

Meaningfulness, Eternity and Theism*

JOHN COTTINGHAM

1. *Theism, meaning and contingency*

We all want our lives to be meaningful: the sense of futility or absurdity that haunted the French existentialists of the twentieth century, and finds expression as early as the book of Ecclesiastes (3rd century BC), is something we all dread. Religious believers typically find that their faith is a great alleviator of this sense of futility; and even those who deny the truth of theism often grant that if theism *were* true, believers would be right to be comforted. For if our lives take place against the backdrop of a cosmos that reflects the purposes of a supremely good and benevolent creator, then (so it is felt) there would be a point to them. Instead of being here accidentally, through a blind contingent chain of circumstances that is utterly neutral and impersonal and indifferent to our concerns, we would have the assurance that our existence has a meaning and a purpose.

There are, however, all sorts of objections that can be raised against this view of the reassuring implications of theism as regards meaningfulness. One line of thought (which might be called 'the concessive line') starts by accepting that the theistic picture may be reassuring, but denies that it is *uniquely* reassuring. It concedes that a theistic worldview is hospitable to the idea of our lives as meaningful, but goes on to point out that even on a secularist or naturalistic worldview there are plenty of ways to salvage meaningfulness. Even allowing for the radical contingency of our origins, and the fluidity of the historical and cultural circumstances that have happened to shape us, it nevertheless remains true, on this secularist view, that we can still find meaning in the projects we choose to pursue and the goals we find it enriching and satisfying to set ourselves. An *internal* or *self-generated* teleology, on this picture, is quite sufficient for meaning, even once we have abandoned the idea of an external or divinely ordained teleology.

Such a defence of the idea of meaningfulness-without-God commands widespread support, and is probably the dominant or majority view on the contemporary philosophical scene. But it does have problems of its own. Ever since Nietzsche raised the subversive idea of the 'genealogy of morals' —that once we see the contingent origins of our value system, we can begin to ask '*what value those values themselves possess*' (Nietzsche 1887, Preface, §3) — moral philosophy has been living under the shadow of the 'radical contingency of the ethical', as Bernard Williams once called it (Williams 2002, p. 20): I may earnestly pursue my 'projects', and earnestly declare the importance of my values, or of the values held by my culture group, but at the back of my mind I am aware that these projects and values might seem highly questionable, or even absurd, to those of other cultures, or might even have seemed absurd to me, or to my society, had things in the past gone slightly differently. Against this, it might be objected that these supposedly subversive implications of contingency are being overdone: might not there be over time a tendency towards ethical *convergence*, based on fundamental aspects of the human condition that do not change (except perhaps extremely slowly), so that there is hope for ethical progress? In due course, then, might we not have reason to suppose that a sufficient consensus can arise to allow a stable and enduring set of values to be the focus of human striving, so that our lives can be good and meaningful against this backdrop?

* This is a draft of a paper the definitive version of which appeared in Beatrix Himmelmann (ed.) *Meaning in Life* (Berlin/Boston: De Gruyter, 2013), pp. 99-112.

This is in many ways an attractive position, and has found eloquent defenders. Moral philosophers such as David Wiggins and John McDowell have suggested, in different ways, that the steady process of human acculturation allows us to gain access to a sufficiently stable ethical domain within which good and meaningful lives can be lived (Wiggins 2006; McDowell 1994). Against this, Bernard Williams was a (perhaps sometimes reluctant) defender of the more subversive Nietzschean line. Contrasting the ethical with the scientific case, Williams offered powerful reasons for doubting that there is any reasonable hope of convergence in the ethical sphere, of the kind that we aspire to in science (Williams 1985, Ch. 8). And if this worry cannot be neutralized, then there will always be the anxiety that building our system of value and meaning within the parameters of the particular culture of which we happen to be members will risk incurring the charge of ethical complacency or quietism. If, on the other hand, we rely solely on our own individually chosen ‘projects’ to generate meaning, then there is the risk of falling into too ‘voluntaristic’ a conception of meaningfulness. This would come close to the solution offered by Nietzsche himself, when he supposed that a certain kind of heroic and exceptional human being has the power to bootstrap value into existence, to *create value* by a supreme act of will;¹ but that solution, even if it could be shown to be philosophically coherent,² appears altogether too arrogant and individualistic to form a framework for meaningfulness that could command widespread acceptance.³

