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## **GOD'S ROLE IN A MEANINGFUL LIFE. NEW REFLECTIONS FROM TIM MAWSON**

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### **I. INTRODUCING MAWSON'S DOUBTS ABOUT MONISM AND NATURALISM**

Over the past 30 years or so, English-speaking philosophical debates about what, if anything, would make a life meaningful have crystallized into a field, one that is distinct from enquiries into other values such as well-being, virtue and justice. It is now common to have entries on meaningfulness in philosophical encyclopaedias, handbooks and related collections, where there were none in the 20<sup>th</sup> century. Characteristic of this field has been the combination of monism in method and naturalism in substance. That is, much of the field has sought to reduce enquiry into life's meaning to one question and to offer a single principle as an answer to it, with this principle typically focusing on ways of living in the physical world as best known by the scientific method.

T. J. Mawson's new book, *God and the Meanings of Life*, provides fresh reason to doubt both this form and this content and also develops positive alternatives to them. One readily sees that the title expresses both angles: the reference to God indicates a commitment to a kind of supernaturalism as central to what constitutes (a certain type of) life's meaning, while talk of 'meanings' signifies a pluralism about the answers to a given way to understand the question of what makes life meaningful.

In this critical notice of Mawson's book, I consider several of the central arguments that he gives for a pluralist supernaturalism, explaining why I remain unconvinced. To do so, I often draw on positions I have advanced in my own book on life's meaning (Metz 2013a), which, as the perceived quintessence of a monist naturalism, Mawson routinely uses as a foil to advance his views.

Although I am not yet convinced, I must report that Mawson's book has given me serious pause. It is the most erudite and intricate book on life's meaning that I have ever read in the Anglo-American tradition of philosophy, and its appearance is a testament to the richness of the field of analytic existentialism. Mawson has advanced reflection on the question of what, if anything, would make life meaningful, requiring those in the field to engage with his original and powerfully defended positions. The book has truly broadened my thought, and I recommend it most strongly.

In the following, I begin by addressing Mawson's rejection of monism and his specific alternative to it, so far as the questions that pertain to meaning are concerned (section II). After discussing his meta-ethical point, that asking about 'life's meaning' can involve posing a wide array of questions, I address more normative issues. Specifically, I consider Mawson's view that, for a given one of these questions about life's meaning, there is also a plurality of legitimate answers to it (section III), and then also his rationales for thinking that God is necessary for a deep kind of meaning in our lives (section IV). I conclude by indicating some of the issues that the field needs to address next, when it comes to God's role in a meaningful life (section V).

## II. ONE OR MANY WHEN IT COMES TO 'LIFE'S MEANING'?

Mawson is correct that the dominant approach to analyzing the concept of life's meaning, or defining the terms 'life's meaning', has been the monist one of seeking a single statement. Some have been simple, while others complex (on which see Metz 2015b). One simple statement, from R. W. Hepburn (1966), is that asking whether life is meaningful is just a matter of asking whether a person has achieved worthwhile goals in a way that is satisfying to her. A more complex answer, from the likes of Arjan Markus (2003), is that it amounts to enquiring into the extent to which a person's life is purposive, is worth living and has parts that cohere in some way. Although Hepburn and Markus appeal to a varying number of properties, they each proffer a single analysis, one that is meant to capture an essence to the concept of life's meaning, or a clear and distinct definition of the terms.

In my book (2013a: 17–35), I had contended that talk of 'life's meaning' probably does not admit of an essence, and instead is united by virtue of overlapping but non-equivalent ideas such as: achieving purposes that are particularly worth striving for, connecting with goods beyond one's animal self, making a positive difference to the world, doing what merits great esteem or admiration, or, I would now add (taking especially Wong 2008 on board here), living in a way that would make for an interesting or uplifting narrative. My idea was that enquiry into life's meaning is to address at least one of these issues, which share family resemblances but are not identical.

While I had labelled my approach a 'pluralist' one in the book, Mawson believes that it is not pluralist enough, and it does appear monist when juxtaposed with his view. My family resemblance approach still supposes, at bottom, that meaning is a property that a human person's life can exhibit to varying degrees and that is good for its own sake. I, and I submit most other analytic philosophers addressing meaning, take that much to be true of meaning-talk by definition (though that is not enough to demarcate meaning-talk from, say, happiness-talk).

Mawson disagrees. According to him, when asking about life's meaning, we could be enquiring into that issue, but quite a number of others as well. '(T)he question of the meaning of life is best approached first and foremost by recognizing that it is several questions' (Mawson 2016: 42; see also 75, 85, 172). There are many, and not just one.

