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Beyond proper fit: Integrity, narrative and the meaning of life

 <https://doi.org/10.15633/lie.32105>

Abstrakt

Beyond proper fit. Integrity, narrative and the meaning of life

This article analyses Joshua Seachris's narrative theory of the meaning of life, which posits that meaning emerges when existentially relevant elements and questions (ERQ) achieve a "proper fit" within a coherent explanatory framework. The author indicates that while Seachris correctly emphasises the role of cognitive coherence, his model leaves space for a systematic account of the subjective dimension that determines whether a given narrative becomes a genuine "live option" for the individual. The primary aim of this paper is to demonstrate an interesting convergence between the criterion of "proper fit" and a philosophically enriched conception of personal integrity, inspired by the thought of J. Cottingham, E. Levinas, and J. Tischner. Through an analysis of the phenomenology of religious conversion and the ethical encounter with the Other, the article demonstrates that integrity understood in this way acts as an auxiliary filter, testing a narrative's capacity for the holistic integration of "existentially weighty experiences" – such as love, suffering, or moral obligation – without reducing them. The paper concludes that incorporating personal integrity into the narrative model clarifies Seachris's notion of "proper fit".

Słowa kluczowe: meaning of life, narrative, personal integrity, proper fit, cognitive dissonance

Abstract

Poza właściwe dopasowanie. Integralność, narracja a sens życia

Artykuł analizuje narracyjną koncepcję sensu życia Joshuy Seachrisa, w której sens wyłania się, gdy egzystencjalnie doniosłe fakty i pytania (ERQ) osiągają „właściwe dopasowanie” (proper fit) w ramach spójnej struktury wyjaśniającej. Autor wskazuje, że choć Seachris słusznie akcentuje rolę spójności poznawczej, jego model pozostawia przestrzeń dla systematycznego ujęcia wymiaru subiektywnego, który decyduje o tym, czy dana narracja staje się dla podmiotu autentyczną „żywą opcją” (live option). Głównym celem pracy jest wykazanie interesującej zbieżności między kryterium proper fit a ufilozoficzną koncepcją integralności osobowej, inspirowaną myślą Johna Cottinghama, Emmanuela Levinasa i Józefa Tischnera. Poprzez analizę fenomenologii nawrócenia religijnego oraz etycznego spotkania z Drugim artykuł dowodzi, że tak rozumiana integralność pełni rolę pomocniczego filtru, testującego zdolność narracji do holistycznej integracji „doświadczeń o wysokim ciężarze egzystencjalnym” – takich jak miłość, cierpienie czy moralne zobowiązanie – bez ich redukcji. W konkluzji stwierdzono, że włączenie integralności osobowej do modelu narracyjnego doprecyzowuje Seachrisowskie pojęcie „dopasowania”.

Keywords: dysonans poznawczy, integralność osobowa, narracja, sens życia, właściwe dopasowanie

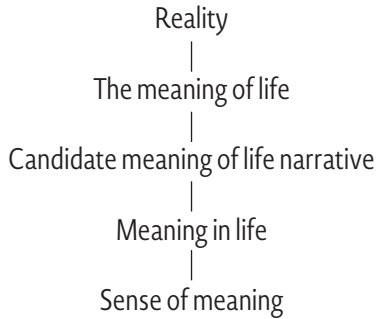
Although the question “What is the meaning of life?” ranks among the most fundamental and existentially important inquiries, it often remains latent, only surfacing with clarity during critical moments in human life. Attempts to understand the question often break it down into related but separate questions about life’s purpose or value—the so-called amalgam thesis.¹ However, this analytically valid approach fails to capture the overall, intuitive search for meaning.

In contrast to this reductionist tendency, Joshua Seachris² proposes a narrative conception of the meaning of life. Central to this conception is the pursuit of an overarching, existentially significant narrative (ERN); this narrative, in turn, must address the “Existentially Relevant Elements and Questions” (ERQs) that comprise the fundamental features of the human condition, including questions of origin, purpose, value, suffering, and destiny. For Seachris, “meaning” depends on a “proper fit” and sense-making within a coherent explanatory framework. Life has meaning when its elements align and make sense within this broader narrative structure.

