

What is the Meaning of God's Existence?

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SECTION I: INTRODUCTION

Virtually all discussion of the meaning of life focuses on human life. Occasionally consideration is given to the meaning of nonhuman life or angelic beings; but rare is the thinker who speaks explicitly of the meaning of God's existence. Robert Nozick is such a thinker, and my paper is inspired by him to some extent. I would like to explore this neglected question, concentrating on the personal, perfect God worshipped in traditional monotheism.

I am not myself a theist of any kind, but I find the question of the meaning of God's existence to be not only intrinsically interesting but also a useful way to reach a better understanding of the meaning of human life in a godless universe. I propose to adopt the following approach. First, we need to consider four ways of understanding the question of the meaning of an individual human life: (a) What, if anything, is the higher purpose of my life? (b) What, if anything, is the higher importance, of my life? (c) What, if any- thing, makes my life worth living? (d) What, if anything, gives my life a unifying direction? Second, once we are sufficiently clear on the meaning of these questions, we can examine the corresponding questions about God's existence. I will argue that if there is a God then God's existence is meaningful in at least two of these four ways, and that the same is true of most human lives—albeit to a lesser degree—even if God does not exist and human beings do not survive death.

SECTION II: THE QUESTIONS OF THE MEANING OF HUMAN LIFE

An examination of the literature on the meaning of human life suggests that there are at least four distinct though related meanings or versions of the question 'What, if any- thing, is the meaning of my life?' (For a different conceptual mapping and helpful, relevant discussion, see Metz 2007.)

The first version might be expressed—admittedly quite vaguely—as follows: 'What, if anything, is the *higher (superhuman/transcendent/cosmic) purpose* of my life?' Both theists and nontheists tend to understand the relevant purpose as divine—specifically, as part of the cosmic plan of a Supreme Being or other deity. But a nontheistic Buddhist might speak of the higher purpose of human lives as the achievement of nirvana (Gyatso 2000). And even a naturalistic nontheist who regards Buddhism as objectionably super- naturalist might be attracted to the view that human lives have a higher but still natural purpose involving the survival of the human species, the promotion of biological com- plexity, or some other natural goal. (See Wright 2000 for one such view.) Given this plethora of possibilities, the vagueness of 'higher purpose' may be tolerable.

The second version asks, with at least equal vagueness, 'What, if anything, is the *higher importance* of my life?' Again, 'higher' can be understand in many different ways; but in this case none of them need be superhuman, transcendent, cosmic, or in any way supernatural. Many people long for their lives to "make a difference" in the world, and the difference need not be one that transcends global human well-being or human history. (Abraham Lincoln was apparently such a person: see Shenk 2005.)

The third version may well be the most personal and basic: 'What, if anything, makes my life *worth living*?' Albert Camus gives perhaps the classic expression of this question:

There is but one truly serious philosophical problem, and that is suicide. Judging whether life is or is not worth living amounts to answering the fundamental question of philosophy. All the rest—whether or not the world has three dimensions, whether the mind has nine or twelve categories—comes afterward. These are games; one must first answer. (Camus 1955, p. 194)

This worthwhileness question relates to the broader value question of what matters for its own sake, something brought out in Nozick's classic thought-experiment about whether or not to choose to hook up for life to an "experience machine" (Nozick 1990, pp. 104ff.).

Some theists hold that human lives are not worth living if they do not serve some higher, indeed divine, purpose; I call this claim 'Tolstoyan theism'. (See Tolstoy 1905 and Craig 1994 for endorsements of this view.) But of course nontheists, such as Camus, and even some theists believe human beings can and generally do have worthwhile lives even if there is no god or immortality.*

The final version of the question of the meaning of human life that I want to distinguish is this: 'What, if anything, gives my life a *unifying direction*?' The idea here is that a meaningful life is one in which the individual has and pursues some plan of life that she has chosen or accepted and that includes (if Owen Flanagan is right: Flanagan 1996, p. 205) some long-term projects. The contrast is with drifting through life with aimlessness or anomie, epitomized by the protagonist of Camus' *The Stranger* (Camus 1954). Also relevant is Tolstoy's "arrest of life" after he achieved fame and fortune and before he regained his Christian faith (Tolstoy 1905, quote at p. 11).

SECTION III: THE CORRESPONDING QUESTIONS ABOUT GOD'S EXISTENCE

Let's begin with a reminder that the god under consideration in this paper is the personal, perfect Creator worshipped in traditional monotheism.