These arguments and counterarguments provide rich food for philosophical reflection, and indeed are an essential prerequisite for any serious contemporary study of meaningfulness in human life. For the purposes of the present paper, it will be useful to keep these debates in mind; but I want to turn the main spotlight on an alternative strategy for vindicating the idea of meaningfulness-without-God. Instead of the concessive line—accepting the premise that theism would underwrite meaningfulness but attempting to show that there are viable secular or naturalistic ways of underwriting it—I want to consider a more radical approach, which makes the prior move of challenging the premise itself, and raising the question of why a theistic worldview should be hospitable to meaning in the first place. On this more radical strategy, there is a challenge to the very idea that an ‘external teleology’ might do the job of supporting the meaningfulness of human life.

2. *Euthyphro-type problems*

The very expression ‘external teleology’ should perhaps already raise alarm bells for those who want to claim that meaning can be found within the wider picture of a cosmos that is the work of a divine creator. For if the purposes of such a creator lie outside the domain of human choices and goals, what have they to do with us, and with the meaning of our human lives? Many of the ancients, to be sure, seem to have felt that being a small part of a much greater process somehow bestows significance on human life: ‘In the thought that I am part of the whole,’ said the Stoic Marcus Aurelius, ‘I shall be content with all that can come to pass’ (Aurelius, AD 85, VI 42). But a life of Stoic contentment is not quite the same as a meaningful life in the sense in which most people understand the latter phrase. The Stoics cultivated *apatheia*, a state of calm, rational detachment from the passions and drives of our human nature; and although they saw a certain harmony between our rational nature and the principles that they took to govern the cosmos as a whole, the life they advocated seems to be

¹ Nietzsche (1886 §203) envisages a ‘new philosopher’ with a spirit ‘strong enough to revalue and invent new values’.

² The obvious problem is that it is hard to see how mere choice can generate value; on the contrary, our choices seem valuable only when their objects have value antecedent to our making them. See further Cottingham 2008.

³ Compare Martha Nussbaum (1994) on the conspicuous lack of a sense of fellow-feeling for others in Nietzsche’s ethical outlook.

more one of endurance of the vicissitudes and misfortunes of human existence, and a detachment from the joys and sorrows of human love, than a life in which there is any ultimate meaning in all of this.

Even for those, such as adherents of the great Abrahamic faiths, who see ultimate reality in much more personal terms, attributing to God not only predicates like 'rational', but ones such as 'merciful', it is still not entirely clear why a divinely ordained cosmic teleology automatically generates meaningfulness in human life. Examples like the hapless talking cow in the *Hitchhiker's Guide to the Galaxy*, who is delighted to provide meat for the dinner table, are funny precisely because they highlight how subserving the purposes of a higher being, even willingly and joyfully, does not defuse the threat of futility and absurdity (Adams 1984; cf. Cottingham 2005, Ch. 3). Or perhaps the cow's existence is not *futile*, since it meets the needs of the masters who have bred it; but meaningfulness of a life seems to require more—it demands some match between the goals towards which someone's life is tending and the ultimate good of the one who is actually living the life. In short, the objection (what I have elsewhere called the 'alienation objection') is that an external teleology estranges us from what is good *for us*, and so forfeits its title to be a valid generator of true meaning. And finally, even in the case where the higher power may be kind and benevolent, as in the 'Truman Show' example, where the protagonist of the film is the unwitting star of a popular TV series orchestrated by an unseen Director, who has concealed cameras filming every day of his life from birth onwards, the supposed benevolence of the Director does not make any difference to the argument: the point is that the hero discovers to his horror that he is living to serve the purposes of *someone else*, and this seems profoundly corrosive of meaning (cf. Cottingham 2012).

