


ORIGINAL ARTICLE

Why are we here?

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Abstract

If one believes in God, what should one say is the answer to the question of why we are here? In this article, I hope to show that when we ask why we are here we ask several different questions at once and that Theism allows (indeed dictates) that these different questions have very different answers. Appreciating these differences can remove at least that perplexity generated when an answer which could well be plausible were it to be given in response to one question of God's purpose for us is mislocated and treated as if it were an answer to another.

Keywords: purpose; providence; God; theism

Introduction: what is the problem?

At one stage in his recent thought-provoking book, *The Human Predicament*, David Benatar expresses a worry which he is far from alone in having.¹ The worry is that the question 'Why are we here?', when raised in a traditional theistic context, cannot have a satisfactory answer. Spinoza famously went so far as to reject traditional Theism in part on that very basis – God, he reasoned, simply could not have *any* reasons to create anything other than Himself, so God must be all that there is. And whether or not one holds to traditional Theism, it must be admitted that there is something at the least puzzling about the answers to the question which that tradition seems to offer.

[W]e might be told that our divinely endowed purpose – the purpose for which God created us – is to help our fellows. However, . . . [this] would not explain why any of our fellows (whether human or animal) were created. If you were created to help your fellow, and your fellow was created to help you, we are still left wondering why either of you (and by extension any being) was created. This purpose smacks of circularity.²

So says Benatar, hence concluding that 'our divinely endowed purpose – the purpose for which God created us' cannot be to help one another. Nor, for similar reasons, Benatar argues, can the purpose for which we are given this life be to prepare us for the next life. As he puts it:

It is hard to understand why God would create a being in order to prepare it for an afterlife, given that no afterlife would be needed or desired if the being had not been

created in the first place. It is much like a parent creating a child for the purpose of that child's having a satisfying retirement. Satisfying retirements are worth aiming at if one already exists, but they hardly provide grounds for creating people who will have such retirements. The sort of meaning that the afterlife provides cannot explain why God would have created us at all.³

Many theists reading these passages will agree that they at least raise puzzles for traditional Theism.

In this article, I aim to offer solutions to these puzzles and thus show that the theistic 'gambit', as Benatar calls it, may not be quite as hopeless as these comments of his alone might lead one to suspect. God's purpose for us may well be that we help our fellows (as well as ourselves), even though that was not His purpose in creating us; His will for us now that we are here may well be that we prepare for an afterlife, even though that was not His purpose in putting us here in the first place. To help us see these and other possibilities, consider the following example of something which I shall maintain is an analogous situation.

An analogy

I send off for a 'Make Your Own Orrery'⁴ kit, intending to use the task of putting it together to challenge my technical skills. The kit arrives and I spend several happy hours putting it together. Once it is completed, after thinking about taking it apart and selling it to someone else via eBay, I instead decide to put it on the sideboard in my main room in college so that looking at it intermittently over the subsequent years will give me pleasure. Occasionally, as time passes, I effect a few minor repairs or in other ways sustain it in its operation. And, now and again, as it's there and is as good for the purpose as is any other object to which I may refer, I use it in a tutorial or in another context as an example to illustrate some philosophical point or other.

The example of the orrery shows the fact that the purpose which explains why something was brought into existence need not be the same as the purpose which explains why that thing is kept in existence. The purpose of bringing the orrery into existence was to challenge my technical skills. But it had completely fulfilled that purpose the moment it was finished. Had I instantly disassembled it then and there, it would have accomplished that purpose just as well as it actually did, with me actually putting it on a sideboard and in my own way sustaining it in existence thereafter. The purpose of the orrery's remaining in existence is to ornament the room in which it sits and thereby afford me pleasure when I look at it. That's not why I created it, but it is why I keep it around. And those two purposes do not exhaust the purposes that the orrery has. The orrery sometimes serves to illustrate some philosophical point or other. In particular – right now – it is serving to illustrate the point that the purpose which explains why something came to exist need not be the purpose which explains why it continues to exist, which in turn need not be the purpose it is currently serving for the person who is its creator. And this does not exhaust the purposes of the orrery. Let's look at the orrery in a more detail. Let's look at one particular cog.

The purpose of this particular cog in the orrery being as it is and being where it is in the wider mechanism is to ensure that the little coloured ball which represents Jupiter and which sits at the end of the armature the rotation of which it affects rotates at a rate which stands in the correct ratio to that of the little coloured ball which represents Saturn and which sits at the end of another armature. As it happens, this isn't a purpose which I had for this cog as I put it where I did. I had no purpose for putting it where I did other than to follow the relevant instruction in the instruction

book. But it should be noted that this purpose of the cog only managed to fail to be a purpose that I had for it because I did not know in detail what I was doing as I put the orrery together. So, to make the case more closely analogous to that of God creating the universe, we'd have to think of my having designed and made the orrery from scratch, being perfectly knowledgeable about the rationale for each of its parts being as they are. Even though with this adjustment to the example the purpose of the cog in the larger whole becomes the purpose which I had for the cog as I put it in place, it should be noted that this purpose of facilitating the representative function of the orrery in a particular way remains a different purpose from any of those yet mentioned – challenging my technical skill; ornamenting my room; or illustrating a philosophical point.