The first question about the meaning of God's existence is this: 'What, if anything, is the higher (superhuman/transcendent/cosmic) purpose of God's existence?' And the answer seems evident: nothing, for surely the existence of a Supreme Being could not have a *higher* purpose. Indeed God's own purposes are already superhuman, transcendent, and cosmic in virtue of her status as Supreme Being, so no purposes could be higher.

It might be replied that we can interpret the question as asking whether God, the higher power par excellence, intends or "purposes" her own continued existence. But even if—what is doubtful—this interpretation is true to the original question, such an intention in God is not easy to grasp. On the one hand, if God is a necessary being then she cannot fail to exist and (*qua* omniscient) knows this is so, and it makes no sense for her to intend to go on existing. On the other hand, even if God exists only contingently and could go out of existence, there is nothing else that could annihilate the Supreme Being. Could she destroy herself? Here we encounter an unusual version of the paradox of omnipotence—or at any rate of an omnipotence-related paradox about the nature of God—that I will not try to resolve. I will just note that it is unclear whether it is logically possible for a contingent, perfect being to commit suicide. (Nozick 1981, p. 228 considers the possibility of divine suicide, although apparently tongue in cheek. I put aside the question whether divine incarnation in human form followed by willful bodily self-destruction counts as divine suicide, and all the more whether the life and death of the New Testament Jesus fits this description.)

*I believe that some human lives are not worth living; but this is not the place to discuss euthanasia and assisted suicide.

Here is the second question about the meaning of God's existence: 'What, if any- thing, is the higher importance of God's existence?' Once again the answer seems evi- dent: surely God could not have a higher importance than she already does given her status as Supreme Being, the perfect Creator and Ruler of the cosmos.* It might be replied that God would have a higher importance if more human beings believed in and worshipped her. But if importance is a matter of making a difference in the world and God (*qua* omnipotent) can do that whether or not people believe in her, the subjective or perceived importance mentioned in the reply seems irrelevant.

The third question about the meaning of God's existence asks what, if anything, makes God's existence worthwhile. It is conceivable that even a necessary being or a contingently indestructible one could find its existence not worthwhile; this would be the ultimate case of Sartrean "no exit" (Sartre 1989)! Perhaps God's perfection entails in one way or another the worthwhileness of her existence, especially if she is impassible and so incapable of suffering, frustration, etc. But then there must be something that *makes* her existence worthwhile. What might that be?

Three obvious answers are the main perfections traditionally ascribed to God: infinite power, knowledge, and (perhaps especially) moral goodness. Note that infinite power is the basis for God's supreme ability to make a difference in the world, and so connects the worthwhileness question to the higher-importance question about the meaning of God's existence. A fourth answer with traditional roots appeals to God's relationships with her creatures, especially human beings (see Nozick 1981, p. 589 and Flanagan 1996, p. 204); Judeo-Christian scripture can arguably be seen as an account of the joys and sorrows of these relationships for God as well as humans . A fifth answer is the creative self-expression manifested in God's activity as Creator (Nozick 1981, pp. 588- 589). A sixth and related answer is appreciation of the beauty and wonder of creation; Genesis 1: 31 maybe relevant here: "God saw everything that he had made, and indeed, it was very good." Finally, a seventh answer appeals to God's possession and execution of a plan of existence, a coherent set of purposes (as suggested, perhaps, in Nozick 1981, pp. 588-589). This answer brings us indeed to the last of the four questions about the meaning of God's existence.

The fourth question is this: 'What, if anything, gives unifying direction to God's existence?' And since a perfect being will presumably not suffer from aimlessness or anomie, the answer is the same one given three sentences ago concerning God's plan. The plan need not rule out all playfulness on God's part; and if Moritz Schlick is correct about the crucial importance of play to the meaningfulness of human life (Schlick 1979), this may be relevant to what makes God's existence worthwhile.

The upshot of this section is that in at least two of the ways that we speak of the meaning of human life, we can speak reasonably of the meaning of God's existence. Given standard assumptions about the nature of God, her existence is worthwhile and has a unifying direction. It is much less clear that God's existence has a higher purpose or importance, but this is no surprise given her status as Supreme Being.

SECTION IV: THE MEANING OF HUMAN LIFE IN A GODLESS UNIVERSE

I want to return now to the four questions of the meaning of human life that I dis- tinguished in Section I, and indeed to the questions of the meaning of human life in a godless universe in which death is final.

The first question is the higher-purpose question. Note that although God—if she exists—lacks or does not clearly possess a higher purpose, it is possible to hold that in a godless universe of permanent death, human beings do still possess one (as explained on page 2). For those of us who do not find this view especially plausible, humans in such a universe would at any rate resemble God in lacking a higher purpose.