The meaning of life can be understood as unfolding through successive levels of alignment or “fit”. At the highest level, the True Meaning of Life Narrative (ThMLN) corresponds to the nature of reality, reflecting its underlying ontological and normative structure. The existential facts and questions (ERQ) of the human condition need to find their proper place within this overarching meaning. Finally, our personal Meaning in Life (MinL), which is the coherence of our everyday goals, relationships, and actions, should ideally align with both the ERN and the ThMLN. The alignment of these levels provides a rational grounding for our subjective

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- 1 Cf. J. W. Seachris, *The meaning of life. Contemporary analytic perspectives*, in: *Internet encyclopedia of philosophy*, 2011.
 - 2 Joshua W. Seachris is an American analytic philosopher affiliated with the University of Notre Dame, specializing in the philosophy of religion and the meaning of life. He is the editor of key anthologies, and author of the encyclopedic survey *The meaning of life: Contemporary analytic perspectives* (2012). His work, such as *The meaning of life as narrative* (2009), is foundational to the contemporary debate on meaning of life.

experience of meaning, distinguishing it from a mere feeling that might otherwise be misguided.



While Seachris's narrative theory offers a compelling account, his foundational concept of "proper fit" warrants clarification. Seachris hints at this, noting we seek answers that "fit together in an existentially satisfying way" and that a worldview can be considered absurd if it fails to allow for a "fittingness between deep human longings and reality". He recognises the search for meaning is "laden with complex emotional and existential baggage that fashions the shape that sense-making takes"³.

Textual evidence indicates Seachris recognises this subjective aspect of "proper fit" without, however, providing a systematic philosophical account of it. A criterion for evaluating this subjective dimension, which makes a narrative a genuine "live option" for an individual, remains only broadly outlined. Personal integrity can clarify this underdeveloped component of "proper fit". While Seachris gestures towards the importance of subjective satisfaction, his framework thus lacks a fully theorised criterion for it. This article proposes that there exists a convergence between Joshua Seachris's criterion of "proper fit" and a philosophically enriched conception of psychological personal integrity. Rather than viewing personal integrity merely

³ J.W. Seachris, *From the meaning triad to meaning holism: Unifying life's meaning*, "Human Affairs" 29 (2019) no. 4, pp. 363–378.

as a psychological state, this paper argues that it serves as a valuable auxiliary dimension that complements cognitive coherence, helping to determine if a coherent narrative is also a genuinely “live option” for the individual.

The meaning of life as narrative

Seachris’s idea that a narrative best captures the meaning of life stems from his concept of the “Meaning triad”⁴. According to Seachris, common linguistic expressions of meaning reveal patterns with significant implications for theorising about both meaning in life and the meaning of life (MofL). He observes that understandings of „meaning” generally revolve around three core concepts:

1. I-Meaning (Meaning as Intelligibility/Coherence): The fundamental concept of meaning, signifying that something makes sense if it is intelligible, clarified, or coherent.
2. P-Meaning (Meaning as Purpose): Refers to aim, teleology, and intention.
3. S-Meaning (Meaning as Significance/Value): Refers to importance, impact, salience, and being the object of care and concern, or value.

Intelligibility has hermeneutical primacy, providing the resources to understand the question, “What is the meaning of life?” as a search for a single, unified answer. This approach stands in direct contrast to amalgam and pluralist views, which do not presuppose such a singular, unifying meaning. Within this framework, Intelligibility organically secures the conceptual space for other senses of meaning (such as P-Meaning and S-Meaning). Crucially, it positions them as relevant components of this singular quest

4 J. W. Seachris, *The meaning of life as narrative: A new proposal for interpreting philosophy’s ‘primary’ question*, “Philo” 12 (2009) no. 1, pp. 5–23; J. W. Seachris, *Death, futility, and the proleptic power of narrative ending*, “Religious Studies” 47 (2011) no. 2, pp. 121–135; J. W. Seachris, *The meaning of life: Contemporary analytic perspectives*; J. W. Seachris, *The “sub specie aeternitatis” perspective and normative evaluations of life’s meaningfulness: A closer look*, “Ethical Theory and Moral Practice” 16 (2013) issue 3, pp. 605–620; J. W. Seachris, *From the meaning triad to meaning holism*.

without resorting to a pluralist reinterpretation of the traditional notion of meaning.