Finally, the orrery may have more purposes than those already described, given to it by myself and given to it by others. So, for example, perhaps one day I use the orrery as a paperweight. If so, for the period that I so use it, holding down papers is a purpose that it has. By way of another example, perhaps on another day, I ask one of my students to take the orrery and put it to a purpose of their own choosing. Then, assuming they follow my instruction, it will be serving a purpose of mine (that my student endow the orrery with a purpose of their own) and a purpose of my student's (whatever purpose they do in fact put it to). The possibilities, if not quite endless, are innumerable.

So, a problem is that we are asking many questions at once

'What's the purpose of that?' someone in my rooms asks one day, pointing to the orrery. 'Why is it here?', 'What's it doing here?', 'What's it for?', 'What is its creator-endowed purpose?', 'What is the purpose its creator had in bringing it into existence?' This perhaps sounds like a single question, formulated in several different ways. If we suppose that it is a single question, then we may consequently suppose that it must have a single answer. But, if we do suppose things along these lines, we are being misled. The discussion so far has, I trust, sufficed to show that. My contention is that when we ask, 'What's the purpose of this?', pointing to the universe as a whole, or when we ask, 'Why are we here?', 'What are we meant to be doing here?', or 'What is this life for?', matters are similar. We are asking various different questions at once, questions to which the answers may well be different, indeed very plausibly *are* different on Theism. Appreciating this is the key to resolving the puzzles people often have with theistic answers to the question of why we are here. Appreciating it means that we need not rule out the theistic gambit prematurely. For appreciating it allows us to appreciate in turn that, in Benatar's terms, there may well be no such thing as our 'divinely endowed purpose', singular. Rather, we may well have a number of divinely endowed purposes, plural. The divinely endowed purpose(s?) for which we were created need not be the divinely endowed purpose(s?) for which we continue in existence. And the divinely endowed purpose(s?) which we have now we are continuing in existence may be something else again. Finally, as one of our divinely endowed purposes is that we assign ourselves purposes (or so I shall maintain), the possibilities multiply yet further, if not quite becoming endless at least becoming innumerable. There are, in short, more moves open to someone playing the Theistic gambit than one might be forgiven for at first noticing as possibilities if one read the passages from Benatar which I quoted at the start of the article and did not reflect on them further. In what follows, I hope to illustrate some of these possibilities by giving some plausible answers to some of these questions as they may be disambiguated from one another. Or at least some answers which are plausible on traditional Theism.⁵

First, why did God create the Universe and us and why might Classical Theism and non-Classical Theism answer that question differently from one another?

In the background of my discussion is an assumed traditional Theistic picture. This picture stands most obviously in contrast to Atheism, but it also stands in contrast to Pantheism, Panentheism, and certain sorts of Process Theism. On Theism, as I understand it, a God with the traditional divine attributes created and sustains a universe which is ontologically distinct from Him. There are various ways of filling-in this sketch-outline of Theism. The distinction between a certain type of Classical Theistic rendering, on the one hand, and other types of Classical or what one might call Neo-classical and Open Theistic renderings, on the other, is the one that makes a difference to some of the issues addressed here. So, I shall now draw attention to these renderings as they make these differences. As will already have become apparent, I shall need to paint with a broad brush, but the details which resultantly will not be picked out are not ones which affect the substance of the matters treated.

The terms are contested, but it would be common to understand Classical Theism as being committed to an Aquinas-strength doctrine of divine simplicity and, although elsewhere I like to allow for a more inclusive understanding, this is how I'm going to be taking the term here. Classical Theism, so understood, faces a well-known problem of modal collapse. The problem is roughly this. If God is identical with His act of creation, then every possible world has God and His act of creation in it; thus, every world has this creation in it; and thus creation in all its particulars is as necessary as God is. It turns out that the fact that I have typed just those words is as necessary as is the fact that God is good. Whole books can be devoted to this problem and in what follows I must, for reasons of space, simply pick what seems to me to be the best route for the Classical Theist to take to avoid modal collapse and explain the implications of taking that route for the title question.⁶

The Classical Theist needs to maintain that there are logically possible worlds in which there's a God and a created order (e.g. a universe such as ours) and worlds in which there's a God and no created order (and thus no universe at all like ours) and needs to hold that there is no difference in God across those worlds. In particular then, the Classical Theist needs to maintain that there is no divine intention to create in the worlds with creations in them, an intention that is absent in the worlds without creations, the presence of this intention in the worlds with creations explaining the existence of those creations there and its absence in the other worlds explaining the absence of creations there. Thus, Classical Theism is committed to the view that God created the universe without intending to do so. On this account then, if we define an accident as an event which is not to any extent caused to happen by anyone's intention that it happen, we must say that Classical Theism is committed to seeing the universe's coming into existence as an accident.⁷

On other theistic views, one may maintain what to my mind is the more commonsensical view, viz. that the divine mind differs between those worlds in which there's a universe such as ours and those in which there is not and that one aspect of this difference explains why there's a universe such as ours in those worlds in which there is a universe such as ours and why there's not in those in which there's not. In the set of worlds in which there's a universe such as ours, there is a divine intention to create a universe such as ours; in the others, there's not. In our world, it's the intention which God had to create our universe that caused our universe to come into existence. The fact that there is a universe such as ours is not an accident in the sense defined. It's here because God intended it to be here.

