

Could God's purpose be the source of life's meaning?

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Abstract: In this paper, I explore the traditional religious account of what can make a life meaningful, namely, the view that one's life acquires significance insofar as one fulfils a purpose God has assigned. Call this view 'purpose theory'. In the literature, there are objections purporting to show that purpose theory entails the logical absurdities that God is not moral, omnipotent, or eternal. I show that there are versions of purpose theory which are not vulnerable to these *reductio* arguments. However, I then contend that there is a problem facing purpose theory which no version can avoid. I argue that the best reason for holding a God-centred theory of life's meaning logically precludes the possibility of purpose theory being the correct version of it. More specifically, I argue that if a relationship with God is necessary for one's life to acquire meaning, this must be because God would have properties such as atemporality and simplicity, perfections which are incompatible with purposiveness. I conclude that religious thinkers have good reason to develop other theories of the way God could confer meaning on our lives.

Introduction: the status of purpose theory

In this paper, I explore the traditional God-centred theory of what can make a human life meaningful. I take the question of what can make life meaningful to be the question of what about our lives (besides bare survival) could be worthy of great esteem.¹ A God-centred theory, as construed here, answers that one's life is worthy of great esteem just insofar as one has a proper relation with a spiritual being who grounds the natural universe. And the traditional God-centred view maintains that at least one proper relation to have with God is to fulfil His purpose. Call this view 'purpose theory'.²

Purpose theory is a *prima facie* attractive account of what could make a life meaningful. It spells out what it would mean to 'exist for a reason' or for 'life to have a point'. It jibes with the fact that 'purpose' is one synonym of 'meaning'. It accounts for the intuition that what confers meaning on one's life is an objective matter, i.e., that meaning is not merely a function of satisfying whatever desires one happens to have. It provides a plausible candidate for what could confer

significance on our lives, namely, a holy being. Finally, it squares with the judgment that most (if not all) people are capable of living a meaningful life, but that not everyone in fact does live a meaningful life.

Despite these advantages, several theorists have contended that realizing God's plan could not make our lives meaningful. In fact, many hold that purpose theory, when conjoined with very plausible theses, entails logical contradictions. There are important arguments in the literature purporting to show that purpose theory entails the absurdities that God is not all-good, that God is not all-powerful, and that God is not eternal.

In this paper, I will argue that there are versions of purpose theory which do not entail these absurdities. The three major *reductio* arguments against purpose theory will be shown to fail. However, critical discussion of these arguments will point the way to a more telling objection to purpose theory. I will also argue that reflection on the reason why God might be the key to a meaningful life indicates that purpose theory must be false. The most promising explanation of why a relationship with God could be the sole source of significance implies that something other than achieving a goal assigned by God must constitute this source. In short, the best rationale for God-centred theory in general is incompatible with the particular version of God-centred theory which has dominated religious thinking on the meaning of life. I am not sure that this new objection is sound; I put it forward as something that must be addressed in order for belief in purpose theory to be plausible.

I will begin by spelling out purpose theory in some detail, differentiating what is merely compatible with the view from what is essential to it. Along the way, I will also respond to objections which are based on misunderstandings of purpose theory, clearing the way for a discussion of more substantial criticisms. In the next three sections I will refute the charges that purpose theory oddly entails that God would treat us immorally, lack omnipotence, and fail to be eternal. Then, I will raise a new problem for purpose theory, that it does not square with the best explanation of God-centred theory. After rejecting several accounts of why a relationship with God might be necessary for life to have meaning, I will advance what I take to be the most promising account, an account which will be shown to contradict purpose theory. Hence, I will tentatively conclude that realizing God's purpose could not be what it is about relating to God that would make our lives meaningful. I will end the paper by pointing both to ways that purpose theorists might try to respond to this objection and to avenues of research for religious thinkers who question purpose theory.

An analysis of purpose theory

In this section, my goal is to explicate purpose theory. I will lay out the different basic versions of the view and also clear up common misconceptions.

Purpose theory is the view that a life is meaningful insofar as one fulfils a purpose that God has assigned. Note that purpose theory implies nothing about whether God in fact has a purpose or whether God even exists. Of course, many believers do hold purpose theory, but it would be possible for, say, atheistic existentialists to hold it as well. We may therefore dismiss one objection to purpose theory, namely, the charge that the existence of evil shows that there is no God with a purpose.³ Evil is not a problem for purpose theory, since it does not contend that there exists a God who has assigned us a purpose. In other words, purpose theory does not imply anything about whether our lives are in fact meaningful. Purpose theory is a thesis about what can confer meaning upon our lives. If atheism were true, then purpose theory would entail nihilism, the view that our lives are meaningless.

It should be instructive to contrast purpose theory with related religious theories of what could make a life meaningful. First, purpose theory is logically distinct from ‘justice theory’, which says that life is meaningful, say, because God’s rules are the source of justice in this world, or because God gives people their just deserts in the next one. The defender of purpose theory may, but need not, hold that God’s purposes are the source of morality; she could hold that moral facts obtain independently of God’s will, but that meaning facts do not. The purpose theorist can also maintain that life would be meaningful even if there were no ultimate justice; she could hold that doing God’s bidding in this imperfect world is sufficient for a significant life.

Second, purpose theory conceptually differs from standard forms of ‘perfection theory’, the view that a life is meaningful insofar as it is oriented toward a superior nature. Typical versions of perfection theory maintain that one’s life is meaningful by virtue of honouring one’s higher self as a spiritual, indestructible entity while on earth, or by virtue of attaining the stage where one will commune with a perfect being upon leaving the earth. Purpose theory differs from these forms of perfection theory in that it can hold that life can be meaningful in the absence of a soul which will survive the death of one’s body. Merely realizing God’s end, without the prospect of an afterlife, could be deemed sufficient for meaning.⁴

Purpose theorists will disagree about whether their account should be conjoined with any of the above perspectives and, if so, which ones. Additional differences among purpose theorists will turn on their conceptions (a) of God, (b) of God’s purpose, (c) of the way God assigns it to us, and (d) of the way we are to fulfil it. Let’s briefly examine some competing interpretations of these elements.