Given I-Meaning's hermeneutical primacy, Seachris argues that the search for life's meaning is best understood as a quest for a narrative. Humans tend to use stories to make sense of the world, organise experiences, and situate life events in a larger context. This narrative impulse helps us comprehend the flow of time, cause and effect, and the unfolding of our existence, allowing us to identify what is valuable and what is not. This drive for a coherent narrative is motivated by significant aspects of the human condition. Seachris refers to these as "existentially relevant life elements and accompanying questions", or ERQ. These are the fundamental questions and inherent facts of our being that intrinsically inspire us to explore the question of life's meaning. The ERQ encompasses critical questions and facts concerning: our origins (Why does anything, including ourselves, exist?); our purpose (Does life have a purpose, and if so, what is it and where does it originate?); significance and value (Are our life projects and pursuits genuinely valuable, and what provides that ultimate value?); suffering (Why are pain and suffering an unavoidable part of the world?); and our destiny or ending (How will it all conclude, and is death the ultimate cessation?).

To bring coherence to these questions, we naturally seek a deep, ultimate narrative context, which Seachris calls an "existentially relevant narrative" (ERN). ERN offers the overarching structure for understanding and evaluating the components of the human condition (ERQ). This narrative framework embodies the meaning of life proper, providing the essential context for interpreting the issues that prompted our inquiry. Ultimately, for a narrative to qualify as "The Meaning of Life" (ThMLN), it must not only comprehensively address the ERQ but also be true. Just as a parent seeking the "meaning" of their children's argument wants the true story of what really happened, the philosophical quest for life's meaning is a search for the true narrative corresponding with reality.

Central to this entire narrative-based understanding of meaning is the idea of "proper fit". For Seachris, something acquires meaning when its parts make sense and fit together smoothly within a larger structure. Conversely, a lack of fit results in meaninglessness. This principle of proper fit applies to

the meaning of life in several ways. First, the answers we formulate to our most profound existential questions (the ERQ) must align in an existentially satisfying way. Second, our profound human longings—for ultimate significance, lasting value, overarching purpose, and true justice—must find a harmonious “fit” within the fundamental ontological and normative framework of reality itself. Lastly, for a life to feel truly intelligible and meaningful, its various aspects—whether relational, vocational, moral, or spiritual—must align, creating a coherent life story. When our lived experience conflicts with the perceived nature of reality, this misalignment can foster a sense of absurdity and hopelessness, as exemplified by figures like Macbeth or Camus.

Notably, Seachris’s philosophical framework of “proper fit” directly addresses a fundamental human need identified by psychologists⁵. The pursuit of a coherent narrative is central to psychological theories of narrative identity, which argue that individuals develop a sense of self by integrating their experiences into a unified life story⁶. A failure of this “proper fit” can be psychologically understood as a form of cognitive dissonance, where a person’s sincerely held experiences (what this paper terms “existentially weighty experiences”) conflict with their professed intellectual worldview, creating psychological tension⁷. Therefore, this paper’s proposition—that personal integrity is the criterion for “fittingness”—is not just a philosophical refinement but also offers a conceptual account of the psychological mechanism by which a narrative becomes a subjective “live option”.

5 Cf. F. Martela, M. Steger, *The three meanings of meaning in life: Distinguishing coherence, purpose, and significance*, “The Journal of Positive Psychology” 11 (2016) issue 5, pp. 531–545.

6 Cf. D.P. McAdams, *The psychology of life stories*, “Review of General Psychology” 5 (2001) no. 2, pp. 100–122.

7 Cf. E. Harmon-Jones, J. Mills, *An introduction to cognitive dissonance theory and an overview of current perspectives on the theory*, in: *Cognitive dissonance: Reexamining a pivotal theory in psychology*, ed. E. Harmon-Jones, 2nd ed., American Psychological Association, Washington (DC) 2019, pp. 3–24.

