

How God could assign us a purpose without disrespect: reply to Salles

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Abstract

In one of the most widely read texts on what makes a life meaningful, composed more than 50 years ago, Kurt Baier presents an intriguing argument against the view that meaning in life would come by fulfilling a purpose God has assigned us. Baier contends that God could not avoid degrading us were He to assign us a purpose, which would mean that God, as a morally ideal being by definition, would not do so. Defenders of God-centred accounts of meaning in life, and even many of its detractors such as myself, have by and large argued that Baier is incorrect on this point. However, using my reply to Baier as a foil, Sagid Salles has recently breathed new life into Baier's old rationale, providing fresh grounds to believe that God could not avoid degrading us if He gave us a purpose to fulfil. Specifically, Salles argues that God would face a dilemma: either He could give us all the same purpose, which would be unfair since some of us would be in a better position to achieve it than others, or He could give us each a different purpose that we would be equally able to fulfil, which would also be disrespectful since God would have limited our lives so as to make other ends out of reach. In this article, I argue that God could avoid the dilemma Salles poses and hence could assign us a purpose without treating us disrespectfully.

Keywords

God's purpose; Kurt Baier; Meaning in life; Respect for persons; Thaddeus Metz.

Resumo

Em um dos textos mais extensivamente lidos sobre o que torna uma vida significativa, escrito há mais de 50 anos atrás, Kurt Baier apresenta um argumento

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intrigante contra a visão de que o sentido na vida viria com o cumprimento de um propósito que Deus nos atribuiu. Baier afirma que Deus não poderia evitar em nos degradar tivesse Ele que nos atribuir um propósito, o que significaria que Deus, como um ser moralmente ideal por definição, não poderia fazê-lo. Defensores das razões do sentido na vida centradas em Deus, e até mesmo muitos de seus detratores como eu, têm em geral argumentado que Baier está incorreto nesse ponto. No entanto, usando minha resposta a Baier como contraste, Sagid Salles recentemente deu nova vida à velha lógica de Baier, fornecendo novos motivos para se acreditar que Deus não poderia evitar em nos degradar se Ele nos desse um propósito a cumprir. Especificamente, Salles argumenta que Deus enfrentaria um dilema: ou Ele poderia dar a todos nós o mesmo propósito, o que seria injusto, tendo em vista que alguns estariam em uma posição mais favorável que outros para cumprí-lo; ou Ele poderia dar a cada um de nós um propósito diferente do qual seríamos igualmente capazes de cumprir, o que seria também desrespeitoso uma vez que Deus teria limitado nossas vidas ao colocar outros fins fora do nosso alcance. Nesse artigo eu defendo que Deus poderia evitar o dilema imposto por Salles e, conseqüentemente, poderia nos atribuir um propósito sem nos tratar desrespeitosamente.

Palavras-chave

Propósito de Deus; Kurt Baier; Sentido na vida; Respeito pelas pessoas; Thaddeus Metz.

1. Introduction

More than 50 years ago Kurt Baier gave an inaugural lecture at the Canberra University College on what makes a life meaningful (1957), and it has since then become one of the most widely studied contributions to the topic, probably third only to Leo Tolstoy's *Confession* (1884) and Richard Taylor's 'The Meaning of Life' (1970). One of Baier's arguments that has been of particular interest is his contention that God could not avoid degrading us were He to assign us a purpose, which would mean that God, as a morally ideal being by definition, would not do so. The logic of Baier's argument is that it would be conceptually impossible for God to give us a purpose that we could then fulfil so as to obtain meaning.

Defenders of God-centred accounts of meaning in life, and even detractors such as myself (Metz 2009) have tended to argue that Baier is incorrect on this point. The dominant view in the literature is that if God existed, He could create us for a

purpose without necessarily treating us disrespectfully (whether fulfilling that purpose would confer positive meaning on our lives is a separate question).

