

What we talk about when we talk about meaning in/of life

Minao Kukita

Graduate School of Informatics, Nagoya University

minao.kukita@i.nagoya-u.ac.jp

Characteristics of Metz's approach

- “Analytic” in a narrow sense: attempting to formulate rigorously and unequivocally the conditions for judgements such as “this guy’s life has meaning” to be true.
- Naturalist: Not drawing on anything supernatural such as God or life after death.
- Realist: Meanings in life exist independently of humans who judge them.
- This combination is familiar to and hence easy to accept for contemporary analytic philosophers.

I propose an alternative approach

- Metz and many others take it for granted that the statements about meaning in life are of the type whose truth is determined by objective criteria, i.e., for which the “model-theoretic semantics” is well suited.
- However, not every statement is of the same type.
- Shouldn't we consider first which category of statements those about meaning in life belong to?
- At least, we should not think by default that the model-theoretic one is *the* semantics for them.

I propose an alternative approach

- By the way, I want to say the same thing to analytic philosophers working on meanings of mathematical statements.
- Mathematical statements can be understood better if we give up model-theoretic semantics and take a pragmatic point of view.

Pragmatic or speech-act theoretic approach

- Think about
 - when we actually use such statements, and
 - what we use them for.
- Let us classify them into the third person, second person, and first person uses.

Third person

- “Picasso’s life is more meaningful than van Gogh’s.”
- We do not usually say such things.
- I’d rather even call this pragmatically “ungrammatical”.

Third person

- “My son’s life was meaningless” said by a bereaved father.
- This must be an expression of deep lament or grief over his son’s death.
- If he says “My son’s life was meaningful”, he may try to comfort himself or other family members.

Second person

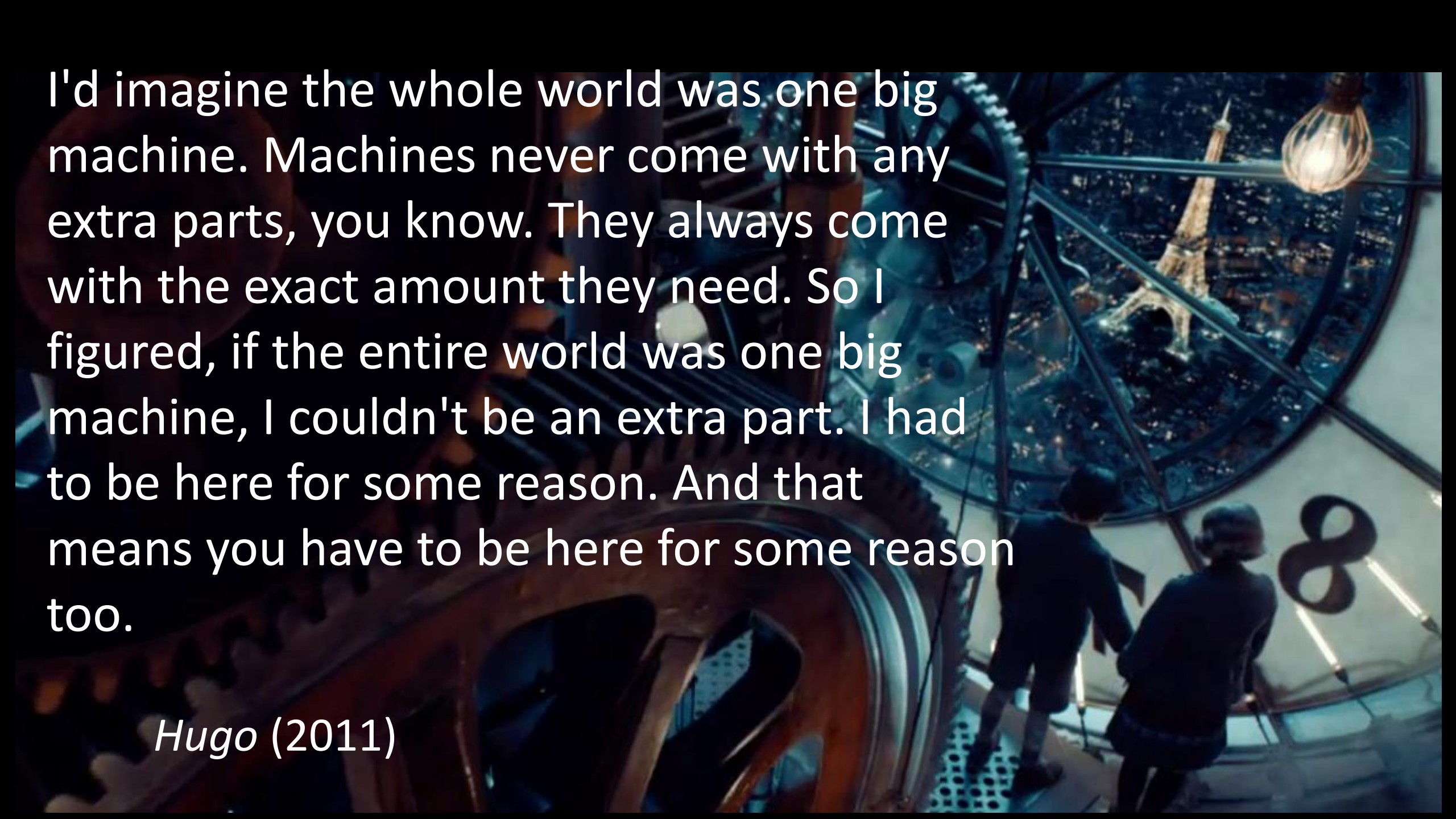
- “You are living a meaningless life”; “You should do something more meaningful”.
- These are statements including “blaming”.
- They seem to be more like what Strawson called “reactive attitudes”.

First person

- “What meaning does my life have?”
- This overlaps what Morioka called “the core of the meaning in life”.
- However, we want to focus on a different aspect than Morioka’s “core”.
- While Morioka assumes “solitary entity” who both asks and answers this question by itself, it is important to consider first person plural subjects or “solidary entities”.

I'd imagine the whole world was one big machine. Machines never come with any extra parts, you know. They always come with the exact amount they need. So I figured, if the entire world was one big machine, I couldn't be an extra part. I had to be here for some reason. And that means you have to be here for some reason too.

Hugo (2011)



“Existential question”

- Yu Urata, *Psychology of Meaning in Life: Minds Asking Existential Question* 浦田悠『人生の意味の心理学：実存的な問いを生む心』（京都大学学術出版会、2013）
- It is “Existential emptiness” that causes one to ask such questions as “Does my life has meaning?”
- It also has “potential to cause various psychological problems such as fear, depression, feeling of alienation, attempted suicide, etc. (Urata, p. 122)
- Questioning one’s own life may be an expression of suffering, or a plea for help.

Conclusion

- Our ordinary talks about the meaning in/of life seem to be very different from descriptions of objective facts.
- When we talk about meaning in life, we usually do not play the same language game as when we report or describe, for example, movements of physical bodies, chemical reactions, the population of a country, the currency exchange rate, today's weather, and so on.
- Using the phrase "meaning in/of life" may have various purposes and effects: expression of lament, blame, existential emptiness, etc.
- It's far from "the fine game of nil".

A question to Metz

- Does Benatar oriented his rationality positively or negatively towards fundamental conditions of human existence?
- His claim is denial of human existence. Thus it seems negative.
- However, it also aims at increasing of net happiness, and so it can be regarded to be positive.