I take it as logically necessary that if there is to be a purpose in something's coming into existence, that requires an intention that it come into existence. The intention is

the mental act of willing (due to the purpose) which directly or indirectly causes the thing in question to come into existence.⁸ Thus, Classical Theism is committed to there being no purpose for the universe coming into existence. The universe is not here for something in that sense. On this Theistic view, the answer to the question of the purpose of the universe in that sense of the question ('Why was it created?') is the same as it is on Atheism ('There's no purpose behind the universe coming into existence.') though the view differs from Atheism in that it posits that there is a divine cause of the universe's coming into existence. In the terms of our analogy, it'd be as if one held the view that whilst a particular orrery was brought into existence by someone, it was not brought into existence due to an intention in that someone that it be an orrery, rather than that it be a clock, a banana, or indeed anything. For myself, I do think this is a disadvantage of the Classical Theist view, but, because I tentatively embrace a temporally localized version of the 'accident hypothesis' myself later, I cannot in consistency say that allowing accidents *per se* into creation is in all cases something to be avoided by the Theist. The objection to Classical Theism that I myself would raise in this context then would not be on the grounds that it posits accidents *per se*, but on the grounds that it necessitates an accident that is 'too big'.

On non-Classical Theistic views, by contrast, God may be said to have had a purpose in bringing the universe into existence. We may then, on these other views, legitimately speculate as to the nature of this purpose. To revert back again to our analogy with the orrery, it's not possible that God brought the universe into existence as a challenge to his technical skill, so why might He have created a universe and why one such as ours, rather one quite different?

A number of answers to this question have been suggested. Sketching any would serve the primary purpose of this article, which is to illustrate how the answer to the question 'Why did God create this?' is plausibly different from the answers that one might give to some other questions concerning the divinely endowed purposes of what has been created, e.g. 'Why does God sustain this?' and 'What are God's purposes for us now He has created and is sustaining us?' For illustrative purposes then, I shall pick the answer to this question which seems most plausible to me. This states that God's purpose in bringing a universe such as ours into existence is to instantiate the sorts of values that humans currently have and which would not have been instantiated had God remained the sole existent or had He created certain other types of universe (e.g. lifeless ones) or had He created us in a Heavenly realm straight away.⁹ These values cluster around a set of phenomena, which includes the following.¹⁰ In our world, sentient, free, self-conscious and in itself morally significant life – persons such as ourselves – make decisions that are in themselves morally significant ones. As we do so, we either advance, individually and collectively, towards loving relationships with one another and with God or we fail to do so. And we consequently develop our characters along the way – in the good case, developing courage, self-sacrifice, heroism, etc.; in the bad case, the opposite. That there are such persons in such circumstances and doing such things is the intrinsically good state of affairs which would not have obtained had God remained the sole existent (or had He created a lifeless universe or us in Heaven straight away) and God's purpose in creating us here was to instantiate these peculiar values.¹¹ Further, now we are here, His purpose for us is that we do indeed use our gifts to 'help our fellows', in Benatar's terms, as well as to help ourselves.

To make this last point clearer, it would probably be worth using the standard distinction between God's permissive will and His perfect will. This distinction is perhaps best introduced by way of an example. I ask my daughter to tidy her room. She asks whether or not I shall coerce her to do so or punish her in any way if she does not tidy her room. And I say that I shall not. My perfect will for her – what it is that I would ideally have her

do – is that she freely tidy her room, that is that she do so without coercion or threat of punishment. However, in order for that to be a possibility, I must therefore permit her not to tidy her room; I cannot hypnotize her so that she tidies it or threaten to beat her if she does not. Thus, when she (as was entirely predictable to me) instead watches television, she is thereby conforming to my permissive will but not to my perfect will. With the distinction between God’s permissive will and His perfect will in mind, we can explain why God’s purpose for us (His permissive will) is that we exercise that freedom as we choose and it was to instantiate the valuable state of our doing so that He created us. Consequent on creating us, His purpose for us (His perfect will) is that we exercise our freedom always in the good way.¹² Needless to say, these issues could do with further treatment. However, that further treatment is not necessary given the primary aim of this article. To repeat, the primary aim of this article is not to assess the relative or absolute plausibility of this answer, but merely to use it as an example of a possible answer to the question of the purpose of the universe when that question is understood as asking for the purpose (if any) that God had in creating a universe such as ours, with us in it; and it is to show that this might be a different purpose from some other divinely endowed purposes that may be had by creation in general and by us in particular.¹³

An interlude on *Imago Dei*

Before moving on, it should be noted that there is another parallel with the orrery case. In the case of the orrery, I brought into existence for the purpose of challenging my technical skill a creation that had a certain *representative* purpose. (An orrery is something the purpose of which is to represent the solar system.) In this case, according to the answer we are favourably entertaining at the moment, God brought into existence the universe with the intention that creatures such as ourselves evolve within it (so that we might use our free will to make morally significant choices, etc.) for the purpose of instantiating those values which are peculiar to us in our current life. His perfect will for us is that we use this free will in the right way (to help our fellows and ourselves), albeit that His permissive will is that it be up to us how we use it, for had He ensured His perfect will was fulfilled, that would have been to have frustrated His purpose in creating us, viz. to instantiate the values that are peculiar to creatures such as ourselves facing genuine choices over morally significant matters. My point now is that one may maintain that in bringing us into existence with that purpose (or, if you will, cluster of purposes), God was bringing into existence something that similarly has a certain representative purpose, to represent God Himself.