For the sake of this paper, I will consider God to be at least a spiritual being who is all-powerful, all-knowing, and all-good and who is the ground of the physical world (a). Although most purpose theorists are theists who hold that God is a transcendent, personal being, it is worth noting that pantheist and deist versions of purpose theory are possible, too. And God might also be necessary, infinite,

atemporal, immutable, and simple, but I will tend to set such possibilities aside (until the penultimate section).

Many defenders of purpose theory hold that any purpose God assigns to an individual would be part of a larger, single plan for the universe (b). It is thought that if God created the natural world, it was done with one highest-order end in mind, whereby all other ends would be necessary components of or instruments for its realization. However, it is not clear that this is the only possible or plausible account of God's purposes. God could have brought about the universe with several higher-order ends in mind, at least if the ends do not conflict. For example, God arguably could have made the world for the sake of being generous to the creatures in it, maximizing temporal values, glorifying Himself, and enhancing the meaning of His own existence. Perhaps the purpose God assigns to us would be necessary for achieving one (or more) of multiple higher-order ends.

Adherents of purpose theory disagree with one another about the precise content of God's purpose and the way we might come to know it. These are notoriously difficult questions to answer. However, it is a mistake to think, as some objectors have,⁵ that purpose theory is unacceptable if it fails to specify our assigned end. The idea behind the objection is that a theory of life's meaning should provide some practical guidance. Now, the purpose theorist can maintain that we do have a reasonable amount of insight into what God's purpose might be. After all, the question of why God would create something rather than nothing, or would create us in particular, is amenable of intelligent reply. But even if the defender of purpose theory could provide no indication as to the content of God's purpose for us, I do not think her view would thereby be disqualified. Utilitarianism has been widely deemed to be a good candidate for a moral theory, despite the enormous difficulty of knowing what course of action would actually produce the best results. Similarly, purpose theory could be an acceptable theory of meaning, even if we do not know how to fulfil God's purpose.

There are further differences among versions of purpose theory regarding the way God might assign a purpose to us (c). For instance, would God command us to realize His end? Might God punish us with eternal damnation if we failed to realize the end assigned to us?

Finally, purpose theorists will disagree about how we ought to fulfil God's purpose (d). Most will hold that it is possible for us not to realize God's end, viz., that we are not predestined to do what God would like. Typical adherents of purpose theory hold that we must freely fulfil the end God assigns. Hence, it is incorrect to say that purpose theory implies that everyone's life would be meaningful merely because God assigned us an end⁶ or because we could not avoid realizing it.⁷ Purpose theory maintains that one must fulfil the end, not merely be assigned one, and most adherents hold that one must fulfil it by means of a free choice. There arises the further question of how to fulfil God's purpose freely. For

example, is one's life (more) meaningful if one takes pleasure in attaining the goal God has assigned, or if one attains it for the basic reason that it is God's goal?

Obviously, many different versions of purpose theory are possible. In the next three sections, my task will be to find versions which do not entail the logical absurdities which have been attributed to purpose theory.

God's purpose vs. God's morality

A prominent criticism of purpose theory is that it would be immoral for God to assign a purpose to other agents. Purpose theory arose in the context of a teleological conception of human nature, whereby normativity is understood in terms of a final cause. Modern conceptions of normativity famously reject the idea that persons ought to realize some predefined end; they instead tend to hold that we ought to live according to norms which are self-legislated. Now, it appears that being assigned an end conflicts with the dictum that rational beings ought to live by their own choice. Hence, Sartre once said of his subjectivist theory that it 'alone is compatible with the dignity of man; it is the only one which does not make man into an object'.⁸

It is difficult to pin down in exactly what respect a God who assigned us a purpose might degrade our dignity. In order to flesh this out, I will appeal to some Kantian ideas about morality. In characteristically modern fashion, the Kantian standpoint presumes that we are essentially autonomous choosers and proposes that the fundamental moral norm is to respect people's ability to make decisions for themselves. In the following, I will examine the 'Argument from Disrespect', the central claims of which are that it is immoral to treat our capacity for self-determination solely as a means to an end and that God's assigning us an end would do exactly that. These claims together entail that if God assigned us an end, God would be immoral, a logical contradiction since God is by definition morally ideal.

Of course, the purpose theorist could always respond by denying that a Kantian ethics is applicable to us, perhaps favouring utilitarianism instead. Or she could grant that Kantianism applies to us, but deny that it applies to God.⁹ Rather than spend time considering how the Kantian might reply to these two claims, I would like merely to set them aside. For the sake of argument, let us suppose that both human and divine wills are morally obliged not to treat rational beings disrespectfully. It would be interesting if it could be shown that purpose theory is consistent with this strong Kantian thesis. In the following, I will explore four ways in which God's assigning us an end might seem to treat our capacity for free choice disrespectfully. I will show that there is nothing inherently disrespectful about God's assigning us a purpose and hence that purpose theory need not absurdly entail that God is immoral.

Coercion

Why hold that God's ascribing us an end would be disrespectful? First, restricting a person's choice by making threats is a quintessential form of disrespect, and it appears that God would threaten us by making eternal damnation the consequence of not realizing His end.¹⁰

To begin to reply, consider that a threat is not necessarily disrespectful; it depends on why the threat is made. Specifically, a threat made incidentally in the course of maintaining a retributive punishment system is not disrespectful. To fix ideas, suppose that a human society instituted a punishment system for the sake of giving violators of just laws the punishment they deserve. While not intending to deter crime with this punishment system, the society would nonetheless be making incidental threats to those who would break just laws. Regardless of its purpose, the mere existence of a punishment system threatens citizens in saying, 'If you break a law, you will be intentionally harmed'. It does not appear that such threats would be disrespectful, on the plausible assumption that retributive punishment is respectful.

Therefore, if it would not be disrespectful for a state to make threats in the course of maintaining a retributive punishment system, it would not be disrespectful for God to make threats in doing the same. If it would be God's purpose for us to be moral, then our failing to fulfil that purpose would warrant punishment, and any threats God would make incidental to imposing that punishment would be respectful.

Unfortunately, we cannot rest content with this response, since it appears that it is not possible for a human to deserve *eternal* damnation. No finite action can earn an infinite reaction. If so, then even monstrosities such as Hitler and Stalin do not deserve to be in hell forever. Hence, I believe the purpose theorist must reject the idea that God would impose eternal damnation upon those who do not fulfil the purpose He assigns. The purpose theorist can accept that we have souls that live forever. She can also hold that God would impose a finite punishment upon souls that have rejected His (moral) end. However, to avoid the charge that God's assigning us a purpose would be disrespectfully coercive, I suspect that the purpose theorist must reject the postulate that God would send recalcitrants to hell forever. If I am wrong about this, so much the better for the purpose theorist who is enthusiastic about the prospect of eternal damnation for the wicked. The point is that purpose theory can escape the charge that it implies that God would be wrongfully coercive to assign us a purpose.