Identifying the gap

While Seachris's narrative framework seems convincing, it faces an epistemological dilemma. Our inability to verify the objective truth of any single "well-fitted" narrative leaves us with a pluralism of plausible, coherent options. This raises the question: By what criteria do we select a narrative as a viable candidate for MofL before its truth is known?

This pluralism of coherent options is precisely where Seachris's framework requires clarification. While he rightly highlights the importance of an existentially satisfying fit, his theory lacks a detailed criterion for what makes an ERN genuinely persuasive at the level of human experience. Essentially, Seachris's theory lacks a clear connection between a narrative's cognitive coherence and the subjective conviction and experiences required for an individual's wholehearted acceptance. Thus, an additional criterion is necessary.

This idea becomes clearer through an example. Imagine Bob, a researcher comfortable with empirical evidence, who embraces scientific materialism. This perspective asserts that only physical matter and energy are fundamentally real, reducing all phenomena — from consciousness to values — to the interactions of physical particles. Bob is attracted to this view for its intellectual clarity and broad explanatory power; It offers a single, logical approach for solving complex ethical dilemmas, providing strong cognitive coherence. However, this intellectual rigour proves to be existentially problematic. The worldview struggles to account for the phenomenological reality of lived experience, risking the trivialisation of experiences of love, justice, or awe by reducing them to mere biochemical reactions. To stay consistent, Bob is logically forced to accept that free will is an illusion and suffering is just random. The ultimate consequence of this intellectual consistency is a potential sense of meaninglessness, as the narrative fails to align with Bob's most cherished experiences

The above example demonstrates that a narrative's cognitive coherence is insufficient for its existential viability. A worldview fails not when its logic is flawed, but when its logical implications demand an abandonment of an individual's core experiences, thus fracturing their sense of personal

integrity. While Seachris's framework effectively addresses cognitive "fit", the observed discrepancy with existential "fit" suggests the potential benefit of an additional criterion. Such a criterion would evaluate the psychological and lived adequacy of a narrative, determining if it is coherent and a genuine "live option" — a worldview an individual could sincerely and authentically adopt⁸. In other words, a worldview like Bob's is like a perfect architectural blueprint for a house that is structurally sound but entirely unsuitable for human inhabitation — it has no windows or has ceilings only five feet high. This example does not undermine the architect's central idea that a house must be structurally sound. Instead, it shows that the criterion of being "structurally sound" alone is not enough to explain what makes a house good.

This highlights an area where Seachris's framework could be clarified further. Although the theory emphasises an "existentially satisfying" fit, it does not yet thoroughly explain what constitutes this satisfaction beyond cognitive coherence. Without a more detailed explanation of this subjective aspect, the choice between competing narratives (ERNs) risks being perceived as a purely rational decision, potentially neglecting the human experiences that influence which stories we find convincing and how they address the ERQ. To strengthen this foundation, I suggest exploring personal integrity as a valuable criterion for bridging the gap between a narrative that is cognitively coherent and one that can be wholeheartedly embraced.

What is integrity?

While integrity has various interpretations, this paper views it not just as moral rectitude but as a gauge of existential viability — a narrative's capacity for integration with a person's life. As one definition aptly describes it:

8 Cf. W. James, *The will to believe: And other essays in popular philosophy*, Longmans, Green & Co., New York–London 1897, p. 2.

The primary meaning of integrity is wholeness or completeness. A man of integrity is one who is not at war within himself, liberated from his illusions and self-deceptions. The man of integrity lives one life, and not many. He has one self, and not a whole cluster of selves, this for religion, this for business, this for family, that for pleasure, and so on. Furthermore, the man of integrity sees the world and life and all life, whole. His thinking and feeling are not broken up into compartments so that what he affirms in one area, for example, religion, he is compelled to deny in others, for example, in his patriotism, his business practices, or his interest in science⁹.

The philosophical insights of John Cottingham further deepen this focus on internal coherence and a unified self. Critiquing a narrow, ratiocentric approach, Cottingham emphasises the integration of all human experience — including emotional and moral intuitions — within a holistic worldview¹⁰. He specifically warns against “compartmentalised” views of life, where personal projects are separated from moral demands, arguing that

something vital for our integrity and psychic health is lost if our chosen projects involve walling in our rational awareness and emotional sensibility so that we are no longer open and vulnerable to the needs and demands of others¹¹.