The doctrine of *Imago Dei* suggests that just as an orrery is meant to be like the solar system in certain respects, so we are meant to be like God in certain respects. Let me immediately concede that much more would need to be said before the view being mentioned would be sufficiently detailed to be tractable to argument. But, again let me plead, I am mentioning it not so as to facilitate an assessment of its absolute or relative plausibility, but simply so as to locate it as a possible answer to a question that one may raise which is distinct from the question of what purpose God had in bringing us into existence. I use it to illustrate that it is possible to hold that our purpose is to be like God in certain respects (it’s in the nature of beings such as ourselves to be like God in certain respects, just as it’s in the nature of an orrery to be like the solar system in certain respects), even if God did not bring us into existence in order to fulfil a purpose *He had* of being like God in certain respects, but rather brought us into existence to instantiate our peculiar *ante-mortem* value as sketched previously. It’s not even clear that it would make sense for God to have had the purpose of being like Himself in some respects and to have tried to realize that purpose by creating something. But it clearly makes sense to maintain

that in order to fulfil some other purpose (I am favourably considering the possibility of this being the purpose of instantiating values of the sort that are peculiar to us in our *ante-mortem* lives), God might have created something the purpose of which is to be like Him in some respects. I did not have the purpose of being like the solar system when I created the orrery. I had the purpose of challenging my technical skill. But I created something the representative purpose of which is to be like the solar system in order to challenge my technical skill. Matters could be similar here, swapping out *me* for *God*; *challenging technical skill* for *instantiating those values peculiar to us in our ante-mortem lives*; and *representing the solar system* for *carrying the image of God*.¹⁴

Second, why has God sustained the universe and us?

We have seen then that (putting Classical Theism to one side for a moment) it looks as if it is at least conceptually possible that God had a purpose in creating the universe and us and that the purpose that God had in creating the universe and us is not the same as the purpose He has in sustaining the universe and us. So, having looked at what one might say about a possible divine purpose in creating the universe and us, let's look at what one might say about God's possible purpose(s?) in sustaining the universe and us. Perhaps, before going further, I should underscore the fact that it is the continuing existence of the universe and us as a species within it that I am currently considering. I'll later consider if God could have a purpose in sustaining our existence as individuals outside the universe and *post-mortem* and what this entails *vis-à-vis* our purposes here.

On a certain Deistic view, God does not need (and perhaps couldn't even have) any purpose additional to whatever purpose He had in creating the universe in order to keep it around. This is so as, on this view, in creating the universe, He created something with a certain amount of 'existential inertia', as it were. Presuming Determinism, all that has happened since then has unfolded without need (or possibility?) for any further purposive action on His part. Someone holding such a view would be free to answer the first question ('What was God's purpose in creating the universe (us)?') in the way that we've indicated Non-classical Theists may answer it and then to respond to this second question ('What is God's purpose in keeping the universe (us) around?') by saying that there is no additional purpose to which we may refer in answer. The universe's continued existence and our coming about and continuing as a species is already 'baked into the cake', as it were, when God's first and only purpose is implemented. To think that there has to be a second purpose (or perhaps even that there could be a second purpose), a person holding this view may maintain, is based on a faulty metaphysical premise, the premise that God needs to do something (or can do something) to sustain the universe. However, if one doesn't adopt that view, then the conceptual possibility opens that there is an answer to this second question and that this answer may be different from the answer to the first. One may suggest that it is possible that we do continue to be here for a purpose and it is possible that this purpose isn't the purpose (if any) for which we were brought into existence in the first place. At least if one's a non-Classical Theist, one may say that there are two distinct purposes in play here.

One may say this. But one need not say it. If one is a non-Classical Theist, one may instead say that only the first phenomenon (the universe coming into existence) is to be explained by reference to a divine purpose. The second (the universe continuing to exist, at least now) is not. That is to say, the non-Classical Theist may maintain that whilst the universe and we came into existence for a purpose, it does not (and we as a species do not) now continue for any purpose. It is not even, as it is on Deism, that the wider universe and our continued existence inevitably comes with the purpose which resulted in them being brought into existence. It is rather that, at least now, it and we continue to

exist entirely accidentally. I shall consider the view that we continue to exist for some purpose, before myself settling tentatively on the view that, at least now and for the last hundred or so years, we continue to exist only accidentally.

