

# Comparing the Meaningfulness of Finite and Infinite Lives: Can We Reap What We Sow if We Are Immortal?

THADDEUS METZ

## Abstract

On the rise over the past 20 years has been ‘moderate supernaturalism’, the view that while a meaningful life is possible in a world without God or a soul, a much greater meaning would be possible only in a world with them. William Lane Craig can be read as providing an important argument for a version of this view, according to which only with God and a soul could our lives have an eternal, as opposed to temporally limited, significance since we would then be held accountable for our decisions affecting others’ lives. I present two major objections to this position. On the one hand, I contend that if God existed and we had souls that lived forever, then, in fact, all our lives would turn out the same. On the other hand, I maintain that, if this objection is wrong, so that our moral choices would indeed make an ultimate difference and thereby confer an eternal significance on our lives (only) in a supernatural realm, then Craig could not capture the view, aptly held by moderate supernaturalists, that a meaningful life is possible in a purely natural world.

## 1. New Religious Thought about Meaning in Life

In the West, philosophers sympathetic towards a religious account of what is central to meaning in life have changed their account of late. For much of the modern era, up until about 20 years ago, the dominant view amongst those who believe that life’s meaning depends crucially on God or a soul (as characteristically conceived by the Abrahamic faiths) has been that such spiritual conditions are *necessary* for any one of our lives to be meaningful. Positions have included the claims that: a meaningful life is a purposeful one, where God alone could provide an objective purpose; only God could ground a universal morality without which life would not make sense; living up to a universal morality, and hence living meaningfully, would require having an indestructible spiritual nature that is able to overcome the physical laws of nature; meaning in life consists of coming close to God or of God meting out justice, which can be done only if we have immortal souls. Call these rationales instances

of ‘extreme supernaturalism’, for entailing that, if neither God nor a soul exists, all our lives are meaningless, which involves denying that anything about the course of our existence merits pride, admiration, or awe or that there are any values in it higher than animal pleasures and satisfactions.<sup>1</sup>

However, in the 21<sup>st</sup> century, many western religious thinkers – beyond those inclined towards a naturalist approach to meaning in life – have found objections to extreme supernaturalism compelling. One powerful intuition has been that at least the lives of Gandhi, Einstein, and Mandela were meaningful, even on the supposition that there exists only a physical universe.

Supernaturalism has not died out, but instead has morphed into a more ‘moderate’ version. A salient view amongst religious philosophers of life’s meaning has become that, while a meaningful life is possible in a world without God or a soul, a *greater* or *ultimate* meaning would be possible only in a world with (at least one of) them. Explicit adherents to this view include thinkers such as Philip Quinn (2000), John Cottingham (2016), Richard Swinburne (2016), Timothy Mawson (2016), and Clifford Williams (2020).

There have been a variety of specifications of what constitutes a great or ultimate meaning, with moderate supernaturalists yet to debate amongst themselves which is most promising.<sup>2</sup> In this article, I critically discuss temporal and quantitative interpretations of greatness or ultimacy, according to which it is the longest or largest amount of meaning. According to this sort of moderate supernaturalism, on which I focus here, while an earthly life could offer a limited or finite meaning, only a life with a soul and God could offer an eternal or infinite one.

William Lane Craig can be read as providing an important argument for the view that only with God and a soul could our lives have an eternal, as opposed to temporally limited, significance.<sup>3</sup> According to him, without such spiritual conditions, our moral decisions make no ultimate difference, neither to the world nor to our

<sup>1</sup> Perhaps most recent analyses of the concept of meaning in life (or definitions of the phrase) are cluster or amalgam accounts, which include these kinds of properties (even if not solely them). For my own, family resemblance analysis, see Metz (2013, pp. 24–35).

<sup>2</sup> For an overview of the variety of ways greatness has been conceived in the literature, with some suggestions about their logical implications, see Metz (2019, pp. 27–28, 43–44).

<sup>3</sup> Craig (2009a), Craig (2009b) and Craig (2013, pp. 158–61, 166–67).

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lives, whereas if those conditions do obtain, then our moral decisions do make an ultimate difference.

