

## 1 Introducing the Philosophy of Life's Meaning

What, if anything, makes our lives meaningful? How would a spiritual dimension, such as a Heaven transcending the realm of nature, bear on life's meaning? Is God or a soul essential for a meaningful life, or at least for a particularly meaningful one? Or might these spiritual conditions in fact seriously detract from the meaning available to a life?

This Element seeks to acquaint readers with contemporary philosophical answers to these questions. Its primary aim is to recount key authors, texts, claims and arguments from the recent literature composed by analytic philosophers. A secondary aim is to advance enquiry by, amongst other things, pointing out weaknesses in positions that need to be addressed and suggesting under-explored strategies that merit consideration.

The overarching theme of the Element is that there has been a shift in much of the debate about the extent to which, and respects in which, spiritual conditions such as God or a soul bear on the meaning of our lives. During the medieval and modern periods in the West, the debates were principally about whether God or a soul is *necessary* for any meaning in our lives.<sup>1</sup> Supernaturalists then usually claimed, or at least implied, that something spiritual is indeed required for meaning in our lives to be possible, such that, if we live in a purely physical world, then all our lives are meaningless. Naturalists, in contrast, denied that claim, and instead maintained that meaning is *possible* in the absence of God or a soul. These days, many supernaturalists no longer claim that meaning as such is impossible without God or a soul, instead tending to maintain that a *great* meaning would be impossible without one or both of them. Not only have naturalists denied this claim, but some have also gone on the offensive by arguing that the presence of God or a soul would in fact *reduce* our odds of obtaining meaning in certain ways.

This Element addresses both the classic positions, which may be described as 'binary' for being all or nothing when it comes to meaning's logical dependence on a spiritual dimension, as well as the newer developments in the field that focus on degrees or ranked kinds of meaning available to human beings. It pays particular attention to the latter views – advanced largely over the past dozen years – that God or a soul uniquely would either greatly enhance the meaning in

<sup>1</sup> The use of the specific word 'meaning' and the cognate term 'significance' is a pretty recent, modern phenomenon, substantially appearing in the past 250 years or so (Landau 1997). However, the reader will recall that more than 2,000 years ago, the author of the Biblical book Ecclesiastes proclaimed that 'all is futility' and that life is akin 'to the pursuit of wind' (discussed later in this Element). And when Thomas Aquinas, for instance, enquires into the final end for human beings, he is thinking about what the point of our lives is or what our highest purpose is, which is more or less about life's meaning. Although the words are different, the concepts are at least similar.

our lives or detract from it (and conceivably both, in different respects). The Element aims to contribute to philosophical reflection on these matters (although not to defend specific conclusions about them), and to enable other philosophers, theologians and related thinkers to do so.

This Element's enquiry into religious matters addresses the way that the presence or absence of certain spiritual conditions might bear on life's meaning, and not the way that a certain belief system or social practice might do so. So, the philosophical disagreements addressed here are not so much about whether, say, having faith in God or being part of a congregation confers meaning regardless of whether God exists, but instead about how the truth of theism, viz., the reality of God, might confer it (perhaps upon His existence being acknowledged by a believer) or not.

With regard to how spiritual conditions might affect life's meaning, this Element considers only philosophical literature, and does not appeal to, for instance, testimony from purported prophets or holy texts, works in religious studies or findings from empirical psychology. In addition, the philosophical texts it takes up are solely those from the Western, and then the particularly English-speaking and analytic, tradition. Relatedly, this means that the Element addresses the potential influence on life's meaning of God or a soul as they are characteristically conceived in the Abrahamic faiths, leaving aside spiritual conditions salient in other worldviews, such as ancestors in traditional African religion or Brahman in Hinduism.

The next Section of the Element defines central terms, specifying what is meant by words such as 'God' and 'soul', discussing the meaning of 'life's meaning' and distinguishing the sense of 'supernaturalism' from views such as theism (Section 2). In particular, it draws a key distinction between the meaning in a person's life and the meaning of the human race as a whole, with much (though not all) of the Element addressing the former topic, regarding a final value that may be exhibited in some individual lives but not others, at least not to the same degree. The Element then explores the 'extreme supernaturalist' view that God or a soul is necessary for human life to be at all meaningful, sketching the central rationales for the view and their *prima facie* weaknesses (Section 3). In the following Section, the Element critically discusses the view that neither God nor a soul is necessary for a meaningful life and that a purely physical world would be sufficient for some degree of meaning (Section 4), explaining why this 'moderate naturalist' perspective has become so common to hold in the post-war era. After that, the Element considers the claim that, while a spiritual realm is not necessary for a meaningful life, only it could significantly enhance the quantity, quality or duration of meaning available to us (Section 5). Upon having considered what there is to be said for this 'moderate

supernaturalism’, the Element takes up ‘extreme naturalism’, according to which we would instead be better off in terms of meaning if there were no spiritual realm (Section 6). According to this perspective, God or a soul would detract from the meaning available to us. The Element concludes by noting that it is too early to expect firm views about these matters, given how recent are the non-binary positions that spiritual conditions would add to, or conversely subtract from, life’s meaning in substantial ways. The conclusion also sketches promising ways for readers to make contributions to these cutting-edge debates about God, soul and the meaning of life (Section 7).

