# 1 Some Definitions and Some Questions

## Monotheism – Its Definition

Monotheism I define as the belief that, whatever angels and what have you there might be, there is only one God. (I shall expand on this definition in a moment by expanding on what sort of God it is that monotheists believe in.) Although the label 'Monotheism' was used first only in the seventeenth century (by Henry More), the view to which it may be attached is one the roots of which are lost in prehistory. A version of Monotheism arguably first sprang forth in the fourteenth century BC under Akhenaten, only to shrivel again quickly after his death. Some have detected the shoots of Monotheism pushing their way up through the latter books of the *Rigveda*, perhaps a few hundred years later; Hinduism is, even to this day, given a monotheistic inflexion by a minority of its adherents. Did the ancient Chinese believe in a 'High God', one who was so high as to be definitively above any other – and later? – imported 'gods', so high indeed that these other 'gods' would better be categorised as belonging to some lower order of supernatural being? If so, might some ancient Chinese best be categorized as monotheists? Such questions about the roots of Monotheism are hard to answer definitively.[1] What can be said with certainty is that, over the last three thousand years or so, Monotheism has emerged from the soil of various religious cultures across the globe.

Whilst Monotheism has emerged in various places during this period, it has not taken root and flourished equally well in all climates. Monotheism established itself most successfully in what we might call the West – in Judaism; in the Christianity that budded off from it; and then in Islam. In what we might call the East, Hinduism and Buddhism have taken and maintained their hold on the religious imagination; and whilst Hinduism – and even Buddhism – can be given monotheistic interpretations; they seldom have been. Even today, after centuries of cultural interaction with the monotheistic West, most forms of Hinduism remain explicitly polytheistic. By contrast, whilst one can raise questions about the monotheistic (as contrasted with henotheistic) status of

[1] One might define Henotheism as the view that, whilst there is more than one God, one God stands superior to the rest. Those who subscribed to pre-exilic Judaism are sometimes mentioned in this context as potential henotheists (rather than monotheists); adherents of Zoroastrianism could also be mentioned here. Monotheism as so far defined 'shades into' Henotheism, there being no determinate point at which the gap between the 'top' God and those below Him or Her becomes so large as clearly to stop those lower Gods being Gods and thus make them perhaps best spoken of as 'gods', without the capital 'G'. And indeed Henotheism as so defined shades into Polytheism for similar reasons; in the Greek Pantheon, there is definitively a king of the gods, but the religion of the ancient Greeks seems nevertheless best characterised as polytheistic, at least in part because the gap between the top god and the others is slight. With our expanded definition of Monotheism in a moment comes more determinacy.

early Judaism, say, the three main religions of the West as they have developed over the last two-and-a-half millennia at least have been uniformly monotheistic; and they remain resolutely so. During this period, attempts to introduce multiple gods into Judaism, Christianity, and Islam have been, as they remain today, infrequent and quickly – often violently – suppressed.[2]

The issues on which the adherents of Judaism, Christianity, and Islam are divided from one another are oft remarked upon, and they are not without interest. But the issue on which they agree is perhaps even more remarkable and even more interesting, to me at least. Every adherent of each of these three major world religions would agree with every adherent of each of the others about the fact that there is one God. And, further, every adherent of each of these religions would agree with every adherent of each of the others that this is the most important fact to which the human mind may ever direct itself. And, yet further, this agreement is no mere nominal agreement. Rather, there is a substantial unity of opinion across these three religions over the nature of God and over His[3] relations to the world. This enables us helpfully to expand on our definition of Monotheism.[4]

Over the last two-and-a-half millennia or so, aided by philosophical traditions imported from the Greeks, these three world religions have honed their understanding of the God in whom their adherents believe. We may thus speak of 'the' – singular – theistic understanding of God as the shared intellectual inheritance which this philosophical reflection has handed down to contemporary believers in Judaism, Christianity, and Islam. And we may speak of these believers collectively as theists. Whilst there is diversity of opinion amongst theists about the nature of God, there is much less diversity than those unacquainted with these religions or with the Philosophy of Religion might expect; thus, I think that talking of 'the' – singular – theistic view is more helpful than it is misleading.[5]