After briefly expounding this argument in the following section (2), I present objections to it. I contend that if God existed and we had souls that lived forever, then, in fact, all our lives would turn out the same (section 3). One central rationale is that, if God and a soul exist, then we cannot make any difference to the quality of others' lives, since, in terms of harms, God would compensate others for any that befell them and, in terms of benefits, we could not improve on the infinity in Heaven coming to them from God. After that I maintain that, if this objection is wrong, so that our moral choices would indeed confer an eternal significance on our lives (only) in a supernatural realm, then Craig could not capture the view, aptly held by moderate supernaturalists, that a meaningful life is possible in a purely natural world (section 4). Basically, an eternal significance would be 'too big', reducing any meaning possible during an earthly life to nothing by comparison. I conclude that moderate supernaturalists would probably be wise to avoid appealing to eternal or infinite meaning when spelling out the respect in which God and a soul could alone impart a great meaning to our lives; some other notion of greatness should be considered (section 5).

### 2. Craig on Life Mattering through Making a Difference

It is not clear that it is right to view Craig as a moderate supernaturalist, for there are places in his writings where he defends Divine Command Theory, which naturally supports the extreme version<sup>4</sup>; if only God could ground universal moral obligations, the living up to which were necessary for meaning in life, then God would be necessary for meaning. However, there are other arguments of Craig's the logic of which does support moderate supernaturalism, even if he does not accept this position. One of them appeals to the idea that a great meaning requires making an ultimate difference, something possible only if God and a soul exist.

Consider the following quotations:

*'(I)f theism is true, we have a sound basis for moral accountability....Evil and wrong will be punished; righteousness will be vindicated....(T)he moral choices we make in this life are infused with an eternal significance'. (Craig, 2009a, p. 31)*

<sup>4</sup> For instance, see Craig (2013, pp. 161–69).

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‘In the absence of moral accountability, our choices become trivialized because they make no ultimate contribution to either the betterment of the universe or to the moral good in general because everyone ends up the same. Death is the great leveler’. (Craig, 2009a, p. 38)

‘One of the reasons that moral accountability is important is that we want our moral choices to make a difference....(I)t is precisely because our moral choices do make a lasting difference that attempts to improve this finite world are not futile’. (Craig, 2009b, p. 174)

‘On naturalism our destiny, both as individuals and as a species, is ultimately unrelated to moral behavior....(O)bjective values and duties do not finally matter, since everything winds up the same’. (Craig, 2009b, p. 183)

‘(T)o believe that God does not exist and that there is thus no moral accountability is quite literally de-moralizing, for then we should have to believe that our moral choices are ultimately insignificant, since both our fate and that of the universe will be the same regardless of what we do’. (Craig, 2009b, p. 184)

Notice the recurrent qualifications. Speaking of ‘eternal’ significance invites comparison with a less than eternal significance. Talk of an ‘ultimate’ contribution or of something being ‘ultimately’ meaningless or insignificant suggests a less than ultimate meaning or significance. Making a ‘lasting’ difference implies making a difference that does not last. Hence, this argument is sensibly read as supporting a moderate supernaturalism, according to which meaning is possible in the world as known particularly well by science, but an eternal, ultimate, or lasting one is not and requires a God who rewards good and punishes bad in the course of judging one’s soul. In any event, that is how I shall interpret the above quotations, regardless of Craig’s own intentions.<sup>5</sup>

In some ways, this reasoning harks back more than 2000 years to some passages in Ecclesiastes.<sup>6</sup> The worry that all our lives end up the same, regardless of the nature of our moral choices, is one factor

<sup>5</sup> Despite the presence of spots when expounding this rationale where Craig does go extreme, e.g., when he says that ‘in light of the universe’s inevitable fate our children’s lives are, indeed, utterly pointless’ (Craig, 2009b, p. 184). ‘Utterly’ seems stronger than ‘ultimately’.

<sup>6</sup> For other, more recent (but briefer) advocates, see Mawson (2013, pp. 1441–42) and Swinburne (2016, pp. 157–59).

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that led Koheleth (the presumed author of the book) to proclaim that 'all is vanity' and that life is akin 'to the pursuit of wind'. He remarks of death: '(T)he same fate is in store for all: for the righteous, and for the wicked; for the good and pure, and for the impure.... That is the sad thing about all that goes on under the sun: that the same fate is in store for all' (9.2–9.3; see also 2.14–2.16, 3.17).