It will be recalled that Classical Theism could not – if it was to avoid the problem of modal collapse¹⁵ – maintain that the universe came into existence for a purpose. That being so, it absented itself from the earlier speculative discussion of what purpose(s) God might have had in bringing the universe and us into existence. However, Classical Theism may come back into the discussion here, as we consider what purpose(s) God might have in sustaining the universe and us. This is because the Classical Theist may maintain that across all of logical space God intends that *if* there is a universe containing any creatures such as us, then it and they continue on for a given purpose. The Classical Theist may maintain this even whilst maintaining that there is no difference in God's intentions across logical space which explains why in some worlds He exists with universes containing creatures like us, which creatures consequently persist for that given purpose, and why in some worlds He exists without universes containing creatures like us, creatures who consequently aren't there in the first place for the question of the purpose of their persistence to gain traction. In other words, even a Classical Theist who has to say that we came into existence by accident need not say that we continue to exist by accident. So, for the Classical Theist perhaps more clearly than for the non-Classical Theist, the answers to the two questions we've focused on so far ('Why create?' and 'Why sustain?') may be different – we're here by accident, but we don't continue to be here by accident. Perhaps another analogy will help sum up where we've got to with this point. According to non-Classical Theisms, it can be maintained that we are equivalent to children born of planned pregnancies; according to Classical Theism, it can only be maintained that we are equivalent to children born of unplanned pregnancies. But, whatever the intentional or unintentional factors which led to a particular child's being born, once he or she is born, the parents obviously have reasons not to let the child die. And, on any Theistic account, humanity are God's children. So, on any Theistic account, it may be maintained that humanity continues on due to an intention of God's that we do so, rather than by accident. Even if 'Why are we here?' gets the null answer, 'Why are we still here?' may not.

What then, we may ask, might one sensibly suggest is God's purpose in sustaining the universe and us as a species within it? The answer that might at first suggest itself is that we adapt the Deistic view just sketched and maintain that we continue to exist for the same purpose as the one which we have sympathetically entertained as a possible answer on non-Classical Theism to the question as to why we came into existence in the first place. One might suggest that it is to instantiate the peculiar values that we do. It's not, as the Deistic view we just looked at held, that there is no divine act of sustaining, but the same purpose as lay behind the divine act of creating also lies behind the divine act of sustaining. Indeed, if the purpose of creation is that creatures like us evolve, then obviously the universe needs to stay around for long enough for creatures such as us to evolve. If creatures such as ourselves have only evolved in the last 300,000 years, then perhaps the universe needs to continue up until at least then. However, whilst such a view certainly has within it the resources to explain some temporal extension, we've now – several hundred millennia after life of the sort which on this model it was God's purpose to create first evolved – passed the relevant point in time and kept going. What happens now and what's happened in the past hundreds of millennia seems entirely *de trop* to the purpose that we are hypothesizing God had in creation. God could have ended pre-history/history at any stage since then and His purpose in creation would have been equally well fulfilled. Why are we *still* here?

Certain theological theses, if accepted, can move closer to the present day the first date on which God might have ended the universe and yet still have fulfilled His purpose in creating it (and sustaining it to that date). So, one might say that, having created us,

God had obligations (or that it would have been supererogatorily good for Him) to make provision for our salvation and certain metaphysical necessities required a history of a certain sort for that to be effected. For example, on Christianity, there is presumably an earliest time in human history when God could have become incarnate and yet still have done in His incarnate form the saving work that Jesus in fact did c. 5 BC c. AD 33. Other theological theses, if accepted, would enable one to move earlier or later than that the date such that the history prior to it is necessary for God's purpose in creating (and sustaining) to be fulfilled. But still, none of the major religions teaches that this date fell in – say – the last 100 years. So, the question remains: 'Why are we still here?' And it seems to me that its answer cannot be got by adverting to any of the divine purposes which we've sketched so far.¹⁶

My own preferred answer to the question of why we are still here would be the null hypothesis, as it were; there is no 'point', or more carefully no point to *recent* history. When the Eschaton comes, God may well say something to us like, 'Frankly, I could equally well have wrapped all this up in the year you call 1900; doing so would have served my purposes equally well. But waiting to do so didn't serve my purposes any the worse. I kept sustaining it after that date entirely gratuitously. After all, because I am God, it took no effort.' So, this answer, which is certainly open both to Classical Theists and to non-Classical Theists, is the one which I would myself tentatively recommend. On it, the universe; we as a species; and we as individuals now remain here by accident. So, the universe could at any time now cease to exist by accident. We as a species could cease to exist by accident. And we as individuals could cease to exist by accident. But, according to Theism, the end of the universe and the end of us within it is not the end of the story. Let's consider what this story has happening next.

Third, are we here to prepare for being somewhere else next?