The theist, I think, has a viable answer to the alienation objection, namely that unlike the Truman case (where the Director has at the very least mixed motives) the purposes of a truly loving and supremely good God are such as to allow the human subject to identify completely with the goals that have been divinely ordained. In other words, there is a complete harmony between internal and external teleology: our deepest desires, when purified of distortions and confusions, and our clearest rational perceptions, when properly focused, take us towards the supreme good where our true fulfilment lies. Our divinely ordained destiny is precisely that which we ourselves would strive for when our reason is unclouded and our will is unconstrained by anything but the light of truth and goodness.⁴

There are some structural similarities between the issues raised in the alienation objection and a cluster of more abstract concerns that may as a convenient shorthand be labelled 'Euthyphro-type problems'. Plato's original question, in the *Euthyphro*, was whether something counts as pious because it is loved or approved by the gods, or, on the contrary, whether it is loved by the gods because it is pious (Plato 390 BC, 6-10). The core of the dilemma, as it has mutated down the generations to current debates about the relation between morality and religion, is this: we cannot, it seems, say that what makes something good is *simply* its being commanded by God, for that would lead to the repugnant conclusion that if God were to command some morally horrible act it would be good; but if on the other hand we take the other horn of the dilemma and say that God commands things because they are *already* (as it were) good, this seems to make God in a certain sense redundant to morality. For the features which make actions good, and in virtue of which God has good reason to command them and we have good reason to obey, are features which presumably obtain *independently* of the fact that God commands them.

It should already be clear how this bears on the problem of meaningfulness. The dilemma for the theist is that our lives cannot be meaningful *simply* in so far as they serve

⁴ For an excellent discussion of love and desire for union with the good, based on some key ideas in Aquinas, see Stump 2011.

God's purposes for the cosmos; for that would lead to the repugnant conclusion that if God's purposes were, for example, cruel or capricious, serving these purposes would *eo ipso* make our lives meaningful. But on the other hand, if we say that God lays down the goals for human life in the light of the fact that such goals are *already* (as it were) such as to give our lives meaning and value, then God turns out to be in a certain sense redundant to the question of meaningfulness in our lives. For the meaning-bestowing features of our actions or projects, in virtue of which God has good reason to ordain them as the proper goals of human life (for example the fact that a life is devoted to the service of others), are presumably features that count as meaning-bestowing *independently* of the fact that he approves them as goals to which we should devote ourselves. The upshot is that the 'external' teleology invoked by bringing God into the question of life's meaning would appear to do no real work. The work is done by the meaning-bestowing features themselves (for example the altruistic or self-sacrificial character of the relevant acts). Of course God may be the *source* of the very possibility of these features, if only in the sense in which, for the theist, *all* that exists or can exist flows ultimately from the divine nature. But this does not seem enough to vindicate the invocation of God as some sort of 'answer' to the question of what it is that makes for meaningfulness in human life, except in the very general sense that he is, for the theist, the 'answer' to questions about the ultimate source of *any* existing phenomenon, whether the corrosive features of acids, or the gravity-making features of stars and planets, or whatever.

Now in current discussions of the standard Euthyphro problem about the relation between God and morality, it has become common for the theist to defend a 'modified' divine command theory: goodness is identified not with what is commanded by God *simpliciter*, but rather with what is commanded by God *qua* one whose essential nature is supremely merciful, just and loving (cf. Adams 1973). Applying this kind of move to the issue of meaningfulness, the theist might well point out that God's purposes for the cosmos and for human life are, necessarily, the purposes of a supremely loving creator. And one might go on from there to argue that an 'external' divine teleology is not therefore redundant to the question of meaning in life: for if we add the point that God is also all-knowing and all-wise, then the purposes and goals that he ordains for us in love may well exceed our human power to fully understand from our own resources alone (compare the 'external' teleology that guides a loving parent to direct a child towards goals which the child cannot yet properly grasp or internalize). So an 'internal teleology', based on our own conception of the projects and purposes that make for meaningfulness in life must indeed (so the argument runs) be supplemented by appeal to the 'external teleology' deriving from the wisdom and love of God's purposes for our lives.