It seems to me that the best entry point for understanding the theistic concept of God is given by the methodology of what is usually called 'Perfect Being

[2] I rather ignore here some controversies over whether or not certain passages from the Quran are best interpreted as indicating a development from Henotheism to Monotheism in the Prophet Mohammad's thinking. Sometimes Christianity is held by Islam and Judaism to fail to be monotheistic on account of its doctrine of the Trinity. But Christianity itself has always been clear that tri-theism is heretical. The shared presumption then of the adherents of each of these religions, even as they find fault with one another in this way, is that there can be only one God.

[3] I use masculine pronouns for convenience, even though of course God has no sex or gender.

[4] Through its specification that the God believed in meets the theistic description, this expanded definition rules out as variants of Monotheism views which could otherwise be included within it – Deism and Pantheism, for example. It also eliminates the 'shading' issue spoken of in note 1.

[5] Modesty does not prevent me from drawing the attention of readers to another Element – T. J. Mawson, *The Divine Attributes* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2018) – which goes into these issues in greater depth and explores the major differences of opinion interior to 'the' theistic worldview. In the current work, I must paint with a broad brush.

Theology', this in essence being the thought that God should be conceived of as the best possible – indeed the perfect – being. The more particular traditional divine properties – omnipotence, omniscience, and the like – may all be seen to flow from this central idea and indeed in some cases to flow from one another.

So, for example, given that having power is obviously in itself good and in itself a 'more-is-better' property, theists are driven by perfect-being argumentation to conclude that God must be omnipotent. Whilst there is lively discussion about how omnipotence is best defined, omnipotence may be taken to entail that one does not suffer from the liability of failing to know any truth. If so, then from omnipotence flows omniscience. Even if it does not so flow, given that knowledge is in itself good and another 'more-is-better' property, so omniscience may be derived directly and separately via perfect-being argumentation. Being omnipotent and (if it needs to be added) omniscient in turn can be argued to entail being perfectly free. Omnipotence entails that there can be nothing constraining God's actions (no external power can overcome His will; nor can any internal incapacity prevent Him from acting on it). Thus God must be free to do whatever it is He judges Himself to have best reason to do. Although sometimes we think of people as failing to act freely when, despite all that lack of constraint, they are misinformed about the nature of what it is they are doing, omniscience entails that God cannot be in such a position. It entails that God infallibly knows what it is that He has best reason to do, and thus His freedom is perfect. Even if such a chain of reasoning breaks down, then again perfect freedom may be derived directly and separately via perfect-being argumentation.

Perfect freedom in turn, it seems to me, entails perfect goodness. That a given thing is what a person would ideally do in one's situation, and that this is the same as that which one, as a person, has most objective reason to do, means that an omnipotent, omniscient, perfectly rationally being, acting perfectly freely, must also be perfectly good. But again, even if such a chain breaks down, one can derive perfect goodness via perfect-being argumentation directly and separately. God's perfection also entails His necessity; God can't just 'happen' to exist, by luck, as it were; rather, He *has* to exist: not only is God not able to be otherwise than He essentially is, given that He exists, but also He's not able to be otherwise than He essentially is as He has to exist. Given His necessity, it follows that God must be eternal, either in the sense of being atemporal ('outside time', as it is usually put) or temporal ('inside time') but everlasting in both forwards and backwards directions.

Whilst these essential divine properties – and some others – are agreed upon amongst theists, the entailments between them are not, and thus there is dispute about just how many distinct divine properties there really are. At one extreme,

finding expression in the traditional doctrine of divine simplicity, we have the view that there is no distinction at all between God's attributes. For myself, I stop well short of that view. But, in any case, the theistic view is that – however these essential attributes of God are in the end to be divided up and counted – God is an omnipotent, omniscient, perfectly free, perfectly good, necessary and eternal supernatural agent. The agency element is perhaps worth drawing out. God, on the theistic picture, has beliefs (indeed they're all knowledge); He cares about things; and He freely performs actions in the light of these things. He is not some impersonal karmic force.