On all monotheistic religions, the consensus view is that for at least some of us, possibly all of us, our individual deaths do not represent us failing to continue *per se*, but only us failing to continue *here*, in this universe. God's purpose for us is that after our lives here we join Him in Heaven, in order to – as various credal statements put it – glorify God and fully to enjoy Him forever. It is at this stage, even if not earlier in answering the question of why God created us in the first place, that we may bring in this traditional view about the 'chief end for which humanity was created'. Bringing it in earlier need not (as is sometimes suggested) imply that God's glory would have somehow been less were it not for the ultimate contribution made to it by worshipping creatures. It need not imply that God somehow needed a suitably impressed and happy group of courtiers to 'fan Him up', as it were. It need not imply any of this for it is plausible that a creature's happily worshipping God is in itself an intrinsic good and God might have acted in creation with the purpose of instantiating that good. However, simply adverting to this putative value in answering the question of why God created us would not answer the 'Why not Heaven straight away?' question. It might explain why creatures such as ourselves exist, but not why we exist *here*, here being a place where, after all, we do not worship God and enjoy Him perfectly.¹⁷ In any case, when placed as an answer to the question of the ultimate end we have now we have been created, rather than the question of the purpose God had in creating us, no such worries can arise. Our ultimate purpose now is to join God in Heaven and enjoy perfect happiness there. Even if it is granted that in the relevant sense of 'ultimate', this is our ultimate purpose, there is scope for a gap to widen between God's perfect will (that all be saved) and His permissive will (allowing that some, though their own choices, do not accept salvation), and on some accounts our *ante-mortem* lives serve as the context in which the fateful decisions are made.¹⁸ Again, even raising all the various ways of

configuring these issues, let alone discussing their pros and cons, would take us on a long diversion from the route plotted for this article. But we can make progress on the issues to which this article addresses itself whilst keeping at a very general level.

Benatar's analogy with retirement may be accepted by the Theist as at least somewhat apposite. So, whilst my own children are currently too young to trouble themselves with it, in due course, insofar as they can make adequate preparations for the retirements that will be coming to them, they would be prudent were they to do so. Their parents' purpose in mentioning (as we sometimes do in passing) our own arrangements is to give them some forewarning of the need for this prudence and to model it for them. So, it is a purpose that we have for them that they will be fulfilling if they do in due course start preparing for their retirements. We didn't have children so as to have someone for whom we could have the purpose of having a comfortable retirement, but, now we have had children, our love for them dictates that we do have that purpose for them. Similarly, then, on Universalism (everyone gets to Heaven in the end), God is rather like a parent who automatically enrolls each of His children into a generous pension plan, out of which they cannot opt. On other views, He has set up this pension plan; it is available to all His children; and one would be a fool not to opt in; but – in the end – He leaves it up to each child to decide for themselves for it is their *deservedly* enjoying satisfying retirements, not simply enjoying satisfying retirements, at which He aims in this regard. As Goetz puts it, 'God caused the universe to exist, at least in part, for the purpose of providing a setting in which human beings are able to make undetermined choices that will determine whether or not they will receive the perfect happiness for which they were created.'¹⁹ God didn't create us so that there would be people to whom He might give an afterlife (that would be like having children so that one could set up pension plans for their retirement). But that we have an afterlife is nevertheless God's ultimate purpose for each of us who are here. And, if we do need to prepare for it (possibly prepare for it by 'opting into' the celestial pension plan by some decisions of ours *ante-mortem*), well then God's purpose for us is that we do that. That is at least in part what this life is for. The analogy with retirement is, as I have said, only somewhat apposite, as retirements are characteristically periods of rest after meaningful work has been finished, whereas the afterlife is more like getting fully to grips with meaningful work for the first time, everything else prior to then having being at best mere training for it. In any case, this is another divinely endowed purpose (or family of purposes) which we have now we are here, even if this is not the divinely endowed purpose for which we were created; it's not why we were put here in the first place.²⁰

And this does not exhaust the purposes we may have

Penultimately, now we are here, God may give some or perhaps all of us vocations – particular roles to play – that it is then up to us either to appropriate to ourselves or not. These are divinely endowed purposes but us-appropriated ones (or us-unappropriated ones).²¹ And last, but by no means least, we are creatures whose essence is to make choices, some of which give ourselves and things around us purposes. And that we are this way is of course as God intended (at least it is on non-Classical Theism).²² God's purpose in creating us was to create creatures who create purposes for themselves. And these purposes which we may give ourselves are very various. For some, it is their work which figuratively as well as literally gets them out of bed in the morning; for others, it is art; for others, their families; and so on. The possibilities, as with purposes to which my orrery may be put by myself and others, are, if not quite endless, then innumerable. In all their particularities, these are not then divinely endowed purposes (they are 'us-endowed' purposes). But it is a divinely endowed purpose that we exist as creatures who have this general

capacity to generate us-endowed purposes for ourselves. One of the reasons we are here is to give ourselves reasons to be here.