Craig is not explicit when advancing this reasoning about how it is that God would hold us morally accountable and respond to our choices (nor is Koheleth about how he wishes God would do so). However, the picture seems to be a common one amongst Christian and Muslim theists, according to which God sends the souls of those who have exhibited moral virtue (whether in the form of faith or works) to Heaven, where they will enjoy eternal life with God, and God sends the souls those who have exhibited vice to eternal damnation in Hell. If, and only if, there is such judgement can one's moral decisions make an eternal, ultimate, or lasting difference and exhibit a corresponding meaning, so the argument goes.

*Contra* Craig, in the following section I maintain that it is not so much death, but more clearly immortality, that would be the great leveller. If we all had souls that could not perish, and if God determined the quality of life of those souls in response to their moral choices, then it would in fact be the case that everyone ends up the same and our moral choices do not make any real difference to the course of our lives or those of others.

### 3. Immortality as the Great Leveller

In this section I make the case that if we have immortal souls that God looks after, then our moral choices do not make a lasting difference and confer an eternal significance, whereas if we are mortal and on our own, then some difference remains possible, even if not a lasting one. I first show how the lives of others as moral patients would not be differentially affected by our ethical decisions if an Abrahamic spiritual realm exists (3.1) and then how our own lives as moral agents also would not be so affected (3.2).

#### 3.1. *No Difference to Others' Lives*

Aspects of the first point have perhaps become familiar to the field. More than 30 years ago Martha Nussbaum recognized that, if we were immortal, then no virtue or justice could come from saving anyone's life (Nussbaum, 1989, pp. 338–39). Our moral choices

could never make the important difference of rescuing anyone from death. Neither feeding children, nor stopping an axe-murderer, nor providing healthcare saves a life. Such actions could of course protect a body, but we persons are not identical to our bodies and can outlive them, according to the present form of supernaturalism.

Relatedly, our moral choices could never make the important difference of killing anyone. Just as one's actions could not matter for having saved a life, so one's actions could not 'anti-matter', i.e., reduce the meaningfulness of one's life (Metz, 2013, pp. 63–64, 71–72, 234–35), for having taken a life. If lives are indestructible for being housed in souls, then nothing one chooses can ever be so wrongful as to involve murder.

Now, these considerations extend beyond eliminating life to reducing the quality of life. If we had souls that God compensated for any undeserved or otherwise inappropriate harm, then it would also follow that our moral choices could never make the difference of preventing anyone from suffering a net loss of well-being. This point, too, has been made by others recently.<sup>7</sup> If X interferes with Y's life by stomping on Y's foot for no good reason, perhaps maliciously, then, supposing X did not compensate Y, God would do so in an afterlife. X could not impose a net harm on Y, given theism, meaning that our moral choices could not make a negative difference in respect of another person's life. By the same token, if one of us, Z, were to prevent X from stomping on Y's foot, Z would not be preventing Y from undergoing any net harm, since, were Z not to do so, God would step in and make up for the loss (if not in this life, then in the next). Hence, our moral choices could not make an important kind of positive difference, either.

Return to Craig's complaint that, without a spiritual realm, 'our choices become trivialized because they make no ultimate contribution to either the betterment of the universe or to the moral good in general because everyone ends up the same' (Craig, 2009a, p. 38). That complaint appears, in contrast, true of a world with a spiritual realm, since everyone remains alive by virtue of having a soul and God ensures that all lives are bettered (at least insofar as that is morally appropriate). Insofar as we could not rescue anyone from death or from a poor quality of life, it appears apt to describe our choices as 'trivialized because they make no ultimate contribution to the betterment of the universe'.

In reply, one sympathetic to Craig's view might point out that, even if one could not make a difference to others by preventing

<sup>7</sup> See Wielenberg (2005, pp. 91–94), Hubin (2009), and Maitzen (2009).

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death or harm to them, one could make a difference to them by conferring ‘pure’ benefits on them, by which I mean goods that do not consist of the removal of a bad.<sup>8</sup> One could direct someone’s gaze to a beautiful moon, offer her chocolates, or give her a backrub. Or, supposing these actions would not give one moral credit, consider that one could just write a cheque to those who do not need the money to avoid harm. Supporting others’ projects, whether it is playing chess, building a religious institution, or discovering facts about nature, plausibly confers moral credit.