These then are God's *essential* properties on the theistic model. In virtue of God's being free to perform actions, so, as a result of the actions He actually performs, God also has some *accidental* properties on this model. And, in broad terms, theists also agree on these.

Theists agree that God's most primordial action is His action of creating (ex nihilo) the world, a world which is ontologically distinct from Him (in contrast to Pantheism). God's act of creation includes, at the minimum, His creating this universe, understood as all of physical reality as we encounter it – matter/energy in a space-time manifold. But it may also include His creating other things – souls, angels, other universes, if there are any. On Theism (in contrast to Deism), since this act of creation, God has continued to interact with that which He created. Most particularly, God has interacted with us by, for example, speaking to prophets and indeed to many others, guiding us in response to prayer; and He has performed miracles. In these and other ways, God has revealed Himself to us. In addition, theists believe that God, in virtue of His perfect goodness, offers us the hope of everlasting life. This life – here on Earth – is not the only or indeed most important life we shall lead. Rather, some of us, possibly all of us, will move on from it at death to join God in Heaven for an everlasting afterlife. These last divine properties are accidental as God, in virtue of His perfect freedom (an essential property), could have chosen not to create anything else at all, in which case He would have had none of them: there would have been no creation to interact with; no people to whom He could reveal Himself; and no one to whom He could give everlasting life.

This theistic understanding of God can thus form the basis for an expanded definition of Monotheism. The 'Mono' remains as it was – there is one (and only one) God – while the 'theism' is unpacked into the view that this God is as Theism characterises Him. Monotheism on this expanded definition is the view that there is only one God and that this God meets the theistic description. From now on, when I talk of Monotheism or – as I shall more commonly do – Theism, this is the view that I shall have in mind; and when I talk of God from now on, this is the sort of God that I shall have in mind.

## The Meaning of Life – Its Definition

In the same way that Monotheism as an idea preceded 'Monotheism' as a name by millennia, so the concerns which find themselves behind the phrase 'the meaning of life' predated it; indeed, plausibly they go back even further, to our distant ancestors' first religious impulses.

The first recorded usage of the phrase 'the meaning of life' in English was in the nineteenth century (by Thomas Carlyle), though there were precursors in German. Goethe seems to have used an equivalent ('*lebenssinn*') some decades beforehand, at about the same time as Novalis and Schelling were writing of it ('*sinn des lebens*'), from the latter of whom it appears Carlyle got the phrase and turned it into English.

It is sometimes said that the concerns behind the phrase 'the meaning of life' can only have arisen after the so-called 'Death of God'. MacIntyre writes thusly:

> There are concepts that are able to appear on the cultural scene only when some other older concept or concepts have been displaced in such a way as to leave cultural space for them. So it is only in a posttheological age such as our own that the concept of the meaning of life is able to appear and to flourish. For the question 'What is the meaning of life?' fills the space left vacant by the question 'Does God exist?'[6]

The idea is that, first, we had a concern for Monotheism; now – since about 1800 – we have a concern for the meaning of life. But I don't think this idea is right.

God's death itself is, of course, if one believes in it at all, capable of being given various dates, with more or less equal justification. Nietzsche – perhaps the prime suspect in the alleged killing – didn't introduce the phrase 'Death of God' until quite a bit later than Carlyle introduced the phrase 'the meaning of life', *a fortiori* later than Carlyle's German-writing predecessors were talking about it. The idea of God's 'death' occurs first in *Die fröhliche Wissenschaft*, 1882; Carlyle used the phrase 'meaning of life' first in *Sartor Resartus II*, 1834. (If it was Nietzsche who killed God, his predecessors presumably only made Him stronger.) This fact of chronological ordering on its own puts some pressure on the idea that God's 'death' is required to precipitate thought about life's meaning. But my point is that even if the question 'What is the meaning of life?' in those terms rose to prominence in Western culture only due to developments in intellectual history surrounding the Enlightenment, the concerns behind that question plausibly go far deeper into the human psyche and thus far further back in time than would be suggested by an analysis along the lines given by MacIntyre.