However, Sagid Salles (2010) has recently breathed new life into Baier's old rationale. Using my critical discussion of Baier as a foil, Salles provides new reasons to believe that God could not avoid degrading us were He to give us a purpose to fulfil. Specifically, Salles argues that God would face a dilemma: either He could give us all the same purpose, which would be unfair since some of us would be in a better position to achieve it than others, or He could give us each different purposes that we would be equally able to fulfil, which would also be disrespectful since God would have limited our lives so as to make other ends unreachable or at least irrational to pursue.

Salles's essay has advanced philosophical reflection on the relationships between God's purpose, respect for persons and life's meaning, and in this article I hope to do so even more. I argue that, in the final analysis, it would be possible for God to avoid the dilemma Salles poses. In fact, I maintain that God could select either horn and find a way to assign us a purpose without unfairness, restriction or any other intuitive form of disrespect.

I begin by recounting the basics of the view that meaning in life is a function of fulfilling God's purpose, Baier's objection to it, my reply to Baier, and finally Salles' response to me (section 2). Then, after discussing strategies that others might employ to respond to Salles (section 3), I advance my own, which I take to be the most promising for minimizing appeal to controversial moral and ontological positions (section 4). I conclude by reminding the reader that even if my rejoinder to Salles were successful, it would show merely that God could assign us a purpose without being disrespectful and hence immoral; that claim is compatible with the view that fulfilling God's purpose is not necessary for a meaningful life, which I ultimately maintain (section 5).

2. Overview of the Debate about God's Purpose and Respect for Persons

The dominant religious approach to meaning in life is that an individual's life is more meaningful, the better she fulfils a purpose that God has assigned to her. The idea is that God created the physical universe with a plan in mind, and that each one of us has a role to play toward its realization. Most friends of this 'purpose theory' of life's meaning maintain that it is not anyone's fate to do God's bidding; instead, it is our free choice of whether to carry out His wishes. If we elect to do what God intends for our lives, then they are meaningful, which roughly means that they exhibit something in

which to take great pride or for another to substantially admire.¹ And if we do not, or if God does not even exist, then our lives are meaningless, viz., they at least lack pride-worthy conditions and perhaps even exhibit shame-worthy ones.

This sort of view lies at the heart of the monotheistic religions of Judaism, Christianity and Islam. All three conceive of God as having created the world and human beings within it for certain ends, typically captured in the form of commandments God has laid down for us. For Christians, we are to love God and love our neighbour, whereas, for Muslims, we are to live up to the five pillars of faith, prayer, charity, pilgrimage and fasting, all of which signify obedience to Allah. Meaning in life comes from conforming to God's will.

Kurt Baier, one of the most influential atheist and naturalist philosophers in the post-war era, is well known for having critically investigated this purpose theory of meaning in life, particularly as it has been expressed in the Christian tradition. While he provides many objections to it, his most influential and probably deepest one is that God could not avoid treating us disrespectfully were He to assign us a purpose. Regardless of the content of the purpose, Baier maintains, God would degrade us simply by creating us in order to fulfil one that He picked out. It is worth quoting the crucial passage in order to grasp Baier's point:

It is degrading for a man to be regarded as merely serving a purpose. If, at a garden party, I ask a man in a livery, 'What is your purpose?' I am insulting him. I might as well have asked, 'What are you for?' Such questions reduce him to the level of a gadget, a domestic animal, or perhaps a slave. I imply that we allot to him the tasks, the goals, the aims which he is to pursue; that his wishes and desires and aspirations and purposes are to count for little or nothing....(1957: 104).²

Baier contends that such behaviour would be to treat a person merely as a means, the quintessential form of wrongdoing by a Kantian ethic, and he maintains that God giving us a purpose would be an instance of it. Since God is essentially a being that cannot do wrong, God therefore could not assign us a purpose, making the purpose theory of meaning incoherent.³

¹ For an articulation and defence of this understanding of what 'life's meaning' means, see Metz (2001); Kauppinen (2012).

² For approving echoes of this point, see Hepburn (1966: 262-263); Joske (1974: 259); Singer (1996: 29).