Exploitation

Even if the purpose theorist rejects the notion of eternal damnation, charges of disrespect may still arise. In fact, God's offering the reward of heaven for realizing His end might seem to be disrespectful. Some could deem this to be a 'coercive offer', or, in terms that I find more applicable, a form of exploitation.

It seems exploitative, and hence disrespectful, to offer a starving person food in exchange for doing what you like. What choice would she have but to conform to your will? By analogy, an objector could maintain that it would be exploitative for God to offer finite creatures an eternity of bliss in exchange for doing His bidding. The God-Father would be making an offer we couldn't refuse.

Of course, one option for the purpose theorist would be to reject the reward of eternal heaven as I have argued she must reject the punishment of eternal hell. She could hold that God would provide either no reward or a moderate reward for realizing His end.

However, I think the purpose theorist can plausibly maintain that God could reward us with eternal bliss for acting according to His will. The charge of 'exploitation' arises most naturally when the purpose of the person making the offer involves degrading or harming the recipient. Most would not hesitate in calling 'exploitative' the offer of food to a starving person in exchange for sex or a kidney. It is not so clear, though, that it would be exploitative to offer such a person food in exchange for maintaining her rational agency or working part-time at a soup kitchen. If this would not be exploitative, then it would likewise not be exploitative for God to offer us heaven forever in exchange for accomplishing His aim that we act morally.

Condescension

There is a yet a third version of the Argument from Disrespect, namely, one from Kurt Baier. Baier's rendition interestingly does not turn on God's imposing any scheme of punishment or reward. Since Baier's remarks are important and influential, I quote in full the relevant passage:

We do not disparage a dog when we say that it has no purpose, is not a sheep dog or a watch dog... . Man is in a different category, however. To attribute to a human being a purpose in that sense is not neutral, let alone complimentary: it is offensive. It is degrading for a man to be regarded as merely serving a purpose. If, at a garden party, I ask a man in 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. We are treating him, in Kant's phrase, merely as a means to our ends, not as an end in himself... . [Purpose theory] sees man as a creature, a divine artefact, something halfway between a robot (manufactured) and an animal (alive), a homunculus, or perhaps Frankenstein, made in God's laboratory, with a purpose or task assigned him by his Maker.¹¹

Baier's claim is not that God's purpose would be 'selfish', i.e., in His best interest but not ours. Therefore, it will not suffice to point out that God's purpose would be in our objective interests.¹² Baier's concern about God's assigning us a purpose is that it would *degrade* us, not that it would *harm* us. Baier objects that

being assigned a purpose would treat one's capacity for rational choice as a mere tool to be used for the realization of a purpose one does not share. It is irrelevant that realizing the purpose would be good for oneself; that would merely add a paternalistic aspect to the degradation.

It is also worth noting that Baier's claim is not that it is disrespectful ever to view someone as being useful. Hence, one cannot respond to Baier by noting cases in which it is not disrespectful to view people as having a use-value. If we ask a stranger what he does for a living, we are in effect asking how he contributes to society, and there is nothing disrespectful about this.¹³ Such a case does not tell against Baier, since enquiring about someone's job need not involve treating the person *merely* as a means, which is Baier's concern.

If God were to assign us a purpose, then God would clearly have to regard us as a means, i.e., as being useful for the realization of his end. The question is whether God must thereby regard us *solely* as a means, and that is not so clear. If God did not coerce, exploit, or deceive humans to get them to fulfil a purpose, then God would engage in no manipulation, the central form of treating a person merely as a means. However, Baier's example does not involve the use of force or fraud to get an agent to do something. Baier's case is one in which an agent is *insulted*, rather than *manipulated*. In asking a person what she is for, one offensively expresses the judgment that a person does not exist for her own sake. Must God similarly insult us insofar as He assigns us a purpose? It might seem so. If God has a purpose He wants us to fulfil, it seems that He would have to inform us of it. Hence, if God assigned a purpose to us, He would in some way have to say to each of us, 'There is something I would like you to do with your life, and this is the reason that you exist'. As it stands, this statement does sound a bit patronizing.

However, if we reflect some more on what God's purpose might be and how God might seek to promote it, the statement can be part of a respectful address. For example, suppose that the end God assigned us were to exercise our free will in a moral way. Informing us of such an end need not be condescending. Suppose that we filled out God's statement as follows: 'There is something I would like you to do with your life, and this is the reason that you exist. Specifically, I would like you to be a moral person. Your free will is such that I cannot cajole you into exercising it morally, and your moral choice would be valuable only if it were made freely. Therefore, I must ask you to pursue the fundamental end of pursuing moral ends.' We could even imagine that a 'please' were thrown in.

In short, being assigned a purpose could be a matter of divine request, rather than divine command. If being assigned an end can be a matter of being asked to adopt the end voluntarily, then there need not be anything insulting about being assigned an end. We could well imagine a parent telling his adult daughter that he brought her up for the sake of there being another good person on the planet, an end that he hopes she will freely decide to share with him. There need not be condescension here.

Poorly motivated creation

Baier's invocation of Frankenstein suggests a fourth way that purpose theory might entail that God is disrespectful. We often think that it is possible for parents to be immoral insofar as they create offspring for the wrong reasons, and the same might go for God's creation of us.

To illustrate, suppose that a couple decides to have a child fundamentally because they would like a musician in the family. Now, let us set aside the other elements of disrespect considered so far; assume that the couple neither manipulates the child into becoming a musician nor commands the child to become one. We instead suppose merely that the basic purpose of getting pregnant is to end up with a musically-adept relative, a purpose the parents do not promote in any objectionable way (viz., they observe 'side-constraints' on the pursuit of their end). Merely acting on the maxim of creating a child in order to have a musician might be disrespectful, even if the child is in no way manipulated into being a musician or 'reduced to' her musical aptitude. The same apparently goes for creating a child with the aim of having a worker on the farm or a playmate for a sibling. In contrast, it would not seem disrespectful to make a baby for the sake of promoting a being who will set its own ends. Baier might therefore suggest this principle to govern the creation of rational beings: it is disrespectful to create a rational being for any purpose other than that this being pursues its own purposes.¹⁴

Now, God's purpose for us would presumably involve living morally, and it therefore appears that God would create us for a purpose other than setting our own ends. By the above principle, then, God would be acting disrespectfully in creating us for the sake of setting moral ends.