[6] A. MacIntyre, 'Comments on Frankfurt', *Synthese* 53 (1982), 291–4, 291.

The parallel with the term 'Monotheism' seems apposite here: just as that term did not appear until millennia after the idea it picks out, so the phrase 'the meaning of life' (and things more or less synonymous with it in other European languages) did not appear until millennia after the concerns which it picks out. Indeed, I would argue that concerns with the meaning of life have been intertwined with religious concerns since the latter first arose. The Book of Ecclesiastes may be mentioned in this context (dateable at the latest to circa 180 BC) or again we may think of the *Nasadiya Sukta* (datable at the latest to 1000 BC). And – more speculatively – we may push the beginning of the story back yet further and even push it beyond humans. There is evidence that Neanderthals took symbolic care over their dead and buried them with grave goods and the like. Were they perhaps seeking to understand their lives (and deaths) as parts of a greater spiritual whole? Did they too feel 'the sacred passion of the second life', as Tennyson would put it? Consciousness of oneself as a mortal being – one 'thrown' (*geworfen*), as Heidegger would characterise it, into a world not of one's own choosing and not entirely to one's liking; a desire to understand that world and one's place in it, and to transcend its limits in some way; a yearning to know why one is here and where, if anywhere, one is going – all of this and the ideas, desires, hopes, and fears that cluster around it are recognisably parts of the human condition for all who are not infants or developmentally challenged. Whether or not our closest non-human cousins wrestled in their own way with at least some of these thoughts and feelings we cannot tell. But, be that as it may, the phrase 'the meaning of life' picks them out in all their pluriform glory as well as does any other. And it is unsurprising that religions – formed largely in response to such thoughts and feelings – thus speak to these concerns. This Element is about how the God of Monotheism, if He exists, is best understood as affecting these issues as they lie behind the phrase 'the meaning of life'; and so, having got clear how we are going to be taking the term 'Monotheism', we must move on by looking at the phrase 'the meaning of life' in greater detail. We shall first look at the word 'life' as it occurs in the phrase 'the meaning of life' and what ideas lie behind it; then we shall look to the word 'meaning' and what ideas lie behind that.

## *Life*

My main claim in this section is that 'life' as it occurs in the phrase 'the meaning of life' has many different meanings, referring to contingent concrete reality at many levels. Allow me to illustrate, starting 'at the top'.

## Life as Contingent Concreta Per Se

If one looks up the word 'life' in a dictionary, one finds oneself directed to consider it as a biological category, as what it is that distinguishes animals and plants from rocks, water, and the like. But I submit that our concerns as we think about the meaning of life extend beyond the meaning of merely that proper part of reality made up by animals and plants. In considering the meaning of life, we are considering how life in this biological sense is best understood within the yet-broader context of which it is but a part: the universe as such; and even – I would suggest – everything contingent and concrete as such. In inquiring after the meaning of life, we are in part inquiring after the meaning of 'it all'. Why is there anything contingent at all? What, if anything, is the point of it all – the point of there being a universe or even contingent stuff more generally (if there is any stuff more general than that)? How can I make best sense of all of *this* (gesturing outwards in the most all-encompassing way that one can)? Why is it here at all? And where, if anywhere, is it all going? These and similar questions are all in our minds, I submit, when we ask 'What is the meaning of life?' and, if so, that means that, as it occurs in the phrase 'the meaning of life', 'life' should be taken to carry a connotation and denotation which extends beyond merely the biological. I shall call this its 'cosmic' signification.