Why believe that? Mawson maintains that, on the one hand, by 'life' we might mean not merely a human person's life, but also either something broader, as in all biological life, the human race as a whole or even the universe, or something narrower, as in periods of a human person's life or a particular action in it (2016: 51–61). And Mawson notes that, on the other hand, focusing for now of a human person's life, by 'meaning' we might have in mind a variety of issues. For five examples from him, we could be asking about what one of our lives has caused, e.g., the spatio-temporal impact it has made or its desirable influences on other people, or what has caused it, e.g., whether a person is alive purely by accident or instead by design in some way, or whether it has a certain value, such as being worth living, or whether it has a symbolic dimension, perhaps of 'standing for' something, or whether it has a certain kind of narrative structure to it (2016: 61–68).

Given that one could take just about any of the senses of 'life' and pair it up with just about any of the senses of 'meaning', it appears that there is an incredible variety of questions about life's meaning. This is Mawson's most prominent and also strongest argument for an extreme form of pluralism when it comes to understanding what we are asking when enquiring into life's meaning.

Mawson recognizes that not just any combination of a sense of 'life' and a sense of 'meaning' would be useful to the field; he knows he has to account for something about the extent to which there has been unity in people's, or at least contemporary English-speaking philosophers', thought about life's meaning. So, after having multiplied the number of senses of 'life's meaning', Mawson then, while not subtracting from them, does order them. He wants to retain all the various senses of 'life's meaning', but to contend that some are more pertinent than others.

More specifically, Mawson proposes what he calls a thesis of 'amalgam polyvalence', which involves two major ideas. He believes, first, that some questions about life's meaning form clusters, such that

answering one logically or metaphysically entails something about some others, and, second, that some clusters of senses of ‘life’s meaning’ are ‘deeper’ than others (Mawson 2016: 85-109). ‘Deeper’, here, means senses of ‘life’s meaning’ that are about something more desirable, i.e., that should be desired even if they are not, and that merit being desired not just instrumentally, but in themselves or for their own sake (2016: 16, 17, 93, 99, 161, 173). Mawson imagines constructing a list with all the clusters of senses of ‘life’s meaning’ ordered, from most deep at the top to not at all deep at the bottom. That, he contends, would best represent what we have in mind when enquiring into life’s meaning.

I believe that there is a kernel of truth in this image. It probably best captures what ‘we’ mean by ‘life’s meaning’, where ‘we’ includes just about anyone who has used the words ‘life’s meaning’. My beef with the proposal is that I doubt that it would best serve the function of facilitating philosophical debate, which I presume a philosophical audience would find of most interest. To make this point, consider what probably goes where on Mawson’s list.

At the top of the list, for Mawson, is enquiry that is familiar: it is about kinds of intrinsic value, or conditions that otherwise merit being desired for their own sake, that can be exhibited in the lives of individual human beings to varying degrees (Mawson 2016: 56, 58-59, 87, 137, 159, 162). Mawson routinely points out that what I specified above as the essence of ‘life’s meaning’, and what many now call ‘meaning in life’, is the deepest sort and so belongs at the top of the list.

Mawson denies, however, that it is the only sort. While finally valuable properties that a human person’s life can exhibit to varying degrees get 100, and more generally are in the 90s and upper 80s, on a (roughly) cardinal ranked list of 0 to 100, perhaps in the 40s and 50s are cosmic questions, such as whether the human race arose by accident or whether there is a point to biological life as such (Mawson 2016: 56, 64-65, 159). It seems that further down, in the 20s and 30s range perhaps, are forms of meaning that lack final value, e.g., one’s life so purely embodying a single value as to stand for it (Mawson 2016: 91), or one’s life making a large difference to the world, albeit negatively à la Hitler (Mawson 2016: 61-64, 90).

At the very bottom, in the 10s, would be questions that idiosyncratically combine senses of ‘life’ and of ‘meaning’, e.g., one might ask whether the life of a bacterium symbolically represents something. Mawson would likely say that this is a genuine question about life’s meaning, but is not one that we do or should care about much, if at all.

Mawson does not specify rankings determinately in the way I have suggested on his behalf here, but I find it useful to fill out the list a bit with some sense of relative prioritization. The natural query about this specification of the list is why one should not simply take the deepest issues concerning life’s meaning, those at the top, to comprise the only question about it. If the top-ranked senses of ‘life’s meaning’ are about the most desirable sorts, and thereby the ones we have most reason to care about (at least in terms of pair-wise comparison), then why not pin meaning-talk to that cluster alone?

A relatively weak answer to this question from Mawson is that sometimes in order to make headway on enquiry into the deepest senses of ‘life’s meaning’, one has to invoke considerations about less deep sorts. Mawson remarks,

It might be suggested that nobody, when asking ‘What is the meaning of life?’, has in mind the lives of bacteria or insects. However, such an appearance would be deceptive, if only because sometimes the apparent meaninglessness (or meaningfulness) of a life (that is counted as such only due to ‘life’ functioning in this broad biological sense) is taken to have implications for the meaninglessness (or meaningfulness) of individual lives such as our own.<sup>1</sup>

However, I submit that the fact that a consideration is relevant to establishing a conclusion about meaning in life does not imply that that it is itself about life’s meaning in any sense. A premise being useful for drawing a conclusion about the deepest sort of meaning does necessarily mean that it is about any sort of life’s meaning.