## 2 Clarifying the Terms of the Debates

The aim of this Section is merely to define the words central to the debates explored in the Element. We need clarity about what counts as, say, ‘supernaturalist’ or ‘meaningful’ in order to ensure that interlocutors are not speaking past each other and to be confident of what a certain position involves. The Section begins by analyzing what talk of ‘life’s meaning’ means for a large majority of analytic philosophers (2.1), then defines terms central to competing theories of what would make life meaningful (2.2) and finally considers how metaphysical matters, about the nature of reality, are conceptually distinct from theories of meaning, but nonetheless might substantively affect their plausibility (2.3).

### 2.1 The Concept of Life’s Meaning

The dominant view amongst twenty-first-century English-speaking philosophers about the concept of life’s meaning, that is, what competing theories of meaning are all about, is that it is a variable final value that is usefully distinguished from other final values such as happiness and morality. There are some sceptics about that, who contend that talk of ‘life’s meaning’ is superfluous and could be replaced without loss by appeal to another condition good for its own sake, particularly talk of ‘well-being’ (e.g. Kershnar 2014; Hammerton 2018). Rather than use space to argue against such a deflationary view of what meaning-talk is about,<sup>2</sup> this Section articulates the view widely accepted by those party to debates about the role spiritual considerations play in life’s meaning, viz., that meaning is not reducible to any other single final value.

For most these days, talk of ‘life’s meaning’ (and of synonyms such as ‘significant existence’ or ‘important way of being’) signifies a cluster of conditions that are good for their own sake and that can come in degrees. In particular,

<sup>2</sup> Say, by showing how meaning can intuitively come from sacrificing one’s own net well-being for the sake of a cause.

life is usually taken to be meaningful by definition to the extent that it makes sense, forms a narrative, merits ‘fitting’ reactions such as esteem or admiration, manifests value higher than animal pleasures, realizes a purpose or contributes positively to something beyond itself. Few believe that any single one of these properties exhausts the concept of meaningfulness, although some do (e.g. Nozick 1981: 574–612; Martela 2017). Instead, for most in the field, when we think or speak about life’s meaning, we have in mind at least one of these features and quite often more than one as an amalgam (Markus 2003; Thomson 2003: 8–13; Mawson 2016; Seachris 2019).

Notice that the aforementioned features of the concept of meaningfulness are at least analytically distinct from happiness, construed subjectively, and moral praiseworthiness, construed impartially. That is, when we have meaning in mind as a quality human life can exhibit, we are not thereby conceptually considering merely whether a person’s life is pleasant or satisfying to her, or whether she has given others their rightful due. Substantively, it might be that one’s life is in fact (more) meaningful insofar as one has been happy, and perhaps even happy in the course of doing morally right by others. However, the present point is that this is not true by definition of the phrase ‘life’s meaning’. Some meaning could, conceptually speaking, come from conditions that are non-happy and non-moral, perhaps a scientist slaving away to make a discovery about the nature of the universe. Indeed, it is not a contradiction in terms to wonder whether meaning would come from a life that is unhappy and immoral, say, that of a tortured artist who has ditched his wife and children to make great paintings that he will not show to the public.

So far, the meaning of ‘meaning’ has been expounded, but there is also unclarity about what the word ‘life’ might signify. A large majority of contemporary philosophers have focused on the meaningfulness of the lives of human persons, with them having undertaken little enquiry into whether lives of animals can exhibit meaning or even whether the lives of human non-persons, such as the extremely mentally incapacitated, can do so (but see Purves and Delon 2018).<sup>3</sup>

When it comes to the lives of human persons, there is a common distinction drawn in the field between the meaning ‘of’ life in general and the meaning ‘in’ a particular life. The former is roughly about whether there is a point to the existence of the human race as a species, or, more carefully, human persons as a natural kind. Is there a purpose for which we were all created, or is there a way for humanity to connect with something highly valuable beyond itself, or how

<sup>3</sup> There have been some, however, interested in the meaning of the universe or finite reality as a whole, not merely of the human race to be found in it. Here, there is often posed the question of why there is something rather than nothing (e.g. Edwards 1