Elsewhere, he emphasises that our struggle for integrity is not merely about maintaining internal coherence but is also inescapably guided by our shared human goal of living an objectively good life. He writes that

⁹ H. C. Meserve, *Intellectual integrity*, in: The Pacific Coast Theological Society, *The Christian-theological synthesis of freedom and security*, 1953 November, box 4, folder 14, p. 3, <https://gtu.contentdm.oclc.org/digital/collection/p15837coll12/id/130/rec/1> (05.12.2025).

¹⁰ See J. Cottingham, *What is humane philosophy and why is it at risk?*, in: *Conceptions of philosophy*, ed. A. O’Hear, Cambridge University Press, [Cambridge–New York] 2009, pp. 233–255 (Royal Institute of Philosophy Supplement, 65).

¹¹ J. Cottingham, *On the meaning of life*, Routledge [London] 2003.

integrity has an inescapably moral and (I would myself add) a spiritual dimension, being concerned with wholeness at the level of a person's inner psychological and ethical makeup, and, ultimately, with the perennial struggle of all of us, as conflicted beings, to orient ourselves towards the good. Becoming what I am meant to be can never be a matter of autonomy and authenticity alone, but requires me, whether I like it or not, to bring my life into line with true and enduring objective values that I did not create, and which I cannot alter¹².

Instead of such a “walled-in” approach, Cottingham argues that many of our beliefs must be based on evidence drawn from our inner lives. As he writes, some truths manifest in our consciousness with such authenticity that “...if we are honest we cannot deny their authority over us”¹³. This commitment leads him to argue that even worldviews currently out of fashion must be taken seriously if they can account for these undeniable realities. For instance, he writes:

The theistic picture tends to be discarded or ignored by the majority of contemporary philosophers, but it seems perverse to dismiss it from consideration should it turn out to fit rather well with certain aspects of reality that cannot in integrity be denied¹⁴.

For Cottingham, a truly meaningful understanding of the human condition must be able to be integrated into the rest of our worldview, aligning with both our scientific picture of the world and our personal, lived experience¹⁵. It is precisely this need for a unified, internally consistent, and experientially responsive self that makes personal integrity a necessary

12 J. Cottingham, *Integrity and fragmentation*, „Journal of Applied Philosophy” 27 (2010) no. 1, p. 13.

13 J. Cottingham, *Ethics and normativity*, in: *Biology and subjectivity: Philosophical contributions to non-reductive neuroscience*, eds. J. M. Muñoz, M. García-Valdecasas, N. F. Barrett, Bazylea 2016, pp. 181–191.

14 J. Cottingham, *On the meaning of life*.

15 See J. Cottingham, *In search of the soul: A philosophical essay*, Princeton University Press, Princeton–Oxford 2020, p. 28.

condition and a measure of “fit” for any credible narrative account of the meaning of life.

Integrity as a criterion for the Live option

If, as Cottingham suggests, integrity requires a unified, experientially responsive self and worldview, then personal integrity naturally emerges as an additional criterion that clarifies Seachris’s concept of “proper fit”. Building on this, I argue that “proper fit” can be further developed by incorporating the criterion of personal integrity. This addition is not just essential in specifying how we determine if a narrative is a viable candidate from a lived, subjective perspective.

A person’s personal integrity acts as an initial filter for any narrative about the meaning of life. It tests a worldview’s capacity to maintain an individual’s internal coherence against the full spectrum of lived experience — including suffering, hope, love, loss, justice, and transcendence. Only those narratives that can meaningfully encompass these realities, rather than explain them away, can be regarded as viable candidates for the meaning of life. This criterion expands the idea of “proper fit” by going beyond mere intellectual rigour and incorporating a subjective alignment with a person’s core values, cherished beliefs, and sense of self. Personal integrity thereby connects the objective pursuit of a true narrative with the subjective necessity for a liveable one, explaining why a worldview may seem accurate long before its validity is confirmed.