<sup>1</sup> T. J. Mawson, *God and the Meanings of Life: What God Could and Couldn’t Do to Make our Lives More Meaningful* (Bloomsbury Publishing, 2016), 53; see also 54-55.

To see the point, imagine a disjunctive syllogism with three prongs, where we are trying to figure out the nature of the value of intellectual enquiry in a particular person's life. One possibility is that the scholarship made her happy, but we have evidence that it did not — it weighed heavily and she didn't take much pleasure in her work. Another possibility is that she was fulfilling her moral duty, but, upon reflection, we judge that she would not have been violating an obligation had she elected not to study how fish evolved into land-based creatures. Ruling out those two possibilities, we conclude in favour of the third option, that the enquiry made her life more meaningful. Reflecting on happiness and morality enabled us to draw — soundly, let us suppose — a conclusion about meaning in life, but that fact does not, in this case, make such reflection about life's meaning in any way. Similar remarks apply to facts about bacteria; it is not enough that they could entail something about meaning in life to put them on the list of things with the heading 'life's meaning'.

A second, and to my mind *prima facie* stronger, argument from Mawson for employing a broad sense of 'life's meaning' is that when deciding how to live it might be rational not to seek out the deepest kinds of meaning. Basically, the expected value of pursuing meanings in the 60 range of the list could be greater than that of pursuing meanings in the 90 range, if the former were much easier to obtain (say, 70% likely) than the latter (at 30% likely). In Mawson's terms, insofar as we are concerned to realize meanings, we rationally seek out the most meanings 'overall', not necessarily the deepest sort (2016: 164).

This point is strong, but not obviously decisive. Key issues are whether the shallower sorts of meaning are within our power to obtain and how much shallower they are than the deepest sorts. At some points, Mawson himself suggests that certain types of meaning are not valuable or desirable at all. Of the fact that Hitler's life stood for something, Mawson says it was meaningful but 'undesirable' (2016: 90), and he more generally says of a life's standing for an idea that it is one of certain kinds of meaning that 'are not valuable in themselves' (2016: 193). These sorts of meaning, then, will be extremely low on the list, which is ranked by depth, i.e., intrinsic desirability. And then when it comes to cosmic sorts of meaning, they are invariably ones over which we have no control whatsoever. We cannot determine what caused the human race to emerge or whether God is in charge of the universe.<sup>2</sup>

Although I have not executed the strategy in full, one line of argument that is apparently promising is that philosophers should not concern ourselves with what Mawson calls 'shallower sorts of meaning', since these other putative sorts of meaning are either lacking in value or beyond our power to affect. Since they are practically unimportant, they should not be honoured theoretically with the dignity of the title of being about 'life's meaning'.

A second reason to restrict 'life's meaning' to considerations of meaning in life is that the latter have in fact been the focus of the field for the past 100 or so years. Most of the philosophical work attempting to analyze the content of the concept of life's meaning (or define the phrase) has sought to make sense of what philosophers have been debating, i.e., to figure out which subject matter is the uncontested, common ground amongst those with contested, rival theories (see, e.g., Metz 2001, where this strategy is explicit). Insofar as one point of specifying the content of a concept (or the definition of a phrase) is to understand philosophical debate, that is reason to restrict the concept to meaning in life, supposing that it has been the overwhelming focus of philosophical attention.

And indeed it has been. Although the phrase 'life's meaning' has sometimes been used to characterize cosmic enquiries into whether the human race was created for a purpose or why there is something rather than nothing (e.g., Tartaglia 2015), as well as enquiries into evaluatively neutral, biological matters (e.g., Barlow 1994), a very large majority of what analytic philosophers have referred to with talk of 'life's meaning' for the past four or five generations has been a variable, individualist, final value. Or so my surveys of the field suggest (Metz 2013a, 2013b), as does a survey by Joshua Seachris (n.d.), who is well known for himself being interested in the cosmic questions (e.g., 2009). Hence, including a question such

<sup>2</sup> Of course, a person could decide whether to help God fulfil His plan, but that is not a cosmic matter, and is instead an individualist, and deep, one.



as whether a bacteria's life stands for something under the heading of 'life's meaning' would not be helpful insofar as the aim is to clarify a major philosophical debate that has been taking place.

A third reason to construe talk of 'life's meaning' narrowly is to help avoid people speaking past one another. If this heading were taken to include the enormous array of issues that Mawson discusses, then it would be difficult for people to hone in on a common subject matter (cf. Mawson 2016: 114, where he seems to recognize the problem). The dialectical waters would be muddy; the question of life's meaning would be radically ambiguous (cf. Mawson 2016: 49).