³ Note that the issue is neither that meaning in our lives would be reduced by virtue of God's disrespectful treatment, nor that we would have to choose between meaning and autonomy, which Walker (1989) suggests is the concern. Instead, the objection is that if God is by definition unable to

In my engagement with Baier, I have accepted that if God assigned us a purpose that He would treat us as a means, but have denied that He would thereby necessarily treat us *merely* as a means (Metz 2009). To enter a barber shop and ask the barber to cut one's hair in exchange for some money is to treat the barber as a means, but it is not to treat him *merely* as a means; the latter would be exemplified by entering the barber shop, putting a gun to the barber's head and demanding a haircut on pain of getting shot. Similarly, if God made us with a certain end in mind, but did not prompt us to realize it by threatening, deceiving, tricking, exploiting or otherwise manipulating our wills, then He, too, would *merely treat us as a means*, and not *treat us merely as a means*. Imagine that a divine request were made, instead of a divine command; the God-Father would be making an offer that we could in fact refuse.

Here is where Salles (2010) enters the picture, providing a new argument for thinking that God could not in fact avoid treating us solely as tools for the realization of His ends. According to Salles, if God existed, He would face a dilemma in trying to give us a purpose while treating our wills with respect. Either God would give us all the same purpose or he would give us different purposes, and Salles contends that disrespect would necessarily surface whichever way God chose.

First, suppose that God were to assign us all the same purpose, say, to emulate Him or to achieve moral ends. In that case, given patent differences in genes, socialization and our environment, some of us would be placed in a better position to realize the relevant purpose than others. And, according to Salles, an unequal ability to realize God's purpose would mean unfair treatment of us on God's part, a form of disrespect of beings who have the same dignity simply by virtue of being persons, children of God or the like. Surely, in order to treat us as moral equals, God would have to give us the same chances at living a meaningful life, so Salles plausibly contends.

Second, suppose that God instead were to assign us different purposes, depending on the varying internal and external conditions that He knows we face.⁴ That is, imagine that He gave each of us a specific goal that we would be equally able to realize in light of our differential circumstances. Then, according to Salles, fairness would come at the expense of freedom; for the only way that a given individual could

perform immoral actions, and if it would be immoral to assign a purpose, then God *could not* perform the function that the purpose theorist contends is necessary for meaning in life.

⁴ Which is precisely what Jacob Affolter (2007) in a thoughtful essay maintains that God would do.

achieve meaning in life, at least to a degree equal to others, would be to follow the single path that God had laid down for her. 'It doesn't matter how valuable is the purpose that God attributed to me, even so I can consider it offensive that He restricted my choice in relation to the accomplishment of other ends of equal value' (Salles 2010: 108).⁵ To use Salles' example, if a person were born having been assigned the divine purpose of being a human rights lawyer (2010: 108), it would treat her merely as a means to that end, since she could not obtain the same amount of meaning in her life by becoming, say, a pianist or school teacher, in the way that others have been allowed to do.

Salles' objection to the purpose theory of life's meaning is interesting and powerful. In the following, however, I argue that God would be so clever as to avoid the dilemma that he has presented.

3. Extant Strategies for Defending God's Purpose

Before indicating what I think are the most promising ways out for a God seeking to assign us a purpose without disrespect, I canvass two other approaches that are suggested by the literature. I contend that they are weak for appealing to highly contested views of ethics and metaphysics, or at least that they involve more controversial claims than are necessary in order to plausibly respond to Salles.

3.1. Questioning the Principle of Respect

First off, there are some purpose theorists who would be willing to 'bite the bullet' by holding that arbitrariness in the will of God with regard to us would not be immoral. It is not uncommon to encounter those in the Muslim faith willing to accept as ethical God's provision of unequal opportunities to human beings. One common rationale for this view is that since God created us, we belong to Him as something akin to His property, and He may do whatever He likes with what He owns. Our attitude should be one of gratitude just for being alive and for whatever we have been fortunate to have received from Him, so the reasoning goes.