This does not seem to be in itself an inappropriate line for the theist to take about meaning. But it does have the effect of shifting the discussion from the ontological to the epistemological sphere. Instead of raising questions about what *makes for* meaningfulness in human life, and how far the truth (or otherwise) of a theistic worldview might *contribute* to answering these questions, the effect of stressing God's presumed infinitely superior knowledge will inevitably move the debate on to the *evidential* question how, if theism is true, we might know, or reasonably believe, that such and such human actions contribute to the plans of a supremely wise and loving creator. And this in turn gives rise to a dilemma. If we are fully competent to judge which goals are indeed benign and meaning-bestowing simply from our own natural resources—our power of discerning in natural human terms that such and such actions do indeed make for a meaningful life—then we are back with the 'redundancy' objection: why bring God into the matter at all? If on the other hand it is replied that God is all-knowing and all-wise, so may know truths about the real meaning of our lives that are beyond our ken, then it seems that the only way for such a meaning to make a significant difference to our view of human life would be to suppose that God might directly disclose to us goals that we *would not otherwise recognize* as the locus of ultimate meaning

and value in our lives; but such a supposition would of course take us into the area of revealed truth. We (or perhaps divinely inspired prophets or priests) will have to rely on such divine disclosure to know that *these* are the goals that give meaning to human life; such knowledge or belief will not be based on our being able to point to meaning-bestowing features that are accessible to natural human discernment, but will depend on the supposed revelation by God of his plans for us. The status of such appeals to revelation is a highly complex matter that cannot be evaluated here. But the point for present purposes is not to pass judgement on revelatory accounts of meaning in human life, but simply to note that they take us outside the domain of what can be established by natural philosophical reason alone.

3. *What difference does eternity make?*

In the remaining part of this paper, I want to consider a particular feature of the theistic worldview that might be thought especially relevant to the question of human life and its meaning, namely the 'eternal' dimension which is so central to many forms of religious belief. The theist typically views our human existence *sub specie aeternitatis*. God himself is taken to be immortal and everlasting, either in the sense that he had no beginning in time and he will continue for ever, or perhaps in the sense that he transcends time altogether (the difference between these two analyses of God's 'eternal' nature will not need to be unpacked for the purposes of the present inquiry).⁵ God himself, then, is eternal: 'a thousand ages in thy sight are like an evening gone.'⁶ In addition to this notion of *divine* eternity, many theistic faiths, such as Christianity and Islam, and some forms of Judaism,⁷ hold that all or some humans will enter the 'life of the world to come' (ζωὴν τοῦ μέλλοντος αἰῶνος), to quote the words of the Nicene Creed [AD 325]; and this is generally taken to mean eternal life after death.

Both these two ideas, that of the eternity of God, and that of our own possible eternal future existence, might be thought relevant to the meaningfulness of human life. Let us take the second first. The erosion of meaning in human life is by many people connected with the thought that in a thousand years, or certainly in ten thousand, all our struggles and achievements, such as they are, will be *as if they had never been*. The Roman poet Horace, in his celebrated poem *Exegi monumentum aere perennius* ('I have raised a monument more permanent than bronze')⁸ sees meaning and value in his poetic achievement precisely in so far as it will not fade with the years, but will continue on into the remote future. But of course we know that even bronze, along with 'the cloud-capped towers, the gorgeous palaces, the solemn temples, the great globe itself',⁹ will one day perish; and indeed the universe itself will descend into the ultimate stasis of heat-death. As William Lane Craig, an eloquent exponent of this theme, puts it:

Mankind is a doomed race in a dying universe. Because the human race will eventually cease to exist, it makes no ultimate difference whether it ever did exist. Mankind is thus no more significant than a swarm of mosquitoes or a barnyard of pigs, for their end is all

⁵ 'God is eternal. But this has been understood in two different senses: either as the claim that God is timeless (he does not exist in time, or at any rate in our time) or as the claim that God is everlasting (he existed at every moment of past time, exists now, and will exist at every moment of future time).' Swinburne, 2008. p. 12. Swinburne favours the latter view.

⁶ From the hymn 'Abide with me', by the Scottish Anglican Henry Francis Lyle (composed 1847).

⁷ The Jewish sacred texts do not appear to lay much stress on the notion of the afterlife, and it is often said that the main focus of the religion is on performing one's duties to God and one's fellow men in *this* life. Jewish sects during the lifetime of Christ were divided over the question of the Resurrection of the dead, the Pharisees (followed in later Rabbinical tradition) affirming it, and the Sadducees denying it (cf. Luke 20:27, Mark 20:18).