Better, therefore, to restrict meaning-talk to meaning in life, and use other terms for distinct enquiries, one with bearers that are quite different from human lives and with properties that are not even good for their own sake. At the very least, one should separate the enquiries, as much of the field in fact does now with talk of meaning 'in' life and the meaning 'of' life (cf. Mawson 2016: 43), rather than just place both under the same, latter heading, as Mawson proposes.

A fourth reason to narrow the scope of what 'life's meaning' includes is to help advance philosophical enquiry, beyond merely enabling people to speak about a common subject matter when they are debating. Much progress in a field consists of increasing specialization, i.e., drawing distinctions and pursuing increasingly focused matters. That is more likely to come from calling one thing about 'life's meaning' and naming other, related matters with different terms.

For example, *contra* Mawson, who considers the property of having an identifiable effect on large regions of space-time, whether negative or positive, to be a kind of meaning, Robert Nozick (1989: 162-180) labels it 'impact' as something distinct from what he calls 'meaning'. Calling it 'impact' better facilitates enquiry into it as a distinct kind of thing, one that has its own logic that can compete with other considerations and admits of further distinctions. Devising and letting loose a new computer virus for fun would make a large impact, but would, in respect of meaning, most plausibly reduce it, or at least not add to it in any respect; that is one straightforward way to demarcate ideas. In addition, identifying impact as a distinct property invites one to pose further questions about types of it. Preferable to have a large impact of some number  $N$  on one's contemporaries or to have  $N \div 2$  impact on one's contemporaries plus  $N \div 2$  on future generations?

For another example, Mawson sometimes identifies a sense of 'life's meaning' as one that makes life worth living (2016: 67, 99), but it appears to me and some others (Baier 1997: 67-70; Trisel 2007; Metz 2012b) that these values are usefully distinguished. Sometimes the two categories intuitively clash, e.g., when considerations of meaning provide a reason to kill oneself or to let oneself die, and, then, a focus on something called 'the worthwhile' encourages a more fine-grained analysis, e.g., between a life worth starting and one worth continuing.

Insofar as one point of conceptual analysis is to move debates forward, that is some reason to use different labels for properties that have independent structures and are such that we often have to make trade-offs between them. Calling them all facets of 'life's meaning' would retard specialization, by comparison.

To bring the discussion in this section together, I have critically explored Mawson's claim of amalgam polyvalence, the meta-ethical thesis that talk of 'life's meaning' includes a wide array of senses that form logical and metaphysical clusters, some of which are deeper than others. Although I accept that 'life's meaning' has on occasion been used by academics and laypeople to address the large variety of matters Mawson raises, I have argued that insofar as philosophers want a definition that will be particularly useful to them, they should abjure such an inclusive construal of it. Specifically, they should want talk of 'life's meaning' restricted to considerations that are of real practical importance, that have been the main focus of discussion amongst philosophers (at least in a particular tradition) for a long span of time, that would do a good job of helping people avoid speaking past one another, and that would truly prompt increasingly specialized enquiries. Restricting 'life's meaning' to meaning in life satisfies all four of these desiderata, whereas being so inclusive as to apply this heading to the potentially symbolic standing of bacteria would not.

As a final rejoinder, I must consider Mawson's intriguing and powerful suggestion that it is best to take the question of life's meaning to be broad, since, for any particular, narrow answer to it, one will be inclined to think, 'That can't be all that there is to be said about it' (Mawson 2016: 21; see also 20-23, 172-173; cf. 69-72). My own, 'fundamentality' account of life's meaning appears vulnerable in this respect. According to it, roughly,

a human person's life is particularly meaningful insofar as it exercises reason in a robust, sophisticated way, orients it towards basic conditions of human existence, ones that are largely responsible for or explain much else about it, and does so in ways that progress over time (Metz 2013a: 222–239, 2014, 2015a). Offered as an account of life's meaning could invite the thought, 'There must be more to it than that' (Mawson 2016: 21).

However, while there must be more to *life* than that, there need not be more to life's *meaning* than that. Meaning is one value amongst many possible in a human person's life, and does not always ground the strongest reasons for action, which points Mawson himself makes (2016: 169–171; cf. Metz 2012b, 2013a: 59–74). My hunch, then, is that someone who is not yet satisfied with a well defended answer to the question of meaning in life is interested in something broader, about what makes life valuable in all its forms or about how one ought to live in general. To answer these questions requires an account of life's meaning, but is implausibly exhausted by one.

### III. ONE OR MANY WHEN IT COMES TO MEANING IN LIFE?

Mawson's pluralism does not stop at what talk of 'life's meaning' connotes, but also extends to what it denotes. It is obvious that, if we were to accept all the various dimensions of the concept of life's meaning as Mawson analyzes it, then, as Mawson rightly notes (2016: 49), there would be myriad, disconnected features of the world to which the concept applies.