The cosmic signification of the word 'life' seems to me to mark the outer limit to what it is the meaning of which we are concerned with as we concern ourselves with the meaning of life – what I shall call the whole realm of contingent *concreta* as such. I call it this rather than 'the universe', say, so as not to rule out the possibility that there may be contingent stuff that is not a part of our universe – e.g. souls, angels, other universes. It is worth noting that the realm of contingent *concreta* as such is not everything, and thus this is a *real* limit; there are things outside the realm of *concreta* and thus outside our interests as we inquire into the meaning of life. There are *abstracta*. The questions 'Why are there numbers?'; 'What, if anything is the value of abstract objects, e.g. in what does the beauty of numbers lie?'; 'What's the biggest story into which *abstracta* fit?'; 'How can I make best sense of logical and mathematical modality?', interesting questions as they may be, do not – it seems to me – make up parts of what we are asking about when we are asking about the meaning of life. God's role, if any, in answering such questions then is not something we shall look at. It is also perhaps true that there are concrete things that are not contingent. If there is a God, He is concrete but not contingent. In asking about the meaning of life in this most cosmic sense, one is not, I submit, asking about the meaning of God's life. If one answers one aspect of the cosmic question of life's meaning by saying of everything contingent and concrete that

it exists as God has chosen to bring it into existence, one will then naturally be led to consider as a follow-up question whether or not any similar question may be posed of God Himself (Why does God exist?). But in moving on to this question one is, I submit, moving beyond the question that one originally posed to another. That being so, whilst we shall in fact look at how God's necessity terminates the regress here in due course, in doing so, we are not, I submit, considering God's role in giving meaning to life but rather something of the metaphysics that lies behind His being able to perform that role. The realm of contingent *concreta* per se then is the broadest category of things we are asking for the meaning of in asking for the meaning of life.

## Life as Biological Life

Narrower than its cosmic signification, the meaning of 'life' in its broadest biological sense is also assuredly something in which we have a more particular interest. In thinking about the meaning of life, we are thinking about questions such as the following: 'Why is this universe one that contains biological life, rather than remains entirely 'dead'?'; 'Does biological life as such have some value, *sub specie aeternitatis*?' Some have claimed that the laws of nature are such as to require the evolution of observers (so that quantum wave functions may be collapsed) and have sought to answer thus the first question. Others have claimed that it is the very value of biological life which explains its existence: it is precisely because it would be valuable were such life to exist that it does, and the same could not be said of mere rocks, water, and the like. Some have suggested that, in an 'Omega Point' at the end of time, a vast supercomputer will resurrect all life that preceded it. If it could be shown that, given that the laws of nature are as they are, an entirely dead world is not in fact possible, we would have made progress in thinking about the meaning of life in this sense of 'life'. If it could be shown that value per se has this sort creative potential and that biological life has such value, we would similarly have addressed a part of our concerns. If it could be shown that we'll all be brought back at the end of time by a supercomputer, this too would not be without interest. A part of what one is asking when one asks about the meaning of life is whether or not there is any explanation – in terms of the laws of nature and/or in terms of something beyond them, such as value, perhaps, or God – for the existence of biological life as such and whether it has collectively some *telos*. We'll call this sense of 'life' then its 'biological sense'.

## Life as Humanity's Life

Narrower still, we may consider life as we humans lead it – life understood as sentient, self-conscious, free, and in itself morally significant. Obviously,

