# Handout: P. M. S. Hacker – Can Neuroscience Shed Light on What Constitutes a Meaningful Life?

# I. The Problem: Can Neuroscience Explain Meaning in Life?

P. M. S. Hacker takes aim at an increasingly popular view in cognitive neuroscience and psychology: the belief that brain science can answer age-old philosophical questions about the *meaning of life*. This chapter is a polemic against what Hacker sees as a fundamental *category mistake*—ascribing conceptual and normative matters (such as meaning, purpose, value) to physical and causal systems (brains, neurons, neurotransmitters). The core problem: **can empirical neuroscience explain what it is to live a meaningful life, or is this a conceptual confusion?** 

# II. The Philosophical Landscape of Meaning

Before engaging neuroscience, Hacker outlines a rich phenomenology of meaning in life, distinguishing between types and dimensions of meaning.

# A. Transitive vs. Intransitive Meaning (p. 146)

- *Transitive meaning*: e.g., "what does X mean?" asks for definition or explanation.
- *Intransitive meaning*: something is *meaningful in itself*, not in need of explanation. Like a powerful musical passage or a self-sacrificial act.

# B. Subjective vs. Objective Meaning (p. 147)

- Subjective meaning: personal significance (e.g., love of nature or ballet).
- *Objective meaning*: contributes to a life worth living regardless of one's feelings.
- Hacker critiques *illusory meaning*—when one *feels* life is meaningful, but that feeling is based on false or corrupt values (e.g., Eichmann's genocide as "meaningful").

"Nothing that is evil can give meaning to a person's life, for evil is a paradigm of disvalue." (p. 147)

#### C. Criteria for Meaning

- Must be *serious*, not trivial.
- Must transcend selfish concerns.
- Must shape one's *self-conception and relationships*.
- Must express and develop one's nature.

# III. The Phenomenology of Meaninglessness (pp. 148–150)

Hacker emphasizes the *primacy* of meaninglessness:

- People seldom say "my life is meaningful," but commonly report loss of meaning.
- Such loss manifests in depression, numbness, and existential despair (cf. Tolstoy's *Confession*, p. 149).
- Psychological roots: suffering, grief, alienation.
- Intellectual roots: death of God, cosmic insignificance, loss of teleology.

"There is no such thing as the meaning of life...life as such has no purpose." (p. 149)

Yet humans—unlike other animals—*can* live meaningful lives through love, vocation, creativity, and response to suffering.

### **IV. Neuroscience's Ambitions**

#### A. Neural Naturalism (pp. 150–153)

Hacker surveys the position he critiques:

- The mind is the brain, and mental states are neural processes.
- Meaning is what lights up brain areas like the *nucleus accumbens*.

- Love, work, and play are emotionally salient neural representations.
- Functional brain imaging (e.g., fMRI) is believed to reveal meaningful experiences.

#### Paul Thagard's Thesis (p. 152)

Thagard argues neuroscience and psychology can explain why things (like love, music, vocation) are meaningful:

- Meaning = goals encoded as emotionally valenced brain states.
- Love activates reward centers; play has "neural circuits"; work taps goal-reward mechanisms.

# V. Hacker's Critique of Neuroscience's Pretensions

#### A. Five Foundational Errors (p. 153)

- 1. Reducing *all* explanation to causal explanation.
- 2. Equating *person* with *brain* ("You are your brain" fallacy).
- 3. Assuming *hedonic consequentialism* (all action aims at pleasure).
- 4. Treating Cartesian dualism and neural naturalism as the only options.
- 5. Assuming empirical science can answer conceptual questions.

# B. Clarifying Categories (pp. 154–157)

Hacker draws on **Aristotle's four causes** (efficient, material, formal, final) to show that neuroscience only captures *some* forms of explanation.

• **Example**: Turning on a light can be explained teleologically (to read), materially (muscle contraction), and causally (neural activation)—but these aren't interchangeable.

"The latter [neural explanation] does not displace the former. Nor does it explain what is enjoyable about the activity." (p. 154)

#### **C. Philosophical Clarifications**

- Brains do not think, decide, reason, or remember. Persons do.
- Seeing is not a brain process. We see with our eyes and minds, not with "representations in the brain" (p. 156).
- There is no such thing as "storing knowledge in the brain" (p. 156).
- Neuroscience cannot explain *why something is meaningful*—only describe its physical correlates.

# VI. The Solution: Philosophical Anthropology and Conceptual Analysis

Hacker offers a pluralist, anthropological naturalism:

- Humans are **unitary beings**, not dual substances or mere brains.
- Meaning arises from participation in forms of life and social practices.
- Philosophy clarifies **concepts**, not causes.
- Understanding meaning in life requires **normative**, **cultural**, **and autobiographical** reflection—not brain scans.

# **VII. Broader Implications and Supplementary Concepts**

#### A. Mereological Fallacy

- Attributing properties of wholes (persons) to parts (brains).
- E.g., "The brain remembers," "The brain decides"—nonsensical outside metaphor.

#### B. The Role of Language and Culture

• Mastery of a public language embedded in a culture is *necessary for mindedness*.

• No amount of neural firing suffices without conceptual training.

## C. Philosophical Methodology

- Hacker defends Wittgensteinian conceptual analysis as philosophy's task.
- Neuroscience missteps occur when scientists mistake *grammatical rules* for *empirical facts*.

# **Conclusion: The Limits of Neuroscience in Explaining Life's Meaning**

Hacker's chapter is a sustained rebuttal of scientism in the philosophy of mind and meaning. Neuroscience has uncovered astonishing mechanisms, but it *cannot answer the question of what makes life meaningful*, because that is not a scientific question—it is a *conceptual and normative* one. Meaning in life concerns how we live, love, create, suffer, and relate—not which neurons fire.

"There never was any hope that neuroscience might contribute to the understanding of what a meaningful life is." (p. 157)

Would you like a visual diagram summarizing Hacker's five critiques or the conceptual distinctions?