However, suppose we were to focus on one dimension of the concept, such as the question of what constitutes meaning in life, setting aside questions about bearers such as bacteria, the human race as a whole or everything in the physical world. If we just wanted to know what would make a human person's life meaningful, where that is a gradient final value that often merits reactions of pride or admiration and that often transcends our animal nature, could we then answer with a single principle? For instance, would the fundamentality theory, briefly sketched above, be a plausible monist contender?

Mawson answers 'no' to such questions. Even enquiring into one facet of life's meaning, such as meaning in a human person's life, admits of a wide array of answers (2016: 45, 73, 108, 112, 121–123, 173). In addition, for Mawson, these answers often fail to 'cluster' or 'amalgamate', i.e., to be logically or metaphysically related.

In fact, in one important case, Mawson contends that two sorts of meaning in life are inversely related to each other in every possible world (2016: 110–133). This clash, or at least difference, is, as I read the book, Mawson's central reason for being a pluralist about what constitutes meaning in life (as one sort of life's meaning).

On the one hand, there is the sort of meaning that a human person could obtain from fulfilling a purpose that God has assigned. Supposing that God's perfection means that He has a superlatively good nature, the purposes that He assigns to people would be informed by it, and therefore would be respectful, loving and the like. Not only would the content of God's purpose be good, but one would likely be helping to advance a plan for which the universe was created and doing so in concert with potentially billions of other persons. Finally, in doing God's bidding, one would be contouring one's life towards a perfect being and, chances are, perfecting one's human nature to the extent that is possible. God seems able to constitute meaning in life, and in principle for any human person's life.<sup>3</sup>

However, Mawson argues that individual human persons can also constitute meaning in life, specifically, for their own respective lives. He accepts the view of Jean-Paul Sartre, and more recently Richard Taylor (1970) and Harry Frankfurt (1982), that one's life can be more meaningful, the more one obtains the objects of one's contingent propositional attitudes. For Sartre, this means achieving whichever high-

<sup>3</sup> Mawson also argues that God would confer 'cosmic' meanings on our lives, e.g., by virtue of having been our source, for otherwise we 'haven't come from anything significant' (2016: 64). However, I set those considerations aside for the sake of addressing whether there is more than one legitimate answer to a *single question* in respect of meaning, namely, meaning in life, as a gradient final value that can be present in a human person's life and that typically merits reactions of pride and admiration and usually is worth more than one's animal nature.

er-order ends one happens to have, while for Taylor it means satisfying whatever stronger desires one has come by and for Frankfurt it means getting whatever one particularly cares about. Common to all three views is a subjectivism according to which meaning in life varies with the subject, i.e., according to the variable mental states that a given person has. Insofar as autonomy, creativity, authenticity and satisfaction are central to meaning in life, subjectivism seems to explain why powerfully.

According to Mawson, necessarily, the more meaning one obtains by fulfilling God's purpose, the less meaning one can obtain by virtue of subjective factors, and vice versa. There are at least these two ways for a human person to perform actions that would confer meaning on her life, but they are incompatible. You could ultimately do what God wants you to do, or you could ultimately do what you want to do, but not both at the same time, or at least not to the same degree.

Mawson's claim of an essentially inverse relationship between the two sorts of meaning in life is interesting, and I am sure that others will be concerned to explore whether there is a possible world in which they do not detract from each other (cf. Mawson 2016: 124-132). I, however, address a different claim, namely, Mawson's contention that these are indeed two independent sorts of meaning in life.

In my book, I had taken what I there called 'Purpose Theory' and 'Subjectivism' to be rival accounts of necessary and sufficient conditions of meaning in life, and I had argued that, so construed, they are both false (2013a: 106-117, 142-146, 175-179). Mawson, in contrast, thinks of them as merely sufficient conditions and claims that they are both true. Regardless of whether they are necessarily incompatible, they are clearly different, such that it is hard to see how one might unify them into a single, coherent principle. If they are independent sorts of meaning in life, then pluralism is true of what constitutes it. "These two types of meaningfulness then are goods and cannot be amalgamated. So the "threat of monism"...(that all the individualistic meanings of life [or at least all the good ones] amalgamate into one) is avoided" (Mawson 2016: 123).

In reply, I contest the claim that an individual obtains any meaning in her life simply by virtue of obtaining the objects her contingent propositional attitudes. I maintain that subjectivism is false as a sufficient condition of meaning.

Mawson's main motivation in support of subjectivism as a source of meaning in life is a thought experiment in which a person becomes the boss as opposed to one who had been bossed (2016: 111-121). Mawson imagines that one becomes in charge of a firm, which requires strategic planning and powerful vision. Insofar as there is something more desirable about being in that position, relative to the position of a worker who has no responsibility for, or control over, the nature of his labour, Mawson believes that a subjective type of meaning best explains it.