Conclusion

In conclusion: I hope to have shown that those playing the theistic gambit are making a much more complicated move than might at first be suspected from the brief comments from Benatar which this article took as a prompt. When we ask why we are here, we ask several different questions at once and Theism allows, indeed requires, that these different questions have very different answers. Appreciating this can remove some of the puzzlement we may have when an answer to one of these questions is shown to be inadequate as an answer to another. And thus it can help us appreciate the richness of the answers Theism offers to the questions – plural – that we ask when we reflect on our existence using one of the most time-honoured of philosophical/theological formulations and ask ‘Why are we here?’²³

Notes

1. For an overview of the worries as they have been expressed by many, including himself, see Manson (2009).
2. Benatar (2017), 38.
3. *Ibid.*, 39.
4. An orrery is a mechanical representation or model of the solar system.
5. The move made in this article then parallels moves that are becoming more commonplace in the literature on the meaning of life, where it is becoming increasingly common to note that ‘the’ question of life’s meaning is in fact many questions and these need disaggregating from one another if one is not to become confused. For a book-length argument to this effect and on how God might feature in the answers to many of these questions, see Mawson (2016).
6. This and what follows is all rather compressed of course. What I have sketched in the main text as ‘the’ problem of modal collapse would better be called ‘a’ problem, for there are various arguments to modal collapse of which the argument roughly rendered in the main text is but one. The solution that I am assuming is the best in what I say in the main text is one developed by Nemes (2020). Nemes has particularly in mind the recent expositions of the problem of modal collapse given by Mullins (2016 and 2021). As well as being compressed, what I say in the main text is also controversial. In particular, one of the referees for this article thought that the Classical Theist (as defined in this article) might prefer to say that God does have an intention, the same intention over all possible worlds, and it’s just that that intention generates universes in some and doesn’t in others. Although that same referee said that such a view would seem to him or her to be ‘absurd’, he or she suspected that ‘CTs will insist on this absurdity no less’. All I can do as a bystander to such debates is pick the side that seems least absurd to me in the main text and that is what I thus do.
7. For a defence of this, admittedly somewhat stipulative, definition of ‘accident’, see Mawson (Forthcoming). I do not expect the Classical Theist in the sense operative in this article to welcome this implication of their view, and there are undeniably other understandings of accident (e.g. being *contrary* to an intention or desire, rather than being merely unintended) in which they need not see the universe as an accident. But on this understanding of accident, the conclusion follows if I am right that they are best advised to avoid the problem of modal collapse in the manner of Nemes (2020).
8. I incline to think of an intention as a mental act explicable by a purpose; some make the connection between intentions and purposes even closer, equating intentions and purposes. Nothing in this article turns on this. One view which I do not discuss and which would make a difference to some of the issues is the view that there could be purposes inherent in the universe even without a purposer – that is, an intentional agent – providing them. Some read Aristotle as suggesting that such a thing is possible. I myself am not convinced that it is possible.
9. This is significant for avoiding what I have called the ‘Why not Heaven straightaway?’ question. I call it that in – for example – Mawson (2005); the problem is similar in some respects to a problem later discussed by Nagasawa *et al.* (2009). There is another solution to this problem, which I sketch in forthcoming notes – in short, Heaven wouldn’t be as good for its residents if they got there straight away.
10. The answer that I will sketch involves ‘free’ agents, and the sort of freedom I have in mind for them is libertarian freedom. Calvinists would need to make some adaptations.
11. This raises another question, which I hope to discuss in another article, about how this reason for creation could be of a sort such that it did not necessitate God to create in the light of it, leaving God free to remain the

sole existent had He wished it. As I do hope to discuss precisely this question at length elsewhere, I merely flag it here.

12. This brings up the fact that some purposes are more ultimate than others. And it is worth flagging that there are several different sorts of ultimacy. In this context, there is a sense in which one might say that God's permissive will is more ultimate than His perfect will, in that it is His permissive will which 'wins out' over His perfect will when it comes to His forming the universe-actualizing intention that He does. And we may also talk about ultimacy in its temporal sense, saying – for example – that God's current purpose for Ellis is that Ellis be a medical doctor, whereas God's ultimate purpose for Ellis is that Ellis enjoy the beatific vision. There may be other sorts of ultimacy too, structuring in different ways God's purposes for the universe and us.

13. I should however point out that the mainstream tradition interior to the theistic community would put the emphasis in a slightly different place. So, in the main text, I emphasize the intrinsic value of our *ante-mortem* life as God's reason for creating it. Compatible with seeing *ante-mortem* life as intrinsically valuable in this way or others, one could also affirm its extrinsic value, tying this extrinsic value to the highest good – the true *summum bonum* – at which we (or some of us anyway) will arrive *post-mortem*, Heaven. Heaven, it might be maintained, would not be so good if those enjoying it had not got to it via *ante-mortem* routes such as those our current existence allows us to plot. And that, it may be maintained, gives our lives here a certain instrumental value too. On some models, the highest good is the enjoyment in Heaven of perfect happiness by (*and only by*) those who have in some way proven themselves worthy of it; that proving needs then to have been done prior to entry into Heaven. Some such models therefore can end up emphasizing even more the extrinsic value of us being here *ante-mortem*, possibly even to the exclusion of allowing our *ante-mortem* lives to have any intrinsic value at all. A person who held such a view could respond to Benatar's analogy in its own terms by claiming that people *deservedly* enjoying blissful retirements is the best analogue of the intrinsic good for which God creates, this *ante-mortem* life being thus necessary for securing this good; and thus, such a person might maintain, *pace* Benatar, we are here simply to prepare for the afterlife.