⁸ Horace, *Odes* [*Carmina*, 23 BC], Bk III, no 30.

⁹ William Shakespeare, *Tempest* [1610], Act IV, scene 1.

the same. The same blind cosmic process that coughed them up in the first place will eventually swallow them all again (Craig 1984, p. 58).

Would it help to dispel this futility if we live for ever? As Bernard Williams pointedly argued in a celebrated paper, it seems not—indeed, to the contrary. For although it might initially seem nice to continue with our satisfying activities for many centuries without the fear of extinction, the lesson (as drawn from Bernard Williams) from the Janacek opera *The Makropulos Case* is that an *indefinitely* prolonged future existence could only produce a sense of tedium (Williams 1973). Nor would an ‘eternal recurrence’, Nietzsche-style, seem to do much to help (Nietzsche 1882); on the contrary, it might actually *detract* from meaningfulness, by the grinding cycle of everlasting repetition, which not only removes any hope of improvement, but also erodes the uniqueness, and therefore the precarious preciousness, of our human struggles and choices here and now.

In the light of these difficulties, it seems that the better way of approaching the possible link between eternity and meaning will be to connect meaningfulness not so much with *our* eternal future existence, but with God’s. If standard theism is true, then our actions will be held forever, or are eternally present, in the mind of a supremely good and loving and wise God, and so will have ultimate significance.

On the naturalist picture as portrayed by Craig, there can be no such permanent significance, given that the universe is destined for total extinction. But it seems there could be an alternative, but still naturalist, picture in which the structure of the natural cosmos is one where (as it were) ‘nothing ever goes away’: each action is a permanent or timeless part of the complex web that is the space-time continuum.¹⁰ But even were one to grant this, or something like it, it doesn’t seem enough for meaningfulness, if the ‘continuum’ is taken to be simply an abstract web or impersonal matrix. What meaning is conferred by the permanent place my actions have in this blank space-time complex, along with every other event in the universe? But if, by contrast, reality is ultimately personal, and, in particular, if it is as envisaged on the theistic view, then our lives remain for ever enfolded in the presence of a supremely loving God.

The poet Alfred Tennyson found his belief in such a benign cosmic order deeply shaken, when in the mid nineteenth century he confronted the horror of the blank and purposeless processes of nature disclosed by the emerging fossil record—the long and brutal struggle for survival over vast millennia, in which countless individuals and species are wiped out. But he still clung ‘faintly’ to the theistic hope

that not one life shall be destroyed,
or cast as rubbish to the void,
when God hath made the pile complete.
(Tennyson 1850, liv)

His faltering but eventually (by the end of the poem) re-affirmed faith was in the possibility of individual survival in an afterlife, so that the poet would again be able to set eyes on the dear friend who is the subject of his agonized lament here in *In Memoriam*. But even if Tennyson was wrong to ‘faintly trust the larger hope’ (1850: liv), even if we are indeed wholly mortal, our lives, on the theistic picture we are now considering, would still not be ‘cast as rubbish to

¹⁰ See Nietzsche 1882. The complexities of the views on this issue offered by contemporary theoretical physicists and philosophers of time are extremely difficult for the non-specialist to follow, but a useful overview is provided in Stephen Savitt, ‘Being and Becoming in Modern Physics’, *Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy* <http://plato.stanford.edu/entries/spacetime-become/#2.1>, accessed February 2013.

the void' when they end, since they would retain, eternally, their moral significance by being present to God.

In another of Tennyson's famous poems, *Ulysses*, the hero reflects what remains of his own life, and tries to encourage himself by referring to what good still remained to be sought on earth: 'every hour is saved from that eternal silence' (Tennyson 1842). That phrase clearly presupposes the bleaker view that meaning must slip away for ever as our short existence ends and disappears into silence. But on the theistic view, instead of 'every hour is saved from that eternal silence' (which suggests a desperate clutching on to some transient spark of value and meaning in the face of our grim awareness of the eventual total extinction of everything), we would need to rewrite Tennyson and say something like 'every hour is saved in that eternal *presence*'—where 'saved' now means not 'temporarily salvaged', but something like 'preserved, protected, treasured'. Whatever of the good or meaningful we manage to achieve is eternally stored and cherished in the loving presence of God.