Obviously, the purpose theorist must question the principle I have ascribed to Baier. In particular, the purpose theorist must contend that the principle is too broad, i.e., that it can be respectful to create a person for a given purpose in addition to that of adopting her own purposes. It is clear that someone who created a person in order to have another moral agent on earth would be treating that person as a means, but it is not obvious that he would be thereby treating her *merely* as a means. If, as we assume, such a creator did not coerce the created into being moral, did not take advantage of the created's weakness to get her to be moral, and did not condescendingly tell her to be moral, then his creating her to be moral would not dishonour her autonomy. Again, if the creator pursued his end of having the created be moral merely by reasoning and requesting, then the fact that he made the created in order for her to be moral would not appear to treat her capacity for free choice merely as a means to his end.

I conclude that while some versions of purpose theory, particularly those involving eternal damnation, are vulnerable to the Argument from Disrespect, purpose theory as such is not. If we can imagine a God whose end for us includes moral action, who does not threaten us with an eternity in hell to get His way, who

does not make offers we cannot refuse, and who does not address us in a patronizing way, then we can imagine a purpose theory which does not entail the absurdity that God is immoral.

On behalf of purpose theory I have often supposed that God's end would require moral action on our part. Note that this does not mean that the purpose theorist must hold divine command theory (or any other religious ethics). The purpose theorist may coherently hold that God's purpose for us would be to act according to moral standards which obtain independently of God's will. Purpose theory might be neater or simpler if it were conjoined with divine command theory. However, divine command theory has notorious problems that we should not want purpose theory necessarily to inherit, and it is worth considering what problems might be thought to arise for purpose theory when it is considered distinct from divine command theory.

God's purpose vs. God's omnipotence

The next objection to purpose theory is that it entails that God is not omnipotent, which is a contradiction. If it were possible for us not to fulfil the end assigned to us, and if the end assigned to us were necessary to realize God's plan, then God would need our help. But if God needed our help, then God would not be omnipotent. Therefore, purpose theory implies the absurdity that God would not be omnipotent.¹⁵

One might reply that purpose theory as such does not imply that we could avoid executing God's plan. Specifically, one may hold a soft determinist view of freedom, and maintain that God would structure causal laws so that we would necessarily freely choose to realize the end God has assigned us. However, to say we 'necessarily freely choose' to realize a particular end is, to many thinkers, to state a contradiction. In addition, with this response purpose theory would lose the ability to say that some human lives are more meaningful than others, for everyone would then be determined to do God's bidding. (Of course, God could make some people choose to attain the ends assigned to them and make others choose not to do so; then it would not be the case that everyone's life is meaningful. However, such a move would introduce an arbitrariness and inequity into God's plan which would presumably undercut its ability to confer meaning at all.)

Therefore, the purpose theorist ought to hold that we have libertarian free will and hence grant that we could avoid realizing the end God assigns us. She should also grant that realizing the end God assigns us would be necessary to fulfil God's higher-order end(s); assuming that God is the source of the universe, we must presume that our existence is an integral part of the reason(s) for which it was created. That means the purpose theorist must admit that there is a sense in which 'God would need our help': the realization of God's higher-order end(s) would depend on our realizing the end He assigns us, something we could freely choose

to do or not. Therefore, the purpose theorist must respond to the objection by refuting the claim that God's needing help implies a lack of omnipotence.

Now, it is widely accepted among theologians that we need not conceive of God's omnipotence as implying that God could do what is logically impossible. It is also commonly held that it would be logically impossible for God to bring about by His own power the superior value of a person freely choosing to act morally. Therefore, if one of God's higher-order ends required us to act morally on the basis of free choice, we would have a sense of God 'needing our help' that does not impugn God's omnipotence. God could need our help in that God logically could not by His own efforts fulfil one of His valuable higher-order purposes.

However, this response might raise a new worry. Even if God's omnipotence is not called into question by virtue of God's being logically unable to bring about one of His higher-order ends, we might find such a God to be irrational. It seems incredible that God would create the universe for the sake of an end that might not be realized. How could it be rational to go to the trouble of making a world for a goal, the attainment of which depends on the contingent choice of our undependable species?

There are two strong replies to this new concern. First, recall that we can conceive of God making the universe for several higher-order ends. It would certainly seem rational to create nature knowing that, say, two higher-order ends would necessarily be realized but that one would only probably be realized. Second, it could still be rational to bring about a world for the sake of a single highest-order goal which God could not ensure would be achieved. At least if the value of free moral choice were extremely high, then the expected utility of creating a world for the sake of free moral choice, which may or may not materialize, could be greater than that of creating a world without free humans but which necessarily achieves some less valuable goal.

I conclude that God's needing our help to attain His higher-order goal(s) threatens neither God's omnipotence nor His rationality. Let us turn to the third *reductio* against purpose theory.

God's purpose vs. God's eternity

The last charge of incoherence in purpose theory claims that there is a tension between claiming that God is beyond space and time, on one hand, and claiming that God sets an end for us, on the other. In the only book-length treatment of life's meaning published in the 1990s, Irving Singer clearly voices the worry about speaking of 'God's purpose':

...to talk in this way is to assume that one can refer to an intentionality *outside* of time and space comparable to what occurs within. That is the basic flaw in the analogy... . It is not a question of determining whether we can fathom the cosmic plan, or prove that a cosmic planner exists, or manage to fulfill his purposive

program. It is a question of knowing whether our mind is able to formulate these notions with any degree of clarity.¹⁶

Singer finds the traditional concern about the compatibility of eternity and personality sufficient to disqualify purpose theory.

The most straightforward response, of course, is to deny that eternity must be interpreted in atemporal terms. It appears open to the purpose theorist to maintain that God would exist always in time rather than exist never in time.