This “integrity test” can be explored through two fundamental human experiences that any meaningful worldview must embrace. The first is the transformative journey of religious conversion; the second is the normative experience of engaging with another person. Let us examine the process of religious conversion first.

Adopting a new worldview is rarely a detached cognitive assessment but, as Cottingham argues, a dynamic engagement affecting us on a deeper, existential level. Cottingham’s “double helix” model describes adopting a new worldview as a process that simultaneously transforms both perception of

the world and the perceiving self. These processes mutually reinforce each other; as a person's perception changes, their conduct and character evolve, which in turn shifts their intellectual and emotional attitude towards reality. With each step, the old worldview diminishes as the new one becomes more vibrant and compelling¹⁶. Personal integrity acts as the crucial measure of whether this transformation is successful. A genuine change in worldview occurs only when new beliefs are truly integrated into one's life, shaping new ways of perceiving and valuing the world. The new framework must be able to accommodate and explain the significance of "existentially weighty experiences" without dismissing their intuitive meaning. A lack of integrity arises when a worldview is accepted despite contradicting an individual's deepest convictions, leading to a form of self-deception. This creates a painful tension between what we feel is true and the worldview we seek to adopt.

This tension is both intellectual and moral. Intellectual honesty demands considering all relevant data, including the powerful, subjective experience of meaning. An honest worldview cannot simply dismiss core human experiences; instead, it must be able to explain the objective significance of these events. Additionally, moral integrity relates to the idea of "betraying oneself". Here, the self is viewed not just as a static entity but as a dynamic process of becoming—it is not only who we are, but also who we strive to become. A worldview that dismisses the value of experiences essential to this journey of self-realisation is therefore experienced as a form of self-betrayal. These fundamental experiences are non-negotiable realities that any viable worldview must respect.

A powerful illustration of this normative experience is the phenomenological analysis of encountering another person, as developed by Emmanuel Levinas and Józef Tischner. The birth of a child, for instance, prompts a genuine sense of novelty and inherent dignity. A reductive worldview like that of "Bob" might provide a scientific explanation for this experience—framing it as a series of biochemical reactions and evolutionary imperatives—but for many, this explanation would undermine integrity because it fails to account for the reality of the value itself. Instead, it dismisses it. Therefore, the narrative

16 See J. Cottingham, *How to believe*, Bloomsbury Continuum, [London] 2015, p. 62.

fails not because it lacks an answer to the ERQ of value, but because its answer is existentially unsustainable, creating a dissonance between our beliefs and our most fundamental human experiences. The emergence of a new person — with a unique first-person perspective and a future of choices — inspires a sense of awe that a purely physical description cannot fully capture.

This encounter with another person has a distinctly normative character — it concerns not just what is, but what ought to be; it imposes a moral or existential demand on us. We feel an immediate obligation to respect their autonomy and freedom, recognising that they are not a means to an end but a mystery to be honoured. Józef Tischner articulates this through the concept of the “face” — a notion he draws directly from Emmanuel Levinas’s foundational work, where the face of the Other is the very source of ethical responsibility. The face reveals itself by uttering the fundamental word: “Thou shalt not kill”¹⁷. This prohibition is not only literal but also relates to our cognitive attitude. It warns us against the violence of reducing a person to a mere object to be explained, classified, or controlled. For Tischner, the face bears within itself an absolute demand — it disarms our inclination to domination. It opens us to a realm where the other’s dignity cannot be annulled or dismissed. As he states in *Philosophy of drama*: “The face that appears speaks. What does it say? It says, «Thou shalt not kill». In other words: do not do what you can do with every other being — don’t trample, don’t cut, don’t devour, don’t pay back with revenge”¹⁸. The experience of another person is thus rich in dignity, novelty, mystery, and its normative pull on us, which seems to be independent of our own minds and leads us to question their source. A worldview that dismisses these powerful intuitions as illusory creates a stark dissonance between our intellectual beliefs and our most fundamental human experiences. Such disharmony almost inevitably leads to alienation and a loss of personal integrity, leaving one feeling like a dissonant piece in the puzzle of existence.