4. *Personal immortality and Averroean concerns*

Some might worry that the route to meaningfulness just sketched out risks committing the 'Averroean heresy', named after the great 12th century Islamic philosopher and Aristotelian commentator Averroes (or Ibn Rushd), who denied that the individual soul survives death. Strictly speaking, of course, there are no necessary 'Averroean' implications in the argument we have been considering. The question of personal survival of death is left completely open; the point is simply that *even if* there is no personal immortality, there would still be a kind of ultimate metaphysical significance to our lives on the theistic view. Nevertheless, a qualm of an approximately 'Averroean' character may seem to remain. If the only meaning we can hope for is that our actions remain present in the divine mind after we die, then our lives perhaps have some 'cosmic' significance, but do not have ultimate personal significance *for us*, or from our point of view.

The frequent and fierce condemnations of Averroes by the Church in the middle ages were in part connected with the fear that without personal survival there could be no Last Judgment; and this was not just contrary to clear Christian doctrine, going right back to the Gospels, but was also felt to be subversive of morals. This continuing fear of the subversiveness of denying individual immortality was aptly summed up by Descartes, several centuries later: 'since in this life the rewards offered to vice are often greater than the rewards of virtue, few people would prefer what is right to what is expedient if they did not fear God or have the expectation of an afterlife' (Descartes 1641). But the point at issue goes far beyond the crude idea of the afterlife as a means of keeping people on the straight and narrow, and impacts directly on the question of meaning. The sense of responsibility, that we are truly accountable for our actions, is intimately bound up with the idea that they are morally significant, that they *matter*. But if the 'mattering' is something that fades over time, to that extent meaningfulness seems to be eroded. This is particularly apparent in the journalism-dominated culture of contemporary Western politics, where the 'story of the day' is frenziedly hyped up, only to disappear from view and be replaced by tomorrow's big news: politicians increasingly take advantage of this in a way that subtly but inexorably undermines the idea that personal moral conduct really matters. So when detected in corruption they will brazen things out, or if there is no other recourse, they will issue an 'apology' of transparent perfunctoriness and insincerity, trusting that in a few months' time the event will have been all but obliterated by the latest brouhaha.

Politicians are (for the most part) a particularly unappetising model to have in mind when we think about the value and meaningfulness of human lives. But for all of us there is the spectre of temporariness—the fading of memories, the steadily reduced impact of our actions, like the ripples in a pond slowly subsiding; all this does seem to threaten the idea of *enduring responsibility* that is one of the foundations of meaningfulness in our lives. But if it is

true, as Christianity and other religions affirm (but as philosophical inquiry cannot determine one way or the other) that there is personal survival, then this would function as a further 'bonus', as it were, as far as meaningfulness is concerned—a bonus to be added to the previous argument about the eternal presence of our actions in the mind of God. For if personal survival is true, then the eternal joy of God at the good deeds of his creatures would be a joy in which those who have lived well somehow share.

But an important caveat to note here is that someone's continued personal existence, if it happens, could not *in itself* confer meaning on their life; that point is already clearly established by the Makropulos example. The imagined scenario instead is one of continuing joy that must arise in significant part out of the meaning-conferring achievements and actions of the human life as it was actually lived—or out of the fact that, though all the faults are acknowledged, that life has found redemption. The religious believer might of course speculate about additional 'heavenly' joys not now conceivable; but on any plausible view of the continuing ultimate responsibility that is invoked by the ideas of heaven and hell, the joys would have to have a continuing personal connection with the former life and its character—just as indeed *any* joy, in ordinary earthly life, is laden with the past that has shaped the life up to that moment. The upshot of these points is that heavenly bliss, like earthly bliss, should not be thought of as *in itself* the generator of meaning; it must instead be thought of as of a somewhat similar status to pleasure on the account given in Aristotle's ethics: a kind of epiphenomenal fragrance or glow, like the bloom of youth, that sets the seal on, or is a sign of, the life well lived, or a life redeemed.¹¹