Now, it is certainly true that God would not owe it to a person to create her in the first place; after all, there would be no one to owe anything prior to her existence. And so an attitude of gratitude may be appropriate for having been given the gift of life, at least supposing one can expect some kind of net benefit relative to non-

⁵ 'Ainda, não importa o quão valoroso seja o propósito que Deus atribuiu a mim, ainda assim posso julgar ofensivo Ele ter restringido a minha escolha no que diz respeito ao cumprimento de vários outros fins de igual valor.'

existence.⁶

However, even if God did not owe us life, upon having been created it could be that God would owe us respectful treatment. Here, Jews and Christians often appeal to the idea that God created us in His likeness, relevantly unlike bugs, shrubs and rocks, conferring on us a dignity that demands some kind of honouring. Immanuel Kant is commonly taken to have articulated the logical implication of this view, such that, for him, we stand on a comparable footing with God in terms of rights and duties.⁷

Muslims, however, by and large emphasize the respects in which God is unlike us, indeed is greater than us, and they also tend to eschew talk of God having an ‘image’.⁸ Even so, for most in Islam, human beings are an honoured and special part of creation, viz., have a dignity, by virtue of being a vicegerent of God or being able to approximate divine attributes such as intelligence and beneficence more than other created beings. In addition, at the core of Islam is the idea of God meting out rewards and penalties based on individual desert; Heaven and Hell are retributively just responses (even if informed by mercy) to how one has chosen to live one’s life. These central elements of the Islamic faith provide strong reasons for Muslims to question the idea that, since we are His creation, God may treat us however He pleases, such as serving as food for His favourite pig.

In any event, I do not wish to enter into intricate debates about how best to interpret Islam. In this article I address myself to those who accept the Kantian principle of respect for persons, or some ethic akin to it, which emerged from the monotheistic tradition and is probably the most widely held ethical theory today. I recognize that some would maintain that God is not bound by this principle. However, such a perspective would be a minority view among professional philosophers and theologians, and, furthermore, it would be interesting to see what would follow if God were bound by it. Could He assign us a purpose if morally required not to degrade our capacity for self-governance? Baier and Salles say ‘no’, while I say ‘yes’.

3.2. Appealing to Supra-Physical Powers

A second major strategy for responding to Salles would be to contend that we do not in fact face unequal abilities to achieve God’s uniform purpose for us. Although natural capacities clearly differ among us, our ability to achieve God’s end might turn

⁶ Which contemporary ‘anti-natalists’ deny in interesting ways.

⁷ On which see Schneewind (1998: 510-513).

⁸ But see the 38th *Hadith*.

on a supernatural capacity that all of us share.

For example, some would maintain that we have libertarian free will, roughly, the ability to initiate a causal chain from outside the spatio-temporal laws of nature, the exercise of which in certain ways is constitutive of moral choice. Another approach would be to say that, because we have immortal souls, we have an infinity of time in which to achieve moral perfection; and since any finite time added to infinity is infinity, we all have an equal ability to achieve that goal.⁹

There are of course purpose theorists who believe that achieving the end God has assigned us would require us to have a non-physical self, either because it could freely cause an action independently of the course of nature up to the present moment, or because it would give people an eternal existence in which to perfect their moral nature (or, of course, to enjoy Heaven). If one is already appealing to God's purpose to ground meaning, it would not be a huge step, one might suggest, to appeal to additional spiritual conditions, manifest by us, in order to avoid Salles' objection that the natural lottery would upset the fairness of God's plan.

However, it is worth noting that the most prominent contemporary philosophical defenders of purpose theory have tended not to invoke additional supra-physical conditions beyond God Himself. John Cottingham (2003, 2005), the most influential proponent over the past 10 years or so, rejects the idea that a soul is necessary for meaning, as do process theologians such as Charles Hartshorne (1952, 1984), Delwin Brown (1971) and Michael Levine (1987). According to these thinkers, meaning is a function of one's purely physical self relating to God in the right way, a much simpler, and also more readily comprehensible, view than the idea that meaning turns on one's (non-physical) soul interacting with one's (physical) body to perform actions that help to realize God's plan.