At first glance, these two facets of integrity — internal authenticity and responsiveness to external normative demands — may seem distinct.

¹⁷ E. Levinas, *Totality and infinity*, Duquesne University Press, Pittsburgh 1961, p. 199.

¹⁸ J. Tischner, *The philosophy of drama*, University of Notre Dame Press, Notre Dame 2024, p. 37.

However, this paper argues that they are deeply interconnected. True psychological wholeness, the kind that allows a narrative to become a “live option”, is unattainable if it requires a “walling in” of our moral sensibilities against the undeniable reality of others. A truly integral self is not a closed system; it is one whose internal coherence is achieved precisely through its openness to objective values encountered in the world, most poignantly in the face of another person.

Thus, personal integrity deepens Seachris’s “proper fit” by closing the gap between a coherent and a suitable worldview. The examples of changes involved in religious conversion and the irreducible phenomenology of encountering another person reveal this important distinction: a viable narrative must incorporate our most significant experiences, not dismiss them. Any worldview that forces a choice between its logic and our lived reality creates dissonance that weakens integrity, thus failing the vital test of what makes a narrative a “live option”. Having established this criterion, let us now consider possible objections to this proposal.

Counterarguments

Specific objections might be raised against personal integrity as a key auxiliary criterion. These include arguments from subjectivism, which claim that the proposal prioritises personal feelings over objective truth; arguments from imprecision, asserting that personal integrity is too vague to serve as a rigorous philosophical standard; and arguments from redundancy, suggesting that the criterion adds unnecessary complexity to existing frameworks.

The integrity criterion results in subjectivism

One significant concern is that incorporating personal integrity might direct the understanding of the meaning of life towards subjective preference and feeling, ultimately undermining the pursuit of objective truth. If any

narrative that offers a sense of integrity qualifies as a candidate for meaning, the search for truth risks collapsing into a relativist quest for a psychologically comforting story. This objection suggests that prioritising subjective “fit” via integrity filters for psychologically comfortable narratives, while potentially dismissing an objectively true but existentially challenging one.

This objection, while validly concerned with objectivity, misinterprets personal integrity’s proposed role. Personal integrity does not override the truth condition of the True Meaning of Life Narrative; instead, it functions as a prior and complementary criterion. It acts as a filter for a narrative’s viability or potential, not its ultimate truth. Its purpose is to identify world-views that humans can genuinely consider as candidates for life’s meaning. A psychologically damaging life vision, even if it is theoretically sound, becomes practically useless in guiding human existence, inevitably causing dissonance and the sense of disconnection that Seachris describes as meaninglessness. Therefore, meeting the integrity criterion is a prerequisite for a narrative to undergo thorough testing for its alignment with reality. Indeed, it would be illogical to suggest that truth itself is not one of the “existentially weighty” elements that a narrative must include.

The objection from imprecision

A second counterargument is that personal integrity is too imprecise and unworkable as a rigorous philosophical standard. Unlike cognitive coherence, which can be assessed with logical tools, integrity might be seen as a “black box” of subjective feeling, hard to define or measure. The critique asks: How exactly is it to be measured? Whose definition of psychological “wholeness” or existential “fit” should be used? By introducing such a vague, immeasurable, and deeply personal standard, the theory risks sacrificing philosophical rigour for the hazy realm of psychology, or even wishful thinking, making consistent application impossible and hindering judgment between individuals whose integrity might point in opposite directions.

The argument from imprecision is quite persuasive, and it is fair to admit that the proposed indicators for personal integrity do not offer the same level

of clarity as formal logic. While concepts such as “internal consistency” and “experiential integration” are indeed complex and not easily measurable, this lack of precision seems to be inherent to the nature of the judgment itself. Deciding if a worldview is a “live option” — a process where integrity is crucial — does not lend itself to simple, objective metrics. Nonetheless, this does not mean the concept is unworkable (or un-analysable). Integrity can be assessed through a set of clear indicators, such as the internal consistency among a person’s core beliefs; the extent of experiential integration, which pertains to a worldview’s ability to incorporate experiences like love and grief rather than dismissing them as illusions; and behavioural consistency between an individual’s stated narrative and their actual actions.