The big problem with this tempting reply is that the moral credit could not be of the sort Craig maintains is essential for an ultimate significance, when the person being benefited has a soul destined for Heaven. If someone would spend eternal life in a supremely good state, then nothing one can do in a finite period would make any difference to the quality of that person’s life. An infinity of bliss plus any finite amount of pure benefit would remain infinity.<sup>9</sup>

It is true that an eternal life would not form an ‘actual’ infinity in the mathematical sense of being complete or realized. It would be more aligned to the mathematical notion of a ‘potential’ infinity, one in which a series will never end. I do not think this distinction has much of a bearing on whether a finite contribution to a person’s well-being could make a difference to his quality of life. After all, if the person’s well-being would indeed go on forever, then any finite addition to it would make literally no difference to the life considered as a whole (even if not as ever completed), that is, as something that will continue forever.<sup>10</sup>

Just as God would remove the finite harm done to a person, meaning that one’s removing it would make no difference to how

<sup>8</sup> For the concept, see Shiffrin (1999).

<sup>9</sup> Although this is the standard mathematical approach to infinite quantities, its logic does entail that any infinity of bliss plus a finite amount of harm would remain infinitely positive and so no worse than any infinity of bliss plus no finite amount of harm. We might prefer the latter to the former, on which see Jackson and Rogers (2019). It is open to theists here to develop some novel way of measuring infinite values.

<sup>10</sup> On the other hand, if one elects to take the person’s life at a certain point in time, noting that it remains finite despite its infinite trajectory, the billions of billions of years of bliss that it would at some point contain would render, say, cutting a cheque for 50 pounds to be negligible by comparison. I accept that, from the perspective of considering a potentially infinite life at a given moment, one’s contribution would make some difference to her quality of life, but an arbitrarily small one, a difference that approaches zero as her life continues.

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well her life goes, so God would confer infinite pure benefits on a person, or, more carefully, would do so forever, meaning that one's adding some would make no difference to how well her life goes. It is not death that is the great leveller, but rather God and a soul, when it comes to the effects of our actions on other people's well-being. We cannot influence their lives for better or worse considered as a net sum, and hence cannot, in one of Craig's central senses, make an ultimate difference with our moral choices.

### *3.2. No Difference to Our Own Lives*

Even if we cannot make a difference in the sense of changing the quality of other people's lives, Craig could maintain that we could make a difference in some other senses. Specifically, he can point out that, even if, given theism, we could not make a positive or negative difference to others in the world, we could still make one to ourselves. We could make choices that have long-term consequences for our own lives, where these consequences are furthermore not the same for everybody. Recall that Craig remarks of theism: 'Evil and wrong will be punished; righteousness will be vindicated. ... (T)he moral choices we make in this life are infused with an eternal significance' (Craig, 2009a, p. 31). If we exhibited vice, God would punish us forever, and if we instead exhibited virtue, God would reward us for an eternity.

Set aside what counts as vice, but notice that, even if one could not commit the grave wrong of murder if we had souls, one could plausibly exhibit serious vice. One would surely count as a bad person if one incorrectly believed it were possible to kill others and intentionally sought to do so without justification. Hence, it appears that our moral choices would make a lasting difference in respect of our own lives if, say, people who try to kill those made in the image of God went to Hell and people who do not went to Heaven.

It does seem true, on this picture, that one's moral choices would have infinite ramifications and that not everyone would experience the same ones, hence making a 'lasting difference' and having 'eternal significance'. However, that is contingent on the premise of Hell, which is largely out of fashion these days<sup>11</sup> and for good reason. Philosophers of religion have come to doubt that God would send anyone to Hell, when that is understood as damnation that does not end.

<sup>11</sup> But cf. the Doctrinal Statement of one of Craig's institutions: [http://media1.biola.edu/bold/downloads/doctrinal\\_statement.pdf](http://media1.biola.edu/bold/downloads/doctrinal_statement.pdf).

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For the considerations that will be familiar to many readers, recall that it is unlikely that a loving God would treat anyone that way.<sup>12</sup> A compassionate, caring God might well impose penalties, but they would be ones that would be lifted upon having done some good, such as reform of the wayward individual and reconciliation between him and others, including God. Such a God would not impose suffering merely for the sake of suffering because one had made others suffer (merely in the short term!).

Furthermore, even an angry, vengeful God would not judge that anyone of us should go to Hell, since nothing we can be or do would deserve such a penalty. Humans would deserve an eternal punishment only if they did or were something infinitely bad, and we may reasonably doubt that infinite disvalues are possible in an earthly life.