14. In passing, this representative purpose gives what one might call 'a direction to importance' internal to the structures concerned. Someone looking at the orrery for the first time, considering the small balls sitting at the end of the armatures (literally the most peripheral and simple of the orrery's parts) and comparing them to the large and complex set of cogs and gears that are close to the centre, might be forgiven for wondering if the balls exist merely in order to serve some purpose of the cogs. Perhaps their weight regulates the movement of the cogs in some way, they might speculate. In any case, they might reason, if the balls are important to the machine's proper function, it must be because they do something for the cogs. It can't be that the cogs are there for the sake of the balls. But of course we know that the balls are the whole point. The other stuff – however large, complex and near to the centre of the structure it is – is only there to serve their representative function. And, on this view, matters are similar with regard to the universe and creatures such as ourselves. What's the point of all that lifeless time, the billions of years before life evolved? We are. And all that empty space, billions of light-years in every direction from us? Us again. Of course, if there is extra-terrestrial life of our degree of sophistication in the relevant dimensions, then these other species would need to be included in the 'we' and the 'us', along with humanity, for a full picture; but still, figuratively speaking, there's something deeply anti-Copernican about the doctrine of *Imago Dei*.

15. And presuming I was right about how it would need to do this, viz. by not attributing world-specific intentions to God.

16. Well, it seems that way to me; it won't seem that way to those who think that the sorts of values the instantiation of which was God's purpose in creation are additive. So, let me say a few words about that view. One thought one might have is that when it comes to the sorts of values that we instantiate in our *ante-mortem* lives, 'more is better'; these values are additive. There is a danger that this thought might 'prove too much' for most theologians to stomach in that it would seem to prohibit God from *ever* bringing the universe to a close. On the 'more is better' hypothesis about these values, God's purpose in instantiating these values seems to dictate that He create a temporally open-ended universe, as only so could there be no end to the amount of these values instantiated. And it is difficult to fine-tune this 'more is better' hypothesis so that it doesn't entail that God's purposes would have been even better served by creating a universe in which life was more abundant than it has been to date. Even if a potential infinity of life of our sort (with all its values) lies ahead, could there not have been more of it before now? And won't we all die off in the Heat Death if not before anyway? Whilst difficult, these issues are not without hope of resolution and thus I don't think this view should be definitively dismissed on the basis of them. However, for myself, I don't feel drawn to any 'more is better' hypothesis about these values. For me, these sorts of values certainly don't seem additive past a point in time that we equally certainly passed many generations ago. A world destined only ever to contain a billion beings such as ourselves would not be worse through having instantiated the values that we instantiate on only about one hundredth of the occasions that they have been instantiated in our universe to date (if we assume ours

is the only planet on which such life has evolved, there having been – roughly – 100 billion anatomically modern humans to date). That others have different intuitions here is evidenced by the different attitudes taken to various cosmological facts. So, when it is pointed out that the universe is billions upon billions of light-years of mostly empty space in every direction; seems to have had billions of years of lifelessness in the past; and, furthermore, seems heading towards a Heat Death, after which a potential infinity of lifeless time stretches into the future, some people think that they find in these facts disconfirmation of the thesis that it was in order to instantiate life of our sort that the universe was created. Those who are struck in this way by these facts presumably have the ‘additive’ thought about the sorts of values we instantiate – the ‘more is better’ thought – that I lack. They thus reason from that to the fact that if an omnipotent being had wished to instantiate these values, He’d have got quantitatively more of them out of creation than He has got to date or seems destined to get in the future. However, those sorts of arguments have never seemed at all persuasive to me. For me, it’s quality, not quantity that counts. And thus to me these arguments have always seemed akin to someone looking at a monstrosity and suggesting that the larger the decorative surround relative to the space reserved for host, the less reason we have for thinking that the person making the monstrosity regarded the host as at all important. Still, we seem to have reached an impasse here, based on a difference of value judgements. If you are non-Classical Theist; are taken by the additive thought; and can resist the ‘proving too much’ danger that it *prima facie* seems to generate, you may indeed say that in fact God’s purpose in creating the universe and us as a species is the same as God’s purpose in sustaining the universe and us as a species, viz. to instantiate the values peculiar to us in our *ante-mortem* lives.

17. However, consider the material in a previous note concerning the view that it is *deservedly* enjoying God forever which is the intrinsic good at which God aims in creation to see a way of closing this gap, answering the ‘Why not Heaven straight away?’ question.

18. For a recent book-length exposition of this as a plausible answer to this question of the meaning of life, see Goetz (2012).

19. *Ibid.*, 125.

20. Though again I should refer back to earlier notes where I sketch views which, by making people *deservedly* enjoying perfect happiness with Him in Heaven the intrinsic good at which God aims, may make ‘retirement’ be the whole point.

21. This is rather too brief to be more than suggestive, but a good discussion of the options here is given by Affloter (2007). I also discuss vocations in Mawson (2016), *passim*.

22. Again Calvinists might need to adapt the story I tell in the main text.

23. I am grateful for the comments of David Benatar, Martin Dunkley-Smith, Stewart Goetz, Jarek Jankowski, Steven Nemes, Nick Waghorn, Daniel Woolnough, and the anonymous referees of this journal for their comments on various drafts of this article.

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