In case all this seems to present too rosy and complacent an account of the religious conception of eternity, it is worth adding that the theistic idea that every single one of our actions on earth remains eternally present in the mind of God cuts both ways. Just as whatever we can achieve of genuine worth and meaningfulness somehow does not fade but endures for ever, so whatever we do that undermines the value or meaning of our lives or the lives of others will also remain eternally present to the divine mind. That is indeed a terrible thought, and becomes even more fearful when we add the further idea of individual survival of death; for this implies not just that our good and evil acts retain their significance for ever, but also that we shall be called to account for them. And although on the Judaeo-Christian picture (and perhaps most prominently in the Christianity of the Gospels) this insistence on responsibility is compatible with the possibility of divine forgiveness (cf. Luke 15:11-32; Matthew 18:22), there is nothing whatever in the tradition that suggests that that possibility can or should be taken for granted.¹²

But however that may be, the crucial point for present purposes is that the inescapability of ultimate judgement on our lives—that very prospect that is so unpalatable and even absurd in the eyes of those who hold strongly deterministic versions of a secularist or naturalist worldview—turns out to be an aspect of the theistic outlook that actually *adds* to meaning. The sense that our acts are eternally subject to divine evaluation, so far from detracting from their meaning, seems deeply to enhance their significance. The responsibility that we bear for every single act that we do or fail to do during our lives is not something that fades or slips away, but retains its ultimate significance. For on the theistic view, the cosmos is not just an indifferent backdrop to our fleeting lives; it is a cosmos shot through with meaning and value, where our contribution ultimately and eternally matters.

¹¹ 'Pleasure completes the activity as an end that supervenes as the bloom of youth does on those in the flower of their age.' Aristotle 325 BC, Bk. X, Ch. 4.

¹² This incidentally explains why one feels there is something slightly rosy or sentimental in Tennyson's thought that from the perspective of eternity our lives will be viewed from an gently indulgent perspective: 'Be near us when we climb or fall:/Ye watch, like God, the rolling hours/With larger other eyes than ours,/To make allowance for us all.' *In Memoriam*, li.

So, in conclusion, the ultimate meaningfulness of our actions, on the view advocated here, comes from their taking their place, *sub specie aeternitatis*, as actions that eternally matter: where whatever sparks of good they contain is a source of joy to a being of supreme wisdom and love. This amplifies and as it were confirms the meaningfulness that they already had on earth, and protects them against the erosions of time and contingency, shielding them against the backdrop of impermanence against which nothing in the long term matters very much. And if we add to this the doctrine of individual post-mortem survival, then the blessed who have led good lives, or received the grace of redemption, will share personally in that eternal meaningfulness, and the joy that crowns it.

Some readers may feel that the considerations advanced here at the close of our discussion can hardly bear on the philosophical understanding of the question of life's meaning, since they involve too many theological ideas whose acceptance is a matter of revelation or faith. But it would be a mistake to suppose that any argument that treats **of** matters of religious faith will take us wholly outside the domain of rational discussion and philosophical evaluation. Part of our discussion has been about what religious claims about the existence of an eternal loving God, and of our own future existence, might coherently be supposed to contribute to the meaningfulness of our lives *if* they were true; and on any showing that kind of analysis must be counted a legitimate matter for philosophical inquiry. But more importantly, by unpacking the implications of the theistic world view as regards the meaningfulness of human life, we are able to see how far these implications resonate with our powerful pretheoretical intuitions about what makes for meaning and value in our lives. If, as has been suggested here, the theistic picture is strikingly hospitable to many of those intuitions, and if it is also true that those intuitions cannot be fully and satisfactorily accommodated within alternative naturalist pictures, then if we are disinclined to accept the theistic picture we face a stark choice. We could try to give up the search for ultimate meaning, and abandon the idea that our lives can be meaningful in any but a local and temporary sense: we could perhaps try to 'cure' ourselves of the idea, on the grounds that it is no more than a fantasy or an illusion born of our unwillingness to face the starkness of reality. But we may find that the yearning for ultimate meaning is an ineradicable part of our human nature, or that to try to abandon it would do too much violence to our fundamental human aspirations for it to be an option we can coherently pursue. If that is the case, and no other framework but the theistic one is available to support those aspirations, then the question arises as to whether the theistic framework is one that we can in integrity continue to dismiss out of hand.

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