Still more, even if infinite disvalues were possible in an earthly life, it would not follow that eternity is needed to give people what they deserve; for supposing that one could do or be something infinitely disvaluable in one's 80 or so years here, then a response proportionate to this deed or state would require merely a finite amount of time.

Lastly, even if infinite disvalues were possible during an earthly life and even if only an infinite punishment would be proportionate to them, it is implausible to think that God would create such horrible beings in the first place. Of course free will has some final value, but it is hard to think that the specific kind producing the sort of vice or wrongness that warrants eternal damnation would be worth such a cost.

We must suppose, then, that universal salvation would be on the cards, if God and a soul existed. If so, then it appears, yet again, that 'our choices become trivialized because they make no ultimate contribution to either the betterment of the universe or to the moral good in general because everyone ends up the same' (Craig, 2009a, p. 38). Of course, some would surely take a detour on the route to Heaven; some bad people would require time away from God, perhaps even in the form of punishment, in order to become the sort of people to whom God would bestow the gift of eternal bliss. However, such a finite amount of time would not detract from the overall supreme quality of life that would come to everyone; for a life of never-ending happiness would be, if not literally an infinity of bliss, then so enormous as to make the punitive detour amount

<sup>12</sup> For just a few references to the large literature over the past 30 years, see McCord Adams (1993); Kershner (2005); Buckareff and Plug (2017); and Mawson (2019).

to nothing by comparison. And hence all lives would end up the same, regardless of the moral choices we make.<sup>13</sup>

One might be inclined to think that, just as there would be circles of Hell, there would also be circles of Heaven, with some concentric circles coming to closer to God than others (cf. Jeremiah 17:10, Matthew 16:27, 19:28–9; 1 Corinthians 3:7–15; 2 Corinthians 5:10; Qur'an 30:38–9; 56:1–11; 83:18–28). Some people's faith has been stronger, some of their virtue higher, some of their works better.

Even if that were true, it would not make any difference to people's quality of life, on what I take to be the standard understanding of this sort of infinity amongst mathematicians since Cantor. Two lives of infinite happiness would both be 'countable' infinities and hence the same, in the sense that for any quantity of value in an eternal life, it could be put into a one-to-one correspondence with the natural numbers.<sup>14</sup> The amount of goodness in two infinite lives would be the same.

In sum, *contra* Craig, theism is unable to ground a world in which our moral choices would make an ultimate difference. When it comes to preventing harm or conferring benefits on others, there is nothing we can do to change their quality of life relative to what God would do for them. When it comes to our own quality of life, given universal salvation, there is nothing we can do to make it the case that our quality of life would differ from that of others. When Craig complains that, in an atheist world, 'we should have to believe that our moral choices are ultimately insignificant, since both our fate and that of the universe will be the same regardless of what we do' (Craig, 2009b, p. 184), his complaint applies with comparable force to a theist world.

Craig's complaint might even apply with greater force to a theist world, insofar as in an atheist one it is at least possible for a moral agent to affect the net quality of other people's lives for better or worse. Of course, it does not follow that atheism would make it possible for our moral choices to make an *ultimate* difference in Craig's

<sup>13</sup> I have argued above that all being destined for Heaven means that all would have the same quantity of quality of life, but a further argument to consider is whether we would also have the same quality of quality of life, so to speak. A standard picture of Heaven is that we would become impeccable, i.e., unable to exhibit vice, and that central to our lives would be the contemplation of God's nature. (For just two examples, see Henderson (2017) and Swinburne (2016, p. 160)). Would we all be destined to perform the same activities and have the same mental states? Could we be unique persons in Heaven?

<sup>14</sup> For one clear exposition, see Barrow (2005).

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senses. However, they could at least make a *real* difference. If neither God nor a soul exists, then it is possible to prevent other people from undergoing net harm and to improve their quality of life with pure benefits compared to what they would have had otherwise. In addition, it would still be possible (even if unlikely in our actual world) to apportion deserved penalties so that the wicked would face harms; as I and others have pointed out, an impersonal Karmic force could allocate burdens justly in the absence of a personal judge (Metz, 2013, pp. 83, 108–9, 125n2, 238–9; Kahane, 2018). In short, without God or a soul, we could in principle change the overall quality of people’s lives, including our own.