humans considered as such form but a proper part of the larger whole that is picked out by 'life' in the biological sense just considered. There are, apparently, about ten quintillion insects alive today, but, whilst each of these non-problematically counts as an instance of biological life, none, I take it, is sentient, self-conscious, free, or in itself morally significant. Thus none counts as an instance of life in this narrower sense, which we might call 'humanity's life'. I shall talk of humanity, but I do not wish to rule out the possibility that the category of life in this narrower sense extends beyond the boundaries of our species. It could well be that our non-human ancestors; parallel hominids who have since died out; or certain of the great apes even now count as life in this sense. It could likewise well be that there is life of this sort on other planets – Martians, say. I ignore such possibilities in what follows only for reasons of simplicity. Humans – sentient, self-conscious, free, and in themselves morally significant beings – strike us as special amongst other things that fall into the broader category of biological life, special relative to all those insects, say. In thinking about the meaning of life, we are, I submit, thinking in part about whether or not there is any particular explanation for this sort of specialness to exist beyond any general explanation there might be as to why life in the broader sense exists. Of course, it might be held that the answer to that question is 'No, there is not': all of what we take to be special about us in this way comes about as a result of accidents of evolution, so, presuming evolution explains why life in the broader biological sense has arisen, that is more or less all that needs to be said here. Separately or in parallel with answering this way, one might downplay the specialness of life of our sort. It's come about just by chance and it's not so special anyway. But in thinking about the meaning of life we are, I submit, thinking about whether or not answers along these lines are the right ones, for we are asking questions of the following sort. 'Why are humans here?' 'Do we – as a species – have some purpose?' 'Is the universe or some wider reality – God say – not entirely indifferent to our coming into existence, or could reality have 'got on equally well' without us? Are we, as a species, collectively going somewhere?' 'Does the largest story into which contingent *concreta* fit in the end pick out our sort of life as special and give its existence and specialness an explanation?' Even if we decide that the answers to these questions are along the negative and deflationary lines, the questions that such negative and deflationary claims allegedly answer form a significant part of our concerns when we concern ourselves with the meaning of life.

## Life as Our Individual Lives

Below the level of biological life as such, and below the level of our species, there we find ourselves – individual people, leading our individual lives. In

asking about the meaning of life, we are asking in first-personal terms about the meaning of the sort of lives which we as individuals are leading or could lead. We are asking questions such as the following. 'Why am I here?' 'What's the point of my living?' 'Is my life already, or can it be made by changes which it is in my power to effect, meaningful or more or less meaningful?' 'Do I have a vocation – something I'm here for?' 'Am I "going somewhere"?' 'Do I have a *telos* of some kind?' 'Does my life have any ultimate significance, or is whatever significance it may have in the end to be swept away by time?' These sorts of question will have been, for many of us (perhaps for all of us), the first questions of the meaning of life that we asked. And they will remain of most central concern. Questions of this sort occur to us in our most calm and reflective periods, as we deliberately take time to step back from our everyday concerns and see if we can put them into perspective and indeed seek to see if, from a larger perspective, we should re-order these everyday concerns or perhaps even switch our efforts from them to something entirely new. 'Is there a greater scheme of things into which I fit, or could fit better, if only I knew about it?' 'Are the things that concern me and the projects to which I direct my energies in everyday life the right ones?' 'Am I fundamentally using my life well or wasting it?' As well as entertaining them in calm and reflective periods, questions of this sort can be forced on us in traumatic instants, when our quotidian cares – 'Will I have time to defrost the fridge before we go on holiday?' – are forcibly displaced from our consciousness by some momentous interruption – 'I'm phoning to let you know your blood-test results have come back; I'm afraid it's bad news.' Whether of our own volition or not, each of us will have wrestled with these individualistic versions of the question of life's meaning at various stages in our lives. We may call the sense of life which functions in them 'individual life' to distinguish such questions from those which concern themselves with life at the higher levels we've sketched previously.

## Sub-conclusion

All in all, then, when one considers the meaning of life, one is considering the meaning of a lot. Allow me to sum up this section, which has been to this effect.

We started big. In asking about the meaning of life, we are asking what I called 'cosmic' questions, questions such as 'Why is there anything (contingent and concrete) at all?' We are also asking questions concerning a class of things smaller than the set of contingent concrete objects: biological life, per se. We are asking questions such as 'Is there some purpose behind the existence of biological life as such?' And we are asking questions about something yet narrower – that which I called 'humanity's life'. We are asking questions such