In addition, as with the previous strategy, it would be philosophically interesting to set this one aside. So, beyond granting Salles that the principle of respect is binding on God, let us also grant him that human beings lack any supra-physical self that would confer on them the equal ability to achieve God's purpose regardless of their physical circumstances. It should be revealing to consider whether and how God might respectfully assign a purpose to human persons, understood as purely physical creatures.

⁹ Both ideas are implicit in Immanuel Kant's (1788) thought.

4. How God Could Respectfully Assign a Purpose

Suppose, then, that a moral God is a respectful God, and that He is obligated to respect us as beings who are no more than matter. I first indicate how such a God could respectfully assign us all the same purpose, then how He could respectfully assign us each a variety of purposes, and finally, more tentatively, how He could respectfully assign us each a single purpose tailored to our different contexts.

4.1. *One Purpose for All*

The clearest way that I imagine God could avoid Salles' dilemma would be to address the first horn, which supposes that God would assign us all the same purpose. This approach is the dominant one in the religious tradition, where it is standardly thought that God would intend for us to treat one another morally. Salles contends that if we were merely physical beings and hence confronted by differential natural obstacles to realizing the moral end, then being assigned the same end would be unfair, and hence not something that God, as a morally perfect being, could do.

In making this objection, Salles supposes that the meaning in life would have to come by virtue of *attaining* the moral end, but that is not the only plausible way to understanding the relationship between life's meaning and end-pursuit. Consider instead the view that God could assign to everyone the same purpose but that meaning is a function of the extent to which realized one's ability to make progress toward it.¹⁰ According to this approach, meaning in our lives is not a function of actually reaching some end-state, but rather of the degree to which we approached it in light of what our varying biological, social and other capabilities make possible for us.

A person's life would then count as meaningful on balance if she achieved a high proportion of the maximum amount of progress toward the realization of God's purpose that she was in a physical position to make. This view entails that if she did, say, 90 per cent of what she could have done to make progress toward the realization of God's purpose, then her life would be meaningful on balance, whereas if she did only 35 per cent, it would not be.

Such a conception of how God's purpose for us might constitute meaning in our lives avoids the problem that Salles raises of unequal physical abilities to achieve the goal God has set for us. Meaning plausibly does not consist in one's *achieving* the goal, and instead is a matter of one *progressing toward it to the extent that one physically can*. By this

¹⁰ Although he is arguing against supernaturalist perspectives, the discussion in E.M. Adams (2002) occasioned my awareness of this move. Cf. Metz (2013: 147-148).

view, everyone is capable of an equal degree of meaning in their lives, since meaning is a function of the degree to which a person made use of her particular limited capacities to move toward the achievement of God's purpose. A meaningful life is not one that necessarily reaches the finish line in a race where some have a head start, a revealing analogy that Salles invokes to illustrate his point (2010: 104); instead, it is one in which a person has made substantial use of her abilities to run as close to the finish line as she can.¹¹

4.2. *Several Purposes for Each*

I turn now to the other horn of Salles' dilemma, the one that considers God not assigning us all the same purpose, but rather contouring purposes to our variegated physical circumstances. Salles imagines God doling out goals to people that would be appropriate given their particular contexts such that they have an equal chance to realize them. And recall that Salles thinks that this would be for God to 'restrict choice', to 'treat us as devices' and to 'manipulate us' (2010: 108).

The objection appears to depend on the idea that God would enable us to pursue only one goal, given our varying contexts. However, God, being all-knowing and all-powerful, could probably structure the world so that we could have an equal chance of attaining a variety of goals in light of our biological, social and other physical conditions. Return to the person whose talents, upbringing and society give her a good shot at becoming a human rights lawyer. Presumably, they could equally, or at least comparably, enable her to become a philosopher, a social scientist, a debate coach, a labour organizer, a director of an NGO and many other things. I submit that God would respect our capacity for choice if He gave us a variety of possibilities, any one of which we could elect to take up.