 *Nozick 1981 suggests that limitation is what jeopardizes meaningfulness, and that the existence of an absolutely unlimited being would be intrinsically meaningful (pp. 593-594, 599-609). But he neglects the ambiguity of 'meaning(ful)' that I have been taking for granted in this paper. Moreover, isn't God limited by anything non-identical to her, and even by her constituent features? Finally, as Nozick himself suggests, perhaps God needs the humans with whom she stands in personal relationships in order to fulfil her goals (Nozick 1981, p. 589; see also Flanagan 1996, p. 204).

A related point can be made in connection with the higher-importance question. If God exists, she lacks a higher importance. In a godless universe of permanent death, human lives may still possess such an importance, even if it is not superhuman, tran- scendent, or cosmic: they may make a difference in the world, a positive one that endures beyond their death. To be sure, if God exists she makes a greater difference than anyone else, one that is superhuman, transcendent, and cosmic. We humans may or may not be troubled by the cosmic unimportance of the difference we make; but following the example of Thomas Nagel, we can remind ourselves that our cosmic unimportance is itself cosmically unimportant (Nagel 1971, p. 185)!

In Section III I listed seven possible answers to the worthwhileness question concerning God's existence: omnipotence, ominiscience, moral perfection, relationships, creative self-expression, appreciation of creation, and a plan of existence. All of these answers carry over—at least to some extent—to the question of what makes human life worthwhile in a godless universe in which death is final. The last answer deserves separate treatment in connection with the unifying-direction question.

As before, let's take the first three answers together. Of course, human beings are limited in power, knowledge, and moral goodness. But to suppose that our power, know- ledge, and goodness fail to contribute at all to the worthwhileness of our lives because we possess them only imperfectly is surely to commit something like the perfectionist fallacy beloved of informal-logic texts (Moore and Parker 2012, p. 221). At most what the finiteness of these human traits shows is that they contribute less to the worthwhileness of our lives than their infinite counterparts would to the worthwhileness of God's existence.*

If my students are at all representative of humankind, the most common answer to the question of what makes human lives worth living is personal relationships with other human beings (especially family and good friends). Even students who believe in God tend to hold that relationships would help make their lives worthwhile even if there were no God or afterlife (though some add that it would less worthwhile). The force of this answer is even stronger once we acknowledge that relationships contribute to the worthwhileness of God's existence should God exist.

Creative self-expression is of course often mentioned in response to the question of what makes my worth living (Flanagan 1996, pp. 199-200, 205, which also stresses its relevance to the higher-importance question). This creativity has been developed in connection with the worthwhileness of God's existence by treating God as a cosmic artist or craftmaker, on the model of human artists and craftmakers. Of course, creative self- expression should be understood more broadly than creative work involving arts and crafts—perhaps so broadly that it covers expression of one's identity (Flanagan 1996).

Appreciation of the beauty and wonder of and in the world is another common answer to the question of what makes my life worth living (see, e.g., Klemke in 2000, pp. 195- 196). God as Divine Artist can appreciate the value of human artwork as well as that of her own natural creations; indeed religious thinkers have suggested that human artistic creativity is a reflection of divine creativity Even in a godless universe without anafterlife, many of us possess much the same appreciation of aesthetic value in art and nature.

The last of the four questions about the meaning of human life is the unifying-direction question. As noted earlier, God is traditionally conceived as having a plan of existence that provides a higher purpose for human lives and other aspects of her creation, and that gives a unifying direction to God's existence. No doubt human life plans are much less elaborate and coherent, but most people—at least those who have escaped chronic deprivation—do have unifying goals and plans (and perhaps some long-term projects) beyond meeting basic physical needs. This is so even in a godless universe of permanent death.

*For a related point about the contrast between earthly happiness and eternal bliss in connection with the worthwhileness question, see Baier (2000), pp. 125-128 and Edwards (2000), pp. 140-141, 147.

The following conclusions appear to be in order:

- (a) Although God's existence seems to lack a higher purpose and importance if God exists, human lives may possess a higher (though not cosmic) purpose and importance even in a universe devoid of God and an afterlife.
- (b) What makes God's existence worthwhile if God exists is roughly what would make human lives worthwhile even in a universe devoid of God and an afterlife.
- (c) What gives God's existence a unifying direction if God exists is roughly what would give human lives a unifying direction even in a universe devoid of God and an afterlife.

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