Although these indicators may be somewhat imprecise, they provide at least some basis for theorising about this subject. The alternative — to discard such criteria because of their complexity — is to remain completely in the dark regarding the subjective dimension of meaning. Therefore, these indicators should not be seen as perfect measurement tools but rather as essential heuristics for exploring one of the most significant areas of human experience.

The “dark integrity” objection

A third objection might claim that the criterion of integrity is morally neutral and could legitimise even deeply exclusionary or dehumanising worldviews. For example, could an individual committed to a totalitarian ideology not possess a form of integrity, where his beliefs and experiences are perfectly aligned within his abhorrent narrative? If so, integrity would fail as a criterion for a “live option” narrative. This criterion, it seems, would permit any worldview in which one can be fully engaged.

This objection is answered by returning to the dual nature of integrity developed in this paper. If integrity were merely internal psychological consistency, the objection would hold. However, as argued through the work of Cottingham, Levinas and Tischner, a narrative that requires denying the fundamental, objective value and dignity of other persons — an “existentially weighty experience” accessible to all — forces a profound fragmentation of

the self. It demands a “walling in” of one’s moral and emotional sensibilities. Such a worldview, while perhaps logically coherent, fails the integrity test because it is built on a foundational act of self-deception and a denial of reality. True integrity, therefore, is not just about being true to oneself, but about being true to a self that is properly oriented towards the good and the real.

The objection from redundancy

A final objection is that this proposal adds unnecessary complexity to Seachris’s otherwise elegant theory. The current criteria of proper fit (a narrative must make sense) and truth (it must correspond with reality) are argued to be all that is fundamentally necessary for a solid theory of life’s meaning. The idea of „existential satisfaction”, frequently referenced by Seachris, is seen as a likely result of finding a true and coherent narrative, rather than an omitted component requiring a separate criterion. Therefore, including personal integrity as a distinct, initial test is considered to inflate the theory and introduce unrelated psychological mechanisms for a problem that does not inherently exist.

This counterargument correctly identifies that the proposed criterion is not entirely novel. However, this proposal does not add unnecessary complication to Seachris’s framework but rather clarifies a dimension implicit in his „proper fit” concept. While „proper fit” functions on multiple levels, including cognitive coherence and objective truth, personal integrity can be viewed as a mechanism for evaluating this fit at the subjective, experiential level — the very level Seachris himself alludes to with terms like “existential satisfaction” and “deep human longings”. This objection, therefore, correctly identifies that personal integrity is an addition to Seachris’s explicit framework. However, it is a necessary one. Without it, Seachris’s theory remains unable to explain the mechanism by which individuals choose between multiple, equally coherent narratives, a gap this paper aims to fill. By establishing this test, the aim is to shed light on an overlooked aspect of “proper fit”, thereby illustrating the full depth of Seachris’s original framework.

Conclusions

Joshua Seachris's narrative theory provides a solid foundation for understanding the human pursuit of meaning. However, as this paper has argued, his core concept of "proper fit" requires further elaboration to balance intellectual validity and existential resonance. To address this, I have proposed that personal integrity functions as a crucial supplementary criterion within Seachris's "proper fit" — or that it be made explicit if already implicit.

Defined as a narrative's ability to maintain an individual's existential coherence amid life's complex realities, personal integrity acts as a vital filter. As the transformative process of religious conversion and the normative interaction with another person show, a worldview only becomes a "live option" when it can incorporate our most existentially significant experiences without dismissing their intuitive meaning. This criterion enhances Seachris's framework by extending "proper fit" beyond logical consistency to include the subjective alignment necessary for „existential satisfaction”, thereby clarifying why some narratives feel so compelling while others do not.

By incorporating personal integrity, Seachris's theory becomes more comprehensive and better aligns with the intuitions guiding the search for meaning. This unified perspective not only enhances the philosophical discussion but also paves the way for promising interdisciplinary research. Future studies could explore the relationship between narrative coherence and personal integrity, connecting philosophy with insights from psychology and the humanities. Such work would be especially valuable in examining the link between the universal quest for life's meaning and the personal challenge of finding or creating meaning in life.

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