To reply on behalf of Singer, one may note that conceiving of God as everlasting has well-known *prima facie* difficulties for other aspects of theism, e.g., it is unclear that an everlasting God could be the source of space and time. Now, I want to avoid this debate. I would prefer to downplay questions about the coherence of our concept of God, in order to focus on the much more neglected topic of the plausibility of purpose theory.

Therefore, I suggest that a more attractive reply is to say that a merely everlasting God would not be special enough to be a unique source of significance. If a temporal being could not have the right sort of status to be the only source of life's meaning, and if an atemporal being could not be conceived to have a purpose, then the purpose theorist would be caught in a trap. In brief, the purpose theorist potentially faces this dilemma: either (1) God would be atemporal and could be the sole source of meaning, but God could not have a purpose, or (2) God would be temporal and could have a purpose, but God could not be the sole source of meaning.

I believe this is the most important objection facing purpose theory, one that I will develop in the following section. In order to flesh out this dilemma, we must enquire into the underpinnings of God-centred theory.

God's purpose vs. God-centred theory

The objections in the previous three sections contended that purpose theory entails logical absurdities. I have argued that there are versions of purpose theory which can avoid these implications. However, I will now argue that there is a problem facing purpose theory which no version can avoid. Specifically, I will contend that purpose theory as such is incompatible with claims central to a God-centred perspective.

The objection I will develop can be understood in terms of the responses which one might offer to two questions. First, why think that the significance of our lives *essentially depends on a relationship with God*? Second, why think that a relevant relationship with God is a matter of *realizing His purpose*? I will argue that the most promising answer to the first question implies that no satisfactory answer to the second question is available. Specifically, I will argue that the best reason for holding a God-centred theory is that God has qualities such as atemporality,

immutability, simplicity, and infinitude, qualities that seem to be incompatible with God's being purposive.

Before presenting the objection, I want to respond to a worry about its form. Someone might be inclined to say the following: 'So what if purpose theory cannot be the correct version of God-centred theory? Whoever supposed that God-centred theory is the proper way to articulate a religious thinker's perspective on the meaning of life?' A God-centred theory, as I construe it, maintains not just that the better one's relationship with God, the more meaningful one's life; it also holds that the existence of God is necessary for one's life to be at all meaningful. A God-centred theory of meaning implies that, if the physical world did not spring from God, then there would be no way to acquire meaning in it. The question is, why think that such a theory should be attractive to theologians? Why not hold instead that, while *some* meaning would be possible if God did not exist, God's existence would potentially make people's lives more meaningful? If Western religious scholars denied the view that God's existence is necessary for a meaningful life, or if such a view were *prima facie* implausible, then it would not substantially discredit purpose theory to show that it is incompatible with this view.

I have three reasons for thinking that God-centred theory is a relevant standard for appraising purpose theory, at least given a Western context. First, the most influential statements on the meaning of life in the Western religious tradition are clear instances of God-centred theory. Consider Tolstoy's 'Confession',¹⁷ by far the most widely-read religious discussion of the meaning of life. In this work, Tolstoy acutely expresses the worry that life would be meaningless without God. For another instance, think about Kierkegaard's writings on God. In them, he also expresses the judgment that life would be without significance if God did not exist.¹⁸

In addition to historical prominence, there are strong theoretical reasons for using God-centred theory as a base from which to evaluate purpose theory. Meaningfulness is a value concept, and one would expect a religious theory of meaning to accord with other religious theories of value. Consider, then, that in moral theory a religious view is standardly understood to maintain that moral rules are identical to God's commands and hence that 'if God does not exist, everything is permitted' (Dostoyevsky). For another example, consider the theory of human excellence. Here, many religious thinkers follow Aquinas, holding that God is the unique source of perfection and that other things obtain excellence by virtue of participating in God's. By analogy, then, a religious theory of meaning ought to hold that God is the sole source of meaning and that, without God, there would be no meaning (just as there would be no morality or excellence).

Finally, God-centred theory cuts out philosophically interesting territory. In order for the dispute between naturalists and supernaturalists about life's meaning to be substantive, the latter must hold that a relationship with God is necessary to make our lives meaningful. To see this, suppose that a religious thinker instead

maintained the weaker view that while a relationship with God would make our lives more meaningful, it is not necessary for meaning. The problem is that virtually no naturalist would dispute this claim. Very few naturalists would contend that, if God existed, relating to him would fail to enhance the meaning of one's life (and the arguments for this contention are simply unpersuasive).¹⁹ After all, typical naturalists would hardly be displeased if they suddenly discovered God exists; they simply maintain that for a life to be meaningful there need not exist a spiritual being who grounds the universe. Therefore, for religious thinking to carve out a distinct and interesting position, it must maintain that God's existence and a certain relationship with Him are necessary for life to acquire significance.

I conclude, then, that for reasons of tradition, coherence, and relevance, it makes sense to appraise purpose theory in light of God-centred theory. If, as I will contend, purpose theory is not consistent with the underpinnings of God-centred theory, then there is strong reason to reject purpose theory.

My thesis is that if a relationship with God is essential for a meaningful life, then the meaning cannot come by accomplishing a purpose He sets. To defend this thesis, I will now argue in two stages. Step 1 contends that the best explanation of God-centred theory includes the claim that God has certain properties such as immutability and atemporality. Step 2 maintains that these properties are incompatible with a purposive God. These two steps entail (probably) that purpose theory cannot be the correct version of God-centred theory.

Step 1

In looking for an acceptable explanation of why God alone could make our lives meaningful, we must appeal to features that cannot be found anywhere but in God. Again, if our lives acquire significance just to the extent that we have a proper relationship with God, then to explain why God is central to life's meaning we must appeal to features which only God can manifest. Keeping this in mind, let us quickly canvass some common explanations of why life might be meaningless without God.

First, many maintain that God would prevent our lives from being accidental.²⁰ The idea is that without God as our source and destiny, our lives would be contingent and random matters, which would make them meaningless. Now, it is not entirely clear what it means to speak of a 'contingent' or 'accidental' life. It seems well understood, however, as a life the existence or course of which is not well grounded in the fabric of reality. A life that could not have arisen, or which will perish in a handful of years, seems accidental in this respect. In contrast, a life springing from and returning to a spiritual source of the physical world would seem not to be accidental.

