

435 **Review of Iddo Landau's "Finding Meaning in an Imperfect World"**

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Finding Meaning in an Imperfect World. By Iddo Landau. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2018. 297 pp.

Much human misery arises from flawed thinking. For example, people overestimate the probability of bad outcomes or take their lives to be worse than they actually are. It seems obvious that philosophy—with its emphasis on reason and evidence—can help to identify such flaws.

So far philosophical contributions to cognitive therapy or self-help have mainly drawn on two sources: ancient thinkers such as Epicurus, Seneca, and Epictetus; and existential philosophers such as Kierkegaard and Heidegger. Iddo Landau, in contrast, utilizes contemporary analytic philosophy. His particular concern is the issue of the meaning of life. In 'Finding Meaning in an Imperfect World', Landau criticizes several common arguments for the meaninglessness of life. He also develops strategies for identifying and recognizing meaning. Although some aspects of his book need further defence, it impressively achieves its main goal: Landau improves both academics' and non-academics' thinking about this important topic, and helps us making and considering our lives more meaningful.

The book starts with an explanation of what it means to say that a life has or does not have meaning. Focusing on the individual human life, Landau interprets this notion in an evaluative (as opposed to a cognitive) sense. More specifically, he regards the meaning of life as a second-order value. Lives are meaningful if and only if they involve 'a sufficient number of aspects of sufficient value' (p. 15). After these introductory remarks Landau goes on to reject nine arguments against life having meaning in this sense.

Perfection: The first and purportedly most common argument is based on perfectionism. According to perfectionists, only a very high degree of value or value that results from rare and difficult achievements could confer meaning on our lives. Landau argues that this view

sets the bar too high. Most people reject perfectionism for values other than the meaning of life (such as beauty). Typically, we also do not apply such high standards in evaluating others.

436 Requiring perfection seems both unreasonable and cruel towards oneself. Finally, it can also result from conceited and narcissistic attitudes or hypercompetitiveness.

Mortality: One day our lives will end, and everything else that we value will be gone too. Landau admits that when life is good death diminishes its meaning. However, the fact that we realized value at certain points in time is taken to be eternal. It will always be the case, for example, that yesterday you had a nice evening with friends. Moreover, temporal things (such as this evening) can be valuable, and even in light of death some lives are better than others.

Cosmological insignificance: Maybe life is meaningless because it is inconsequential when evaluated from the perspective of the cosmos as a whole? Against this argument Landau objects that some things (such as being courageous or having aesthetic experiences) are meaningful even though they do not affect all or even only many things that exist, and that some people are not even interested in affecting the whole universe.

Lack of free will: Another potential reason for regarding one's life as meaningless is humans lacking free will, and thus being similar to animals or machines. However, Landau argues, even if this claim were true we would still have a much richer consciousness. Moreover, many valuable things (ranging from physical beauty to sportive achievements) do not presuppose free will in the first place.

Uncertainty and relativism: Some people believe that life is meaningless because value cannot be known with certainty or is relative to the standards of individuals or cultures. Against the uncertainty argument Landau notes that it assumes an implausible perfectionist threshold for knowledge. The threat of relativism is averted by pointing out that even if value were relative some things would still be more or less valuable (according to individual or cultural standards), rational assessments would still be possible, and things could still be 'really' valuable.

Lack of purpose: Here, then, is another try: my life is meaningless because it lacks purpose, i.e. it is not a means to some overarching end. One of Landau's suggestions with regard to this argument is to simply find such an overarching end. But even if one does not direct one's life at only one goal, it can still be meaningful. This is because we can also realize many valuable local ends, such as developing friendships or completing an education.

The paradox of the end: Surprisingly, even achieving one's ends has been claimed to diminish meaning—as these ends then no longer provide orientation or often lose their splendour. But this experience is only shared by some people some of the time. Landau also

points out that certain ends do not have a terminus at all (like being a good teacher or husband), are unachievable ideals (like being a moral person), or are intrinsically valuable (such as, maybe, experiencing beauty).

437 *Pain and suffering:* Do pain and suffering render one's life meaningless? Landau argues that compared to pleasure, we may not be more sensitive to or aware of suffering. Moreover, even if this were the case, we could still act in ways that tip our overall experiential balance in favour of pleasure. Finally, even very painful lives can be meaningful.

Evil: At last Landau also defends life's meaningfulness against the presence of evil. In an imperfect world flaws are to be expected. Newspapers and history books exaggerate their prevalence. More specifically, people's actions often are not only based on egoistic motives; wanting to feel good is not by itself bad or worthless; and even if people were easily morally corruptible (which they may not be) this would imply that they are easily improvable as well.

In addition to tackling the above arguments, Landau also provides positive advice. He explains how our blindness to the good may be cured by avoiding tendencies such as perfectionism and overly critical attitudes towards ourselves. He proposes a series of questions that are supposed to help identifying what could make our lives meaningful. And he stresses the importance of becoming more sensitive to value that we are already surrounded by (analogous to how we might sensitize ourselves to beauty).

My above summary should bear ample witness to the wide-rangingness and contentiousness of Landau's exploration of our thinking about the meaning of life. Given these features, it is no wonder that some aspects of his book invite clarificatory or critical questions. Previous commentators have already pointed out problems with Landau's conception of the meaning of life as a second-order value. Here I will limit myself to sketching a methodological issue—an issue that relates to the empirical nature of many of his claims.

'Finding Meaning in an Imperfect World' abounds with empirical claims. Recall, for example, the following objections against perfectionism: most people reject perfectionism for values other than the meaning of life, many people do not apply perfectionist standards in evaluating others, perfectionism sometimes results from conceited and narcissistic attitudes, and perfectionism is often a product of hyper-competitiveness. In light of their argumentative weight, Landau clearly owes us evidence for these claims, such as reports of relevant psychological studies. However, in this as well as in almost all other cases, no such evidence is provided (not even in the form of references).

Relatedly, one sometimes also wonders how the book's empirical claims are supposed to support its conclusions in the first place. Suppose Landau were right that perfectionists about the meaning of life do not endorse perfectionism about being beautiful, having knowledge, etc. Instead of regarding this as a challenge to perfectionism, one may just as well argue that the meaning of life (as a peculiar second-order value) essentially involves a higher threshold of sufficiency than these other values. Or take Landau's claims that perfectionism tends to arise from conceited or narcissistic attitudes, and hypercompetitiveness. How exactly is perfectionism's being *caused* in such ways supposed to undermine its *justification* or *truth*?

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These worries should not distract from the fact, however, that Landau provides us with an excellent book. Nowadays, more and more philosophy is marketed as being accessible to a non-academic audience. 'Finding Meaning in an Imperfect World' really lives up to this promise. It is clear, logically structured, and sufficiently light and entertaining. One can also easily see how reading the book might actually help people when it comes to issues regarding the meaning of life. Finally, Landau develops a number of original arguments that will prove eye-opening to academics who have worked on this topic as well. I hope that similar books will soon further exemplify contemporary analytic philosophy's great potential to inform cognitive therapy or self-help.