One might object that, regardless of what would happen in an after-life, we could still affect people’s lives for better or worse here and now. That is true in one sense – there is no denying that, in the short term, our actions can have good or bad consequences. However, the argument I am presenting for thinking that atheism would uniquely enable our choices to make a difference turns on the concept of *net well-being over the course of a life*. The argument is that only if God and a soul do not exist would it be possible for us either to impose harm that would never be compensated in the future or to confer an amount of benefit that would not otherwise have come then.

Although I would be content to conclude that immortality in a God-ruled universe is *just as much* a great leveller as death, I submit that there is also reason to conclude that it would be *more* of a great leveller than death, making the overall quality of all our lives wind up the same. In contrast, without God or a soul, our moral choices can have differential effects on the net well-being of both others and ourselves, even if they are admittedly short-lived compared to what we can imagine. One might be inclined to suggest that God would recognize the problem I have raised and do something about it, finding a way to enable us to reap what we sow. However, if the above argumentation is sound, the only way God could do so would be by denying us immortality, removing one of the major legs of theism.

### 4. Immortality as the Great Overshadower

Suppose that, despite my argumentation in the previous section, somehow Craig were able to reach his conclusion. Perhaps he would suggest that the sense of ‘making a lasting difference’ sufficient for an eternal significance is making certain choices and then going to

Heaven, even if these choices could not change the overall quality of anyone else's life and even if one's own overall quality of life would end up the same as everyone else's. I submit that this sense of the phrase does not in fact seem to be the one pertinent to what would make one's life matter; after all, making a difference in respect of meaningfulness is intuitively understood to involve one's improving others' net quality of life and then not seeing the wicked and lazy end up doing as well as oneself, neither of which is possible on the assumption of theism, or so I argued in the previous section. However, let us grant Craig that he can reach his conclusion, that an eternal significance for one's life is possible with God and a soul and only with them.

In that case, I submit that the logic of Craig's position would render him unable to capture the intuition that life in an atheist world could be meaningful. Recall the difference between extreme and moderate supernaturalism. The former is the view that God or a soul is necessary for one's life to be meaningful, while the latter is the view that, although these spiritual conditions are not necessary for that, they are necessary for one's life to have a great or ultimate meaning. Reading Craig as providing an argument for the moderate variety, my claim is that, if he understands a great/ultimate meaning to be one that is eternal or infinite, then it is 'too big': for then a life of approximately 80 years amounts to nothing by comparison and Craig cannot make sense of the moderate claim that a meaningful life is possible without God or a soul.<sup>15</sup>

I note that the comparative aspect of this point has been made by others recently. For example, T. J. Mawson recognizes that 'given that the afterlife is potentially infinite, so any finite dollop will diminish in relative size, tending to nothing over time' (Mawson, 2016, p. 144), and Ingmar Persson and Julian Savulescu note that 'whatever value we bring to our lives or the lives of others will fade gradually to nothing in the course of eternity' (Persson and Savulescu, 2019, p. 234). What has not been acknowledged is that these plausible claims render moderate supernaturalism unstable. If a great meaning is an eternal one, then no life of 80 or so years can be

<sup>15</sup> I made this point earlier in Metz (2019, pp. 30–33), from which some of the following phrasing is borrowed. However, I did not there apply the point to Craig's position, and, more deeply, I had there supposed the point applies to moderate supernaturalism as such, not particular versions invoking eternal or infinite meaning. I now recognize that a form of moderate supernaturalism can probably avoid the criticism, which I address below in the concluding section.

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meaningful by comparison, undercutting moderate supernaturalism and returning us to an extreme form.

More carefully, there are two ways to make the objection, depending on whether the great/ultimate meaning is construed in temporal or quantitative terms. In terms of time, if God and a soul would afford eternal significance, then no earthly life of about 80 years can compare and hence the supernaturalist cannot account for the intuition that a such a life could be significant. If a life of eternal significance would bring an infinite amount of meaning in its wake,<sup>16</sup> then consider that no life with a finite amount of meaning can compare and hence the supernaturalist cannot account for the intuition that such a life could be meaningful.

To be sure, by the present position, although an 80 year life would ‘tend to nothing’, it need not be a ‘flat zero’ (Mawson, 2016, p. 5) in terms of the amount of meaning in it. However, it would, compared to infinity (or eternity), come as close to zero as is mathematically possible for a positive number, which, I maintain, fails to capture the judgement that a life can be meaningful absent God and a soul.