Salles might reply that, while a handful of possible ends is better than only one, it is still too limited. However, how much is enough? Surely, in order to respect our capacity for choice God would not have to give us an infinite number of options. And however many options Salles suspects would be sufficient for respect is probably something that God, being omnipotent and omniscient, could organize.

4.3. *One Purpose for Each*

Finally, I consider what resources there are for deeming respectful a God who

¹¹ While I believe that this manoeuvre indicates how God could *fairly* assign us all the same purpose, it does not follow that the conception of meaning that emerges is plausible all things considered, on which see Metz (2013: 148-150).

would give us each only a single purpose that would have a good chance of realization in light of our different circumstances. Suppose, then, that a person could obtain a meaningful life only by becoming a human rights lawyer, and that she could not do so if she, say, became a debate coach. I am not sure that the following reply to Salles with regard to this case is successful, but I put it forth as worthy of consideration.¹²

If we were designed so as to achieve one specific goal in life, then it would be plausible to think of our identity as constituted by that *telos*. The answer to the question of who one essentially is would have to include reference to the end that one had been created to realize. ‘Who is she? She is, in part, the one who can live a meaningful life if and only if she achieves the aim of becoming a human rights lawyer.’

Now, if our identities were fixed by a particular divine purpose for us, then it would become hard to object that God would be treating us disrespectfully by assigning us only one. To see this, consider an analogy. Imagine someone objecting that he had been created at a particular time and place, on the ground that this restricted the choices he would have liked to be able to make. It would be an odd objection to make, since, according to a plausible account of personal identity, a being created at some *other* time and place would, *necessarily, not* be him. Similar remarks might go for a divine purpose that would arguably be essential to who one is; if our potential human rights lawyer had been assigned a different divine purpose, then it would, necessarily, not be her who has that other end, and so it would make little sense for her to object that having been assigned the end of being a human rights lawyer restricts her choice.¹³

5. Conclusion

In this article, I have sought to question the views of Sagid Salles, who has intriguingly argued that even if God were to assign us a purpose with the intuitively right content (such as being a human rights lawyer, and not serving as food for a pig), God could not avoid treating us disrespectfully. If God were to assign us all the same purpose, doing so would be unfair since some people would be in a better position to realize it than others, whereas if God were to assign each a different purpose, doing so would unduly restrict our freedom. My central reply has been that even if God assigned us all the same purpose, there need not be unfairness if meaning is a function not of

¹² Here I expand on some ideas from Affolter (2007), who contends that meaning in life would probably come from fulfilling a unique purpose that God has assigned to each of us.

¹³ As Adila Hassim has reminded me in conversation, there can be fates worse than death, and having been created into such a condition would be a firm ground for complaint. However, this complaint would be a function of the *content* of God’s purpose, and not the bare fact of being *assigned* one, which is Salles’ target.

attaining the purpose, but of striving toward it in light of one's particular circumstances. In addition, I have argued that we can imagine a God who assigns a given individual not just one purpose to fulfil in her context, but a wide variety of them. And I have, finally, suggested that even if God gave each person only a single path toward a meaningful life that fits her physical circumstances, this might not be disrespectful insofar as that end would perhaps make her who she essentially is.

Even if (some of) these replies are sound, all that would show is that God could conceivably assign us a purpose, viz., that doing so would not be inconsistent with His impeccability, His inability to do wrong. This conclusion is far from the positive claim that in order to obtain meaning in life, there must exist a God who assigns one a purpose that one then strives to fulfil. Just because it would be possible for God to assign a purpose does not mean that He must do so in order for us to obtain meaning in life. Like most philosophers, I am fussy, wanting the purpose theory not merely to be rejected, but to be rejected for the right reasons, something to be explored elsewhere.¹⁴

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¹⁴ See Metz (2013: 106-118, 142-160).

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