However, objective considerations seem to me to explain better the comparative desirability of bossing relative to being bossed. Formulating a complex plan, using one's creativity, making an effort to overcome obstacles and similar properties that we are likely to ascribe to a Vice-President, and not so much an assembly-line worker, are all manifestations of our rational nature. They are robust exercises of intelligence, which I, along with other objectivists (e.g., Smith 1997: 179-221; Gewirth 1998: 174-189; Levy 2005), have taken to be at the heart of meaning in life.

Notice, too, that subjectivism, upon reflection, does a poor job of capturing these goods. Suppose that one of one's higher-order ends or strongest desires were to avoid positions of responsibility, since one does not like them. Also imagine that one were afraid to exercise one's creativity and sought, above all, to avoid the objects of one's fears. Under such conditions, subjectivism cannot entail that, or explain why, it would be more meaningful (even if psychologically hard and painful) for a worker to become a manager. The natural thing to say is that one has good reason of meaning to welcome a position of responsibility and creativity (or to become the sort of person who could welcome one, if one currently does not), but that could involve an appeal to elements outside of the person's current set of subjective factors.

Furthermore, I believe the case misleads Mawson since the content of what the Vice-President is imagined to do is at times left open or, at other times, associated with a car factory. One is inclined simply to think of what typical owners and managers do in corporations, which is often benign, or at least not wicked. However, upon filling in certain details, one is further lead to doubt that subjectivism is a source meaning. Suppose, for instance, that the person is in charge of Torture'N'Murder, Inc., with his position

being to come up with new and improved ways to kill mass numbers of innocent people consequent to having subjugated them and inflicted great pain on them. Then, although there would be ‘Sartrean self-creative autonomy’ (2016: 123), there would be a lack of meaning.

It is not true that there is ‘something valuable’ (2016: 115) simply in virtue of realizing whichever aims or desires one has. If there were, then we would judge there to be some meaning, and of a deep sort that concerns what is desirable for an individual’s life, in the Torture’N’Murder, Inc. case. However, we do not. It is not that we detect meaning that is outweighed by immorality, but rather, in this case (cf. Metz 2013a: 189-192), that the immorality removes the meaning. Subjective conditions are in themselves insufficient for some meaning in life, so that the appeal to the former is not evidence that the latter has a pluralist content.

The reason that subjectivism appears plausible is that subjective considerations might be necessary but not sufficient for meaning, as per Susan Wolf (1997), or that they can enhance meaning, even though they are neither necessary nor sufficient for it, as per my own views (2013a: 183-184, 196-198, 223-225). Going with the latter position, there is intuitively often *more* meaning when one’s goals, desires, cares, likes and other propositional attitudes are positively oriented towards what is objectively meaningful. The sort of authenticity worth wanting, i.e., a meaningful sort, is one in which one’s deepest self is contoured to what merits commitment, not where it is fixated on what is intuitively meaningless (on which see Taylor 1992); similar remarks apply to the sort of self-creative autonomy that is meaning-conferring.

One might wonder, at this point, whether Mawson’s suggestion that fulfilling God’s purpose would be sufficient for meaning is also some evidence of pluralism, supposing that, as per my view, exercising intelligence in robust ways and ideally towards fundamental conditions is. These seem to be two independent sources of meaning, a perfect spiritual being’s mind, on the one hand, and objective ways of living in a physical world, on the other.

Although I do not establish the point conclusively here, monism remains plausible in the face of these judgments. As Erik Wielenberg has succinctly pointed out upon considering my account of what makes a life meaningful, ‘On theism, God is *the* fundamental condition of human life, so the fundamentality theory implies that if theism is true, then God is extremely relevant to whatever meaning human lives might have’ (2016: 34; see also Metz 2015a: 121-122). If God exists, then He is the ultimate condition largely responsible for many other conditions of human existence, particularly its environment and its course of development as a species, such that great meaning would be conferred by contouring one’s rational nature towards Him and His plan. However, if atheism were true, then physical states would constitute what is fundamental to us and our world, and would be sufficient for substantial meaning upon positively orienting our intelligence towards them.

On my view, what matters is fundamentality, not the sort of substance that might constitute it. Hence, a form of monism appears able to account for the judgments that either physical conditions or spiritual conditions would be sufficient to confer meaning.

Mawson would surely respond that this rationale does not give God His due. God would not merely be an ‘equally good substance’ for meaning, interchangeable with matter when it comes to fundamentality. For Mawson, God would be capable of making our lives much more meaningful than they would be in the absence of Him. As this point is not about the nature of the sources of meaning in life, but rather the degrees of those sources, I consider it in the following section.