There are two problems with this account. First, if, as many theists believe, God's nature did not require Him to create us, then God would arguably not

ground necessity in our lives; it would be His contingent choice to create us. Second, even if God's nature did require Him to create us (or even if His contingent choice to create us prevented our lives from being 'contingent' in the relevant sense), it is not clear that *only* God could prevent contingency. To see this, suppose that the universe were everlasting. In addition, assume that fundamental physical laws dictated only one path for the universe, a path that necessarily resulted in our coming into existence. Finally, imagine that we were somewhat like vampires, able to live indefinitely. Since under these naturalist conditions our lives would be firmly rooted in the structure of reality, it appears that God is not necessary to avoid contingency. Hence, that God could prevent our lives from being contingent cannot explain why a relationship with Him is necessary for meaning.

The same goes for the suggestion that God could make our lives part of a grand scheme, one that encompasses the universe. Some suggest that, from an extremely objective point of view, our lives would be meaningless insofar as they failed to have some large impact on the universe or to play a role crucial to its development.²¹ If God did not exist, so the argument goes, we would merely be short-lived beings who exist on the third rock from a star in an enormous sea of stars.

However, God's existence is not necessary to avoid this condition, which a brief reflection on the television series *Star Trek* might indicate. If we could travel near or at the speed of light, then we could enact a plan with an enormous range. Therefore, it cannot be mere scope which explains how God could be the sole source of life's significance.

Now consider justice theory, the relevant version of which maintains that there could be no justice, or more generally no morality, if God did not exist. The most famous version of justice theory is divine command theory, the view that God's willing is the source of moral reasons for action, but we may also include here the Thomistic view that God's being is the archetype of goodness. Perhaps a world without God would lack meaning because it would lack moral value.

Philosophers have had a difficult time providing a compelling explanation of why morality is to be identified with God's willing or being. It has seemed to many that morality could be a natural property. It is not my concern to address the responses which religious thinkers have made to their rivals. The point I want to make here is that there is a much *more auspicious* way to explain why God's existence and a relationship with Him might be necessary for life to acquire significance.

I have explored the possibilities that a relationship with God might be necessary for our lives to be meaningful by virtue of His preventing our lives from being contingent, making our lives part of a grand scheme, and grounding morality. Against all three possibilities, I have suggested that nature, independently of God, could perform these functions. In light of this, I suggest that we look to something utterly supernatural in order to explain why God's existence would be necessary for meaning. In particular, perfection theory provides the best explanation of this

condition. Perfection theory is the view that a life is meaningful just insofar as it is oriented toward a superior nature. On this view, God alone could be the source of meaning since He has an absolutely unique, supernatural essence, one which alone has the kind of intrinsic value toward which it would be worthwhile contouring one's life.

What is it about God that might make His nature qualitatively different from and more valuable than anything in the natural world? I do not think that God's being all-good, all-powerful, or all-knowing are very plausible candidates. We find goodness, power, and knowledge in our world to some degree. To be sure, God would have these to a superior degree, but this appears to be more of a quantitative difference from human beings, not a qualitative one. It would make most sense to look for features of God that other beings such as humans and angels cannot exhibit; such features would most clearly indicate in what respect God's nature and value would be unique. Four properties readily come to mind: atemporality, immutability, simplicity, and infinitude. Call these the 'qualitative properties'. If God alone had some combination of the qualitative properties, if a being with some combination of these properties had an exceptional excellence, and if we gained significance by contouring our lives toward such a being, then we would have a satisfying explanation of how God alone could be the source of significance.

Now, it is clear that human beings cannot have the qualitative properties. We essentially are spatiotemporal, changeable, decomposable, and limited. Angels, too, are typically understood to be limited and decomposable (at least in thought). Furthermore, there is good reason to believe that important sorts of intrinsic value supervene on the qualitative properties. Classical theists provided many arguments purporting to show that the two values of unity and independence are (partially) constituted by the qualitative properties.²²

First consider the value of independence, which is a matter of not being confined by or dependent on anything else. All four of the qualitative properties may be deemed instances of independence *par excellence*. A being beyond space and time would be free from the limits of these forms. Such a being would be free not only from decay and death, but also from a point of view restricted to now and here. An immutable being would similarly be something that utterly determines its own nature; if a being which exists in a certain mode can neither have begun to exist nor cease to exist in this mode, then it is free from any influences save itself. A simple being, viz., one without parts, would be free from dependence on these parts for its existence. Such a being would be completely unto itself or *a se*. Finally, an unlimited being would by definition be free of any limits.

Now think about the value of unity. Integrity and oneness are better than disintegration and fragmentation, and the qualitative properties are plausibly manifestations of the former. A being beyond space and time would lack extension or the 'feebleness of division' (Anselm). A simple being, having no parts, forms the ultimate unity in that it cannot even be conceived to dissolve. An immutable being

cannot help but remain what it is. Lastly, an unlimited being would be utterly whole.

These have been more argument sketches than full-blown arguments; one could spend an entire paper developing just one of them. My goal is not really to convince the reader that unity and independence are values which supervene on the qualitative properties. My aim is more modestly to show that the *most promising* explanation of why relating to God is essential for a significant life is that God has certain features not found in the physical world and that these features have a superior value which confers significance on us when we orient our lives toward it. Even without a complete analysis of the qualitative properties and of the values of unity and independence, my hope is that the reader will agree that, particularly given the problems facing a supernaturalist ethics, it is fair to say that this perfection theory is the *best* rationale for God-centred theory. Again, explaining why a relationship with God is necessary for one's life to be meaningful is most naturally done by holding that God has some combination of the qualitative properties and that our lives can acquire meaning by being contoured toward an entity with these exceptionally valuable features. Such contouring might take the form of glorifying God in this life or by communing with Him in an afterlife, but, as I will now argue, it cannot be a matter of realizing God's purpose.

Step 2

In Step 1 of the argument, I argued that if God alone could confer meaning on life, this would have to be because He has utterly unique features with a superior worth, viz., the qualitative properties. In Step 2, I need to show that God's having the qualitative properties is incompatible with central tenets of purpose theory.

