these characteristics. The study of perceived meaning is an interesting and fruitful avenue. We are concerned, however, that Heintzelman and King may have misrepresented and exploited the philosophical debate surrounding meaning to generate interest in their topic.

A generous reading of Heintzelman and King (2014) presents a relatively harmless overview of the prevalence of a particular psychological construct (call it X, for simplicity) and the ways in which it responds to manipulations. X correlates with measures of social well-being, it corresponds with mood and life satisfaction, and it is enhanced by cues of environmental stability. From this perspective, we agree that the abundance of X is cause for celebration and that attempts to deny the existence of X would be ill-founded. Yet, a key premise of their article is that X has a number of deniers, believing that X is nonexistent or rare, who could be convinced by the evidence that X does, in fact, persist in a majority of men and women. Although many perceive that X is *too* rare and that it should always be a priority of mental health (e.g., Frankl's search for meaning, Maslow's self-actualization, Yalom's ultimate concerns), these thinkers do not argue that X is necessarily difficult to find in the population. Heintzelman and King make note of this and quote an article from *The Atlantic* (Smith, 2013) demonstrating that even when made aware that more than 50% of us experience X, we find the data disappointing. However, Heintzelman and King fail to address this bias simply by providing more evidence for the prevalence of X (even at 90% one can say that 1 out of 10 people experience a lack of X). Neither do Heintzelman and King appear to argue that X is prevalent enough to ignore, so it is not clear who they are trying to

convince. By conflating X with the philosophical concept of meaning, Heintzelman and King capitalize on the interest that readers might have in evidence for the existence of intrinsic meaning. Insisting that X is prevalent is only compelling or contestable when misunderstood to imply that intrinsic meaning exists.

Meaning, in philosophical terms, is broadly construed as an underlying quality of "aboutness." Meaning is usually conceived as an essential intention or "subject" of an "object." For example, this sentence can be thought to have a meaning that is ontologically distinct from, but intrinsic to, the letters on the page; the meaning exists in a way that is fundamentally different from the way that the letters exist, but the meaning is inseparable from this arrangement of shapes. Likewise, the meaning of life or the meaning of an individual's life is the essential reason for that existence. When the question arises as to whether meaning exists, it is this definition of meaning that is at stake, not whether individuals perceive meaning in their lives. Most scholars agree that intrinsic meaning is incoherent, that meaning can only exist to the extent that it is ascribed by observers. This *derived* meaning is inadequate because it describes the perception of meaning while admitting that there is no true, underlying meaning about which that perception can be accurate or inaccurate. Heintzelman and King conflate intrinsic and derived meaning when they cite the psychotherapist Irvin Yalom as a critic of the prevalence of X because his model proposes that meaninglessness is one among the givens of human life. As an existentialist, Yalom's interest was in how individuals struggle with the consequences of mortality, morality, the isolation of consciousness, and meaninglessness as philosophical truths. Yalom did not argue that X was rare, but instead argued that even though intrinsic meaning does not exist, healthy minds find ways to ascribe meaning.

Heintzelman and King briefly address the perspective that meaning does not exist, offering that perhaps "all meaning in life is illusory," and that humans may be natural "meaning-makers," but they do not clarify the relationship between this form of meaning and the psychological construct X. Instead of pointing out that their review has nothing to say about the truth value of positive illusions, Heintzelman and King indicate that educating the reader on modern perspectives of intrinsic meaning (i.e., that it does not exist) is morally questionable. Although we are amenable to the possibility that there could exist knowledge that is destructive to well-being (as opposed to simply uncomfortable or controversial), we do not agree that this is such

knowledge. In the same way that volition is not abolished upon believing that free will does not exist (as many do), the day-to-day experience of meaning is not vulnerable to intellectual debate. This is attributable in part to the fact that (as Heintzelman and King explain) it is likely generated by an evolved sensitivity to social, motivational, and environmental cues. That said, there are delicate theological notions and personal philosophies that do hinge on the existence of intrinsic meaning. These deliberative sentiments are vulnerable to revision in a way that the experience of meaning is not. We encourage the revision of such beliefs in light of developments in science and philosophy, and we hope that Heintzelman and King share this interest.

Unless Heintzelman and King wish to argue that life truly *is* meaningful and that the perception of meaning is evidence enough, we recommend that for the sake of clarity they make the explicit distinction between the widespread perception of meaning and its intrinsic existence. We do not expect that the reader's experience of meaning will suffer as a result, but instead that he or she will better understand the implications of the findings. Unfortunately, once this distinction is made clear, these findings are less compelling to individuals who seek confirmation that intrinsic meaning exists.

## REFERENCES

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Correspondence concerning this article should be addressed to Austin John Jeffery, 108 Pryale Hall, Oakland University, Rochester, MI 48309. E-mail: [ajjeffer@oakland.edu](mailto:ajjeffer@oakland.edu)

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## Questionable Measures Are Pretty Meaningless

Nicholas J. L. Brown  
*New School of Psychotherapy and  
Counseling*

Paul T. P. Wong  
*Trent University*

Heintzelman and King (2014) argued that meaning in life (MIL) is widely experienced and exists at high levels. In this brief commentary, we examine what we believe