#### IV. GOD AND DEGREES OF MEANING IN LIFE

Over the past two or three decades, I believe there has been a shift in supernaturalist thought about meaning in life. For much of the medieval and modern periods, supernaturalists typically maintained that God is necessary for meaning in life (at least a meaningful life on balance), such that life in an atheist world would be meaningless. Such was the view of the likes of classic thinkers such as Pascal, Kierkegaard and Tolstoy. It has been vulnerable to the charge that it counterintuitively entails that a life spent in an experience machine and a life spent making revealing discoveries à la Einstein, helping lots of people



in the ways Mandela did and creating great artworks on the level of van Gogh would be equally meaningless. While some contemporary supernaturalists have been willing to ‘bite the bullet’ and accept that implication, most have begun to change the thesis of supernaturalism. Now, the salient view is that while a shallow or limited sort of meaning is possible in an atheist world, a much greater sort would be available only with God (e.g., Nozick 1981: 610-618; Quinn 2000; Audi 2005; Craig 2008; Swinburne 2016).

Mawson is a proponent of this sort of perspective, which he calls ‘optimism’ in respect of God’s contribution to life’s meaning (2016: 4-5, 139-158). For Mawson, there are different potential sources of meaning in life. Subjective factors, for example, would be a small tributary, whereas God would be the Zambezi River gushing into the grand Victoria Falls. ‘(W)hile there could be meaning in our world even were it a Godless world, there could more and deeper sorts of meaning in it were it a Godly one’ (Mawson 2016: 17; see also 134, 144, 158).

I focus on the ‘deeper’ (and hence individualist) kinds of meaning that Mawson believes only God could confer, which, recall, means they are supposed to be more desirable for their own sake than the sorts of meaning in life available in a purely physical world. On this score, Mawson maintains that only God could ‘add ultimate significance meaning in the for-the-individual-concerned mode’ (2016: 146).

By this phrasing, Mawson principally has in mind the thought that with God there would be an eternal afterlife available, one in which we continue to live forever and our actions on earth (and anywhere else we might perform actions) would forever make a difference to a larger whole. Quantitatively, God’s ‘addition to the meaningfulness of our lives is potentially infinite’ (Mawson 2016: 145), while, qualitatively, it would be a meaning *in* our lives, not just an infinite effect of our finite lives on something else.

One initial worry about this argument is that God does not seem necessary for such an eternal afterlife. After all, one can imagine, as many in the Eastern tradition have, living well forever in a world without God.

However, Mawson may reasonably deem the relevant sort of afterlife to be one in which we, constituted by a soul, come as close as we can to God, and at times he does (2016: 155). In addition, even if God were not necessary for an eternal afterlife, if an ensouled spiritual realm were, then a Godless Heaven would still be relevant for advancing a kind of supernaturalism.

A second, more worrisome objection is to point out that even if Mawson has shown that while a meaningful life is possible on earth, a much more meaningful one would not be possible in the absence of a (Godly) Heaven, he has not yet shown that a world with a (Godly) Heaven would be best, given an interest in living meaningfully. Why not? Because it could be that if the prospective gains to meaning with a (Godly) Heaven would be much greater, then so would the prospective losses (cf. Metz 2018). If there were a Heaven, one in which a soul forever enjoyed the most intimate communion with God, then presumably there would also be a Hell, in which a soul forever suffered distance from God. An infinity of meaningfulness appears to be cancelled out by the infinity of what I call ‘anti-matter’ (2013a: 63-64), conditions that reduce the meaning of a life. It is not obvious which world, theist or atheist, would be reasonable to wish for, given an interest in living a maximally, or even just particularly, meaningful life.

The standard reply is of course that a human person could make certain decisions that would avoid Hell. However, what are the odds of being the sort of human person who will in fact make the requisite decisions? As Mawson himself accepts, it is not necessarily rational to want or pursue the deepest sort of meaning, and what we should instead do is seek out meaning ‘overall’, that is, roughly in the light of expected value (2016: 164). It is not clear how, in principle, one is to make headway on construing the relevant options and their expected value. Does one presume that one has a body or otherwise faces temptations, or might a disembodied soul be given the option of making the right choice? Does one presume that accepting Jesus as one’s saviour is necessary, or that works in the absence of faith would be sufficient?

A more unorthodox, but amongst philosophers increasingly common, move is to maintain that if there were a God, He would offer only Heaven, and never impose Hell. However, such a world brings with it anti-matter of its own, for treating the wicked and the upright in the same way; for the author of *Ecclesiastes*, at least, the lack of justice is sufficient for a life that is in vain. One might suggest that no one

can do anything to warrant the response of Hell, but, then, parity of reasoning suggests that no one can do anything to warrant the response of Heaven; God's gift appears arbitrary, in that case.

Mawson does discuss respects in which God would necessarily reduce meaning in life, but only subjective ones (see the previous section), with Mawson fairly concluding that the prospect of Heaven would significantly outweigh the loss of being able to fashion one's own meaning in life. However, much more debate needs to take place in respect of additional ways that God is not to be desired insofar as one wants to live in a world in which one's life has a good chance of being meaningful.