It is hard to see how a being with the qualitative properties could play the role that purpose theory requires. In fact, this is a common concern among theists; my aim is not to add anything new to this particular issue, but rather to articulate it. So, first off, how could there be an unchangeable being beyond time which is purposive? The worry here is not that it is difficult to conceptualize an immutable, timeless being. While it is difficult, it is not impossible, for, as several philosophers have recently noted, states and dispositions do not seem essentially to be temporal or to involve change. The concern is rather that, to the extent that we can conceive of an immutable being beyond time, such a being appears unable to engage in goal-directed activity. Specifically, the problem is that activities are events, and events seem fundamentally to involve change and time. For God to adopt an end for humans might presuppose some deliberation, and deliberation would appear to be a temporal event involving alteration in God. And even if God adopted an end without prior deliberation, the adoption alone would seem to be something that takes time and that forms something new in God. Furthermore, creating a world according to a plan seems hard to understand as something that does not

cover a span of time. Finally, purpose theorists usually hold that God informs us of the end He has set and that He responds to our free decisions of whether to fulfil it or not. Again, these are activities which seem irreducibly to take time to perform and to involve change on God's part.

For another instance of the problem, how could there be an absolutely simple being which has multiple ends, one for humans and one for animals? God presumably would have created bees for a purpose which they do not fail to fulfil. In order to avoid the counterintuitive implication that animal lives can be as meaningful as human lives, the purpose theorist must maintain that we would be assigned a purpose different from and better than those assigned to animals.²³ Now, even if human and animal purposes are components of a single plan for the universe, the fact of there being components would seem to imply a lack of simplicity. The same goes for the different acts mentioned above; more than one act would appear to compromise God's absolute simplicity, and it is difficult to see how a single, grand act could ground purpose theory's conception of what God does.

Finally, how could a being which is unlimited be the sort of entity which has a purpose? As Nozick puts it, 'To be one way and not another is to have limits. It seems, then, that no terms can describe something unlimited, no human terms can truly apply to it.'²⁴ Analogical reasoning will not get the purpose theorist very far. While I have argued above that purpose theory need not provide much practical guidance to be viable, it must at least be theoretically comprehensible.

There are, of course, responses to these worries in the literature. I do not have the space to explore them here. Instead, my goal at this stage has been to note the *prima facie* difficulty of reconciling a view of God as timeless, immutable, simple, and unlimited with a view of God as purposive. Summing up: if indeed a God with the qualitative properties cannot be purposive (Step 2), and if God must have the qualitative properties to be the sole source of meaning (Step 1), then it follows that we cannot acquire meaning in our lives by virtue of realizing a purpose God assigns us. I submit that this is the most significant problem facing purpose theory.

Before considering strategies for responding to this objection, I want to clarify it. There is of course a substantial tradition of wondering whether and how God's otherness might be consistent with God's personality. I am not just reiterating points from this tradition, for I am not making a claim about inconsistency within the concept of God. Moreover, my point is not even that purpose theory is inconsistent with the concept of God (this may or may not follow from the account of perfection suggested here).²⁵ Instead, my thesis is that the most plausible reason for holding a God-centred theory of life's meaning is not consistent with the traditional version of God-centred theory. God alone could be the source of significance just insofar as He has some combination of the qualitative properties, and it is difficult to conceive of a purposive agent which has no limits, is absolutely simple, cannot change, and does not act in time. This argument does not threaten

God-centred theory as such. It instead suggests that, if one is sympathetic to God-centred theory, one should reject the version of it which has been central to Western religious thinking about the meaning of life. Rather than hold purpose theory, theologians should adopt the view that a meaningful life consists of, say, worshipping God in this life, or merging with Him in an afterlife.

Conclusion: the end of purpose theory

I do not claim that the objection as it has been stated here requires disbelief in purpose theory. However, it would seem that an adequate defence of purpose theory must address it. I will conclude by noting the two aims which purpose theorists might pursue in future work.

First, the purpose theorist could try to show that it is conceivable that a being with some or all of the qualitative properties could be purposive. Aquinas is a promising source of ideas needed to flesh out this strategy. For example, one could contend that atemporal, simple, and immutable knowing is possible, that willing and knowing are not distinct in God, and that having a purpose is part of the concept of willing.²⁶

Second, the purpose theorist could grant that purposiveness is indeed incompatible with the qualitative properties, but seek to refute the idea that the latter are the key to meaningfulness. For example, the purpose theorist might join forces with the divine command theorist. If it were plausible to think that God alone could ground morality and that morality is necessary for meaning, then we would have an explanation of how God alone could ground meaning without appeal to qualities such as atemporality and simplicity.

I am at this stage doubtful that either of these two goals is attainable. However, that is something to establish elsewhere, if one is interested in doing so. I suggest that it would also be reasonable, given the objection made here, to develop a God-centred alternative to purpose theory. Suppose God's having some combination of the qualitative properties is part of the best explanation of what would enable Him alone to confer significance on our lives. Exactly which qualitative properties ground God-centred theory? Precisely how would we have to relate to a being with the relevant qualitative properties in order for our lives to acquire significance? These questions, too, are worth considering at this point.²⁷

Notes

1. No arguments in this paper depend on this somewhat controversial characterization of the question of life's meaning. I defend this characterization in 'The concept of a meaningful life', forthcoming as an article and constituting the first chapter of a book manuscript in progress, *Meaningful Lives and Politics*. The present essay forms the core of this monograph's second chapter.
2. Explicit adherents of purpose theory include Paul Althaus 'The meaning and purpose of history in the Christian view', *Universitas: A German Review of the Arts and Sciences*, 7 (1965), 197–204; the monotheistic essays in R. C. Chalmers and John Irving (eds) *The Meaning of Life in Five Great Religions*