The moderate supernaturalist who invokes eternal life in Heaven needs to explain how we can avoid thinking that its value would ridiculously outweigh that of an earthly lifespan, reducing it to next to nothing by comparison, thereby leaving us unable to capture the intuition that an earthly life, such as that of Gandhi, Einstein, or Mandela, could ever count as meaningful on balance. Note that she cannot coherently suggest that judgements of whether someone’s life is meaningful are not in some way comparative or relative, for the *defining point* of her view is precisely a particular comparative or relative judgement, viz., that a spiritual dimension would alone make possible a *greater* sort of meaning in life than what is on offer in the physical universe.

Prior to advancing this argument against Craig’s appeal to eternal significance, I had done so in respect of Mawson’s appeal to infinite significance, and Mawson has recently authored a substantial reply to it (Mawson, 2020). He makes two major criticisms that are relevant here, which I now aim to rebut.

Mawson’s initial criticism is that the life in Heaven would be a merely potential infinity, not an actual one, and so the relevant comparison is not between a life that in fact has lasted for an infinite amount of time and a life that has not. ‘(T)he amount of meaningfulness our lives will ever contain is always going to be a potential

<sup>16</sup> Which at least one scholar believes is true, viz., Mawson (2020, p. 2).

infinity, not an actual infinity, i.e., it will always be finite' (Mawson, 2020, p. 4).

However, the two points made above in the context of potential infinity apply here, too. On the one hand, if the life will indeed never end, then it is reasonable to compare a life that will have an unending amount of value with one that will have a finite amount. On the other hand, if one elects to consider the life at a given point in time, the logic of my point remains: for a life of billions of billions of years would also overshadow a life of approximately 80 years. An actual infinitude would be sufficient to overshadow, making any one of our earthly lives 'tend to nothing', but it is not necessary; a merely potential infinity will suffice.

Mawson's second criticism involves supposing that I believe that judgements of meaning are *solely* comparative, when they in fact are not. In the way judgements of whether something is big do seem to be merely comparative, Mawson says, 'Metz is, I suggest, naturally read as supposing that "meaningful" functions in a similar way. "Meaningful" means relatively meaningful, relative to some suitable comparison class and its relative meaning is the only meaning it has' (Mawson, 2020, p. 7). Mawson then reasonably contends that not all appraisals of whether someone's actual life is meaningful are relative to someone else's actual life or to that person's possible life. For Mawson, one can make an absolute judgement of meaning. Simply looking at one actual person's life, without knowledge of how anyone else is faring or how that person could have fared, one can determine whether her life has some meaning in it or not. In addition, 'No matter how much meaningfulness it's our destiny to receive, that future cannot diminish the absolute amount of meaningfulness we have at any time received' (Mawson, 2020, p. 15).

However, I do not deny that one can make absolute judgements of meaning in the ways that Mawson believes. And I do not need to hold that judgements of meaning are *only* comparative in order to make the point about overshadowing. I think all I need to note is that essential to Mawson's (and others') moderate supernaturalism is a comparative claim, namely, the judgement that a meaningful life is possible without spiritual conditions, but that they would alone make possible a *greater* meaning and specifically a (potentially) eternal or infinite one. When it is said that 'a meaningful life is possible without spiritual conditions', I take that to say more than just that a life could have *some meaning in it* without them. Instead, it is plausibly read as the claim that a life could have enough meaning in it to make it sensible to describe the whole life as *meaningful*, which is much more difficult

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to establish when an earthly life is put into comparison with eternal life in Heaven.

Recall that a key motivation for moderate supernaturalism has been the attempt to capture the widely shared intuition that the lives of Gandhi, Einstein, and Mandela were meaningful even supposing there is only a physical universe. That involves the claim that these lives warranted reactions such as pride from a first-person perspective and admiration and awe from a third-person perspective. It is difficult to see how that claim can be sustained if we are comparing these lives with those that have an eternal or infinite meaning, even a merely potential one. They simply are not that impressive by comparison. Central to moderate supernaturalism is the claim that, although a meaningful life is possible without God or a soul, these spiritual conditions would alone make a much *greater* meaning available, where that, for Mawson (and probably implicitly Craig) is a potential infinity. And so we are back to Mawson's own point that 'given that the afterlife is potentially infinite, so any finite dollop will diminish in relative size, tending to nothing over time' (Mawson, 2016, p. 144), where tending to nothing is not enough for a life to count as meaningful by comparison.