For a third and final objection to Mawson's optimism about God's contribution to meaning in life, I maintain that the logic of his rationale renders it unable to capture the essential intuition that a meaningful life without God is possible (cf. Metz 2017: 367, from which the rest of this paragraph borrows). If an eternal afterlife would enhance meaning in our lives, it would do so to such a huge extent as to make it unreasonable to judge an 80 year life to be capable of being meaningful. Compare the degree of meaning in an immortal life in Heaven with the degree available to a mortal life. It would be infinitely larger, as Mawson routinely points out in his book. And if an immortal life would be infinitely more meaningful than a mortal one, then the grounds for claiming that a mortal life could be meaningful on balance fall away. It would be like saying that a house can be big, even if it would be bigger were it to grow to be the size of a billion billion billion suns.

Mawson himself comes close to recognizing the point at times. For example, he remarks that

even the meaning that can be enjoyed in a lifespan of several millennia will ultimately amount to a small dollop when compared with that enjoyed everlastingly *post-mortem*. And again, given that the afterlife is potentially infinite, so any finite dollop will diminish in relative size, tending to nothing over time.<sup>4</sup>

I take this point to be damning, since the intuition that Mawson is — and should be — seeking to capture is that a meaningful life on balance is possible in an atheist world, just not of a sort that is most desirable. Mawson needs to be able to conclude that the lives of Einstein, Mandela and van Gogh would still have been meaningful to a real degree in the absence of God and Heaven. He needs to account for his own intuition that 'Gandhi's life is more meaningful than that of the wastrel' in the absence of a (Godly) Heaven (Mawson 2016: 5), and cannot rest content with the judgment that it would then amount to nothing. Gandhi's life would not be a 'flat zero', to use Mawson's phrase (2016: 5), but it would, compared to infinity, come as close to zero as is mathematically possible for a non-zero number, and that, I submit, fails to capture its meaningfulness. Upon invoking an eternal afterlife in a spiritual realm, Mawson can conclude that a theist world could make life much more meaningful than an atheist world, but only at the cost of having to forgo the firm judgment, which he shares, that some substantial meaning is still possible in the latter world.

## V. CONCLUSION: ALL OR NOTHING WITH RESPECT TO GOD?

I suspect that, when it comes to supernaturalism, meaning is an all or nothing matter. It will be difficult for Mawson and other supernaturalists to show that God and a soul are essential for a deep sort of meaning without undercutting the ability to capture the intuition that a meaningful life on balance can be had without them. I close this discussion of Mawson's defence of an optimistic conclusion regarding supernaturalism by explaining why this balance will be hard to strike.

The culprit is what I call the 'perfection thesis', the claim that engagement with a maximally possible final value is essential for meaning in our individual lives. It is this claim that has largely driven supernaturalism, I have argued (2013a: 119–138), with the focus sometimes on a perfect being, viz., God, and other times on a perfect state, Heaven.

The perfection thesis has been understood in ways that make it difficult to acknowledge that substantial final value could obtain apart from perfection. For example, it is typically thought that a perfect

<sup>4</sup> Mawson, *God and the Meanings of Life*, 144; see also 13, 154.

state would include eternity, that is, an infinite amount of time, or that a perfect being would be infinite in scope, and, as argued in the previous section, infinitude dwarfs finitude, rendering it insubstantial. For another example, it is often believed that the perfect is the source of the existence and value of the imperfect; earthly realities are good only insofar as they ‘participate in’ divine idealities. For a third example, several philosophers maintain that, for any limited meaningful condition in our lives, it must obtain its meaning or point from something outside it, which, in turn, must get its meaning or point from something outside it, and so on until the regress is terminated in an ineffable unconditioned condition for all other meaningful conditions.

The trick for supernaturalists is to find a way to modify the perfection thesis, so that engagement with a maximally possible final value would contribute greatly to meaning in our individual lives without being required for it. Supernaturalists probably have to appeal to perfection, and hence a spiritual realm, but without having the imperfect utterly depend on the perfect or be completely overshadowed by it. That position is what has to be articulated and defended, for, otherwise, supernaturalists will be unable to account for the strong intuition that a genuinely meaningful life is possible in a purely natural world.

Is there a way to understand perfection without appeal to infinities and without making it the source of the imperfect, or would failure to be the source of all other value be an imperfection? Could the imperfect exist on its own and have some substantial value in itself, while standing alongside a much higher, albeit finite, perfection? Would this value-theoretic structure be defensible in the light of meta-ethical reflection on language, metaphysics and epistemology? Would it satisfy those inclined towards supernaturalism? These, I submit, are key questions to answer at this stage of the debate to which T. J. Mawson has taken the field with his fine book *God and the Meanings of Life*.

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