- (Philadelphia PA: Westminster Press, 1965), chs 4–6; Delwin Brown ‘Process philosophy and the question of life’s meaning’, *Religious Studies*, 7 (1971), 13–29; Michael Levine ‘What does death have to do with the meaning of life?’, *Religious Studies*, 23 (1987), 457–465; Lois Hope Walker ‘Religion and the meaning of life and death’, in Louis Pojman (ed.) *Philosophy: The Quest for Truth* (Belmont CA: Wadsworth Publishing Company, 1989), ch. 16; Philip Quinn ‘How Christianity secures life’s meanings’, in Joseph Runzo and Nancy Martin (eds) *The Meaning of Life in the World Religions* (Oxford: Oneworld Publications, 2000), ch. 3.
3. For this objection, see Kurt Baier ‘The meaning of life’, in E. D. Klemke (ed.) *The Meaning of Life* (New York NY: Oxford University Press, 1981), 106–108; Norman Dahl ‘Morality and the meaning of life: some first thoughts’, *Canadian Journal of Philosophy*, 17 (1987), 11–12 n.; and Oswald Hanfling *The Quest for Meaning* (New York NY: Basil Blackwell Inc., 1987), 50.
 4. For explicitly this-worldly versions of purpose theory, see Brown, ‘Process philosophy and the question of life’s meaning’, esp. 24–25; and Levine, ‘What does death have to do with the meaning of life?’.
 5. Baier ‘The meaning of life’, 106; and Joseph Ellin *Morality and the Meaning of Life* (Fort Worth TX: Harcourt Brace, 1995), 322.
 6. Baier incorrectly states that purpose theory implies the following: ‘No human life, however pointless it may seem, is meaningless because in being part of God’s plan, every life is assured of significance’, (Baier ‘The meaning of life’, 105; see also 106, 115).
 7. A. J. Ayer tends to assume that we could not avoid realizing God’s plan. See his ‘The claims of philosophy’, in Maurice Natanson (ed.) *Philosophy of the Social Sciences* (New York NY: Random House, 1963), 475–477.
 8. Jean-Paul Sartre *Existentialism and Humanism* Philip Mairet (tr.) (London: Methuen & Co, 1948), 45.
 9. For an instance of this argument, see Hanfling *The Quest for Meaning*, 45–46.
 10. Baier ‘The meaning of life’, 107; and Paul Kurtz ‘The meaning of life’ in *The Fullness of Life* (New York NY: Horizon Press, 1974), 86.
 11. Baier ‘The meaning of life’, 104. For echoes of Baier, see W. D. Joske ‘Philosophy and the meaning of life’, in Klemke *The Meaning of Life*, 259; and Irving Singer *Meaning in Life*, vol. 1: *The Creation of Value* (Baltimore MD: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1996), 29.
 12. For this response to Baier, see Levine ‘What does death have to do with the meaning of life?’, 461 n.
 13. Brown makes this reply to Baier in ‘Process philosophy and the question of life’s meaning’, 20.
 14. Compare Singer’s comment: ‘If humanity, or life in general, was created to serve a purpose beyond itself, our being would be analogous to that of a manufactured artifact’, (Singer *Meaning in Life*, 29).
 15. For discussions that prompted me to consider this objection, see Karl Britton *Philosophy and the Meaning of Life* (New York NY: Cambridge University Press, 1969), 31, 34–35; and Hanfling *The Quest for Meaning*, 48.
 16. Singer *Meaning in Life*, 31, 32. For the same point, see R. W. Hepburn ‘Questions about the meaning of life’, in Klemke *The Meaning of Life*, 223.
 17. See the selection in Klemke *The Meaning of Life*, 9–19.
 18. See, e.g., ‘Training in Christianity’, in Robert Bretall (ed.) *A Kierkegaard Anthology* (Princeton NJ: Princeton University Press, 1946), 414.
 19. The main arguments are these: a life relating to God would be degrading and hence meaningless; and achieving our own subjective ends is alone what confers meaning. For suggestions of both claims, see Baier ‘The meaning of life’.
 20. For this view, see Tolstoy ‘My confession’; Albert Camus *The Myth of Sisyphus* Justin O’Brien (tr.) (New York NY: Knopf, 1955); and William Davis ‘The meaning of life’, *Metaphilosophy*, 18 (1987), 288–305.
 21. Thomas Nagel, while not a supernaturalist, has expressed this in a compelling way. See his ‘The absurd’, in *Mortal Questions* (New York NY: Cambridge University Press, 1979), ch. 2, and ‘Birth, death, and the meaning of life’, in *The View from Nowhere* (New York NY: Oxford University Press, 1986), ch. 11.
 22. Many of the following arguments can be found in Plotinus *The Enneads*; Anselm *Monologion* and *Proslogion*; and Aquinas *Summa Contra Gentiles*, and *Summa Theologica*.
 23. For more discussion of human and animal meaning in the context of purpose theory, see Robert Nozick ‘Philosophy and the meaning of life’, in *Philosophical Explanations* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1981), 586–587; and Hanfling *The Quest for Meaning*, 48–49.

24. Making a very different argument, Nozick also answers the question of why realizing God's purpose might be a source of meaning by appealing to God's being unlimited ('Philosophy and the meaning of life', 593–609). At one point Nozick does not recognize the tension in claiming that God is unlimited and that God has a purpose (606), though at another point Nozick notes that it would be difficult to predicate anything of an unlimited being (608). For other recent statements of the tension between God's personality and some of the qualitative properties, see Richard Gale *On the Nature and Existence of God* (New York NY: Cambridge University Press, 1991), ch. 2; and Richard Swinburne *The Coherence of Theism* rev. edn (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1993), ch. 12.
25. The argument I make in the text is that if God alone could be the source of meaning, this must be because God would have the qualitative properties, perfections which are incompatible with purposiveness. Darrel Moellendorf and Graeme McLean have wondered whether my argument could be collapsed into the more common contention that God, *qua* perfect, by definition has the qualitative properties and hence cannot be purposive. I do not think that my argument can be easily reduced to this rationale, since God does not, merely *qua* perfect being, have all the perfections. To see this, imagine a quite valuable being who created the universe but who is short of being Anselm's 'thing of which none greater can be conceived'. Such an entity would sensibly be called 'God'. Hence, insofar as the concept of God (or a common one) does not include having all the perfections, God does not (or does not obviously) by definition have the qualitative properties.
26. For interesting work along these general lines, see Norman Kretzmann and Eleonore Stump 'Eternity', *The Journal of Philosophy*, 78 (1981), 429–458, and 'Absolute simplicity', *Faith and Philosophy*, 2 (1985), 353–382; Katherin Rogers 'The traditional doctrine of divine simplicity', *Religious Studies*, 32 (1996), 165–186; and Don Lodzinski 'The eternal act', *Religious Studies*, 34 (1998), 325–352.
27. I wrote this essay while I was a Visiting Researcher at the University of the Witwatersrand in Johannesburg, South Africa. I thank members of the Wits Philosophy Department for generously providing a supportive environment and for actively participating in a colloquium based on this paper. I would also like to acknowledge the written comments of an anonymous referee for *Religious Studies*. Finally, I must express gratitude to the University of Missouri Research Board for the summer salary and research award which gave me the freedom to write this paper.