Notice the title of Mawson's essay: 'Why Heaven Doesn't Make Earth Absolutely Meaningless, Just Relatively'. My claim is that if supernaturalism entails that an earthly life is meaningless relative to Heaven, then it is no longer moderate, that is, no longer able to capture the intuition that an earthly life can be meaningful, even if a Heavenly life would have a greater meaning. Hence, I am not committed to holding that all judgements of meaning are comparative. Instead, the moderate supernaturalist is the one inviting us to compare degrees of meaning, indeed to compare (what I accept are) absolute amounts of it, in the present case between finite and infinite lives. When Mawson claims that eternal life in Heaven would give us a potential eternity or infinity of meaning, which is much more desirable compared to the dollop available on earth, we are to consider whether we would judge our dollop to afford us a life aptly described as 'meaningful' compared to a potential infinity and so warranting reactions of pride and awe. The answer, I submit, is 'No', which means that extreme supernaturalism is what is really being offered.<sup>17</sup>

<sup>17</sup> Another way to object to my position would be to maintain that judgements of meaningfulness are never relative and are solely absolute. That is not Mawson's view (on which see Mawson, 2020, p. 20n35), but my teenage son in discussion has suggested that judgements of whether a life is meaningful are similar to judgements of whether a piece of paper is red. He holds that, given enough redness as a percentage of a piece of paper, it

## 5. Concluding Thoughts about the Way Forward for Moderate Supernaturalism

William Lane Craig is usefully read as arguing that God and a soul are necessary for an eternal significance in one's life, although not a significant life as such, because only with them can one's moral decisions make a lasting difference to others and ourselves. I have advanced two major objections to this argument. On the one hand, I contended that theism would not enable us to make a lasting difference of the sort most clearly relevant to meaning. We could not affect how well off anyone else is over the course of their life since God would compensate for harm done to them and bestow endless benefit on them, and we also could not influence the quality of our own lives relative to that of others, on the reasonable supposition that Hell would not be on the cards for anyone and universal salvation would instead be expected from God. On the other hand, I maintained that, if the logic of Craig's argument is successful, it entails a conclusion that, upon reflection, is difficult to square with a genuinely moderate supernaturalism. If an eternal significance would come with the presence of God and a soul, then such a life would be so much more significant than one of our earthly lives as to render the latter insignificant by comparison.

Now, Craig's appeal to moral accountability is not the only rationale for moderate supernaturalism, and his appeal to eternal significance is not the only way to interpret moderate supernaturalism. If it is true, given theism, that our moral choices do not make a difference to the net quality of others' lives or our own and that an appeal to eternal significance is in effect extreme, then the moderate supernaturalist has reason to give up theism. However, that need not mean giving up the entire picture that philosophers working within the

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would count as red, regardless of how big or small its area is, where, by analogy, given enough meaning as a percentage of a life, it would count as meaningful, regardless of how long the life lasted. While I am now inclined to suspect that happiness might function in that way, as Mawson would accept (see citation *supra*), we both find it harder to think that meaningfulness does, for one implication would be that an eight day old life with a high percentage of meaning would count as no less meaningful than an 80 year or 80,000 year one with the same high percentage. Furthermore, dialectically speaking, the present moderate supernaturalist cannot coherently avail herself of this purely noncomparative approach, since her view is by definition a comparative one, viz., that an eternal life would offer a greater meaning than an earthly life.

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monotheist tradition have advanced. For one option to consider, it would be worth reflecting on whether God should be conceived as putting an expiration date on our souls, as it were. That is, imagine that we were able to survive the death of our body, with the virtuous receiving reward for a long while and the wicked receiving something negative, but that none of our selves would continue forever. Then, the significance of the afterlife would be greater than what an earthly life could afford, while not necessarily overshadowing it. In addition, then it would be the case that our moral decisions could in fact make a difference to the net quality of others' lives and also our own, for no eternal life would serve as a great leveller. Although this would be an unusual position for adherents to the Abrahamic faiths, I note that something broadly like it is the standard position for Traditional African Religion,<sup>18</sup> a globally under-recognized form of monotheism. It will be interesting to see how moderate supernaturalism continues to be articulated and defended as debate continues.<sup>19</sup>

*University of Pretoria (South Africa)*  
[th.metz@up.ac.za](mailto:th.metz@up.ac.za)

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<sup>18</sup> As I point out in Metz and Molefe (2021).

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