



Feigning Perfection in an Imperfect World. A Review of Iddo Landau (2017), *Finding meaning in an imperfect world* (New York: Oxford University Press)

Gavin Vance¹ · Todd K. Shackelford¹

Published online: 3 April 2019
© Springer Nature Switzerland AG 2019

Iddo Landau has discovered the meaning of life. Or, rather, he has discovered the many ways people fail to recognize the meaning in their own lives. In *Finding meaning in an imperfect world*, Landau makes the case that life is full of meaning, so long as you know where to look and so long as you have the right mindset. The University of Haifa philosophy professor has dedicated a significant portion of his career to addressing meaning in life, and although he makes many compelling points for the often hidden value in our lives, Landau's arguments are less persuasive than they could be because he does not consistently frame the context of meaning and because he does not clearly operationalize meaning.

Landau attempts, primarily, to criticize arguments in favor of the meaninglessness of life. He proposes that people sometimes fail to recognize the meaning in their lives, and that a shift in perception will help them to see this meaning. Landau does not, however, distinguish between subjective, terrestrial meaning (usually limited to the impact an individual has on his immediate surroundings), and objective, cosmic meaning (the impact one has on the universe; see Benatar 2006, 2017). Instead of distinguishing the perspectives one can use to find meaning, Landau opts for a harder sell, arguing for the existence of meaning in spite of the inevitability of death and the disinterest of the universe. Whether by accident or by design, Landau does not frame his arguments for the meaning of life—for example, as an individual, global, or cosmic. Therefore, although he presents many well-reasoned arguments for the ways in which one might recognize meaning in life, the lack of a consistent framing of meaning gives the impression that Landau is conflating an individual's day-to-

day reasons for living (i.e., terrestrial meaning) and meaning in a grander sense (i.e., cosmic meaning).

Landau's message is an optimistic one, in which he claims that meaning is derived from value (those with nothing of value in their lives will also typically experience their lives as meaningless). Landau contends that people can sometimes be mistaken about the meaning their lives have, dedicating an entire chapter to the argument that people tend to underestimate the good in their lives. In asserting that people can be wrong about the value in their lives, Landau implies the existence of objective (cosmic) value, although he does not operationalize value or meaning, and neither does he explicitly state that he is referring to cosmic, rather than terrestrial meaning. Landau's failure to provide a clear and consistent context and operationalization for meaning renders his already dubious claim that we often underestimate the meaning in our lives even less convincing. David Benatar (2017), author of *The Human Predicament*, offers a comparatively pessimistic perspective, although many of his arguments overlap with those of Landau.

Benatar (2017) offers strong arguments for the considerable harms of coming into existence and of death (and annihilation), and encourages the pursuit of terrestrial (subjective, individual) meaning as a way to meliorate these harms. Benatar's case for pursuing terrestrial meaning is commensurate with many of Landau's arguments. Although nothing a human will ever do could be meaningful from a cosmic perspective, Benatar argues, it is nevertheless good to make the most of our human predicament by attempting to find meaning at the terrestrial level. An individual might derive meaning from reading a good book, being a good spouse, or having a lasting impact on a scientific discipline or artistic medium (although most of us will not realize meaning at such a large scale). Benatar and Landau not only suggest similar ways of finding meaning, but also both discourage attempts to achieve meaning on a global scale because such goals are unrealistic for most people. What makes Benatar's case more

✉ Gavin Vance
gvance@oakland.edu

¹ Department of Psychology, Oakland University,
Rochester, MI 48309, USA

compelling than Landau's, however, is that he defines this type of meaning as terrestrial and distinguishes it from cosmic meaning, whereas Landau makes no such distinction, leaving the reader wondering at the level of meaning at which Landau is pitching his arguments.

Landau's failure to frame his discussions of meaning allows the reader to perceive the human experience as unduly positive, and this misperception can have negative consequences. Both Landau and Benatar advocate the pursuit of hobbies, professions, and philosophies that make one's life more meaningful, but Benatar stresses that just because one may be able to find meaning for oneself, one's potential children are not guaranteed to also find their lives meaningful. Even if they did, this would not outweigh the serious harms of existing. In *Better never to have been*, Benatar (2006) makes the case for antinatalism, a view that having children is morally indefensible. Antinatalism asserts that because all living people suffer more harms than they enjoy pleasures, and because non-existent people cannot have an interest in coming into existence, the creation of children is morally objectionable.

Benatar (2017) concedes that although people can derive joy and meaning from having and caring for children, these benefits are outweighed by the costs incurred by children upon being forced into existence and, inevitably, dying. Landau does not address antinatalism and, in general, gives little consideration to the many ways in which one's search for meaning may inflict harms on others. In fact, Landau references family and the rearing of children as potential sources of meaning on several occasions throughout his book, without mentioning the harms inflicted on children by bringing them into existence. Ironically, Landau does address the inevitability of death, but only when explaining why death does not make life meaning-

less. In the context of refuting arguments that death renders life meaningless, Landau contends that just because something will cease to be, does not mean we cannot enjoy it while it is here, whether it be youth, a loved one, or a period of prosperity in one's life. Sound as this advice may be in most scenarios, applying the same logic to producing children conflicts with antinatalism, as presented by Benatar (2006, 2017). In Landau's view, the fact that everyone who comes into existence will experience death is not a sufficient reason to abstain from having children, but this is precisely the opposite of Benatar's point: that creating new people forces them eventually to face their own mortality, death, and annihilation.

Landau's intentions with *Finding meaning in an imperfect world* appear not to be malicious or deceptive. In many places, Landau's wisdom shines through, offering sound advice for making one's life feel more meaningful and worthwhile. Where Landau falters is in his failure to frame his sense of meaning and to adequately operationalize meaning or value. What results is an unduly sunny picture of the human predicament, and one that justifies the creation of new people. There is, therefore, good reason to consider the potentially negative consequences of Landau's assessments of meaning.

References

- Benatar, D. (2006). *Better never to have been: the harm of coming into existence*. New York: Oxford University Press.
- Benatar, D. (2017). *The human predicament*. New York: Oxford University Press.

Publisher's Note Springer Nature remains neutral with regard to jurisdictional claims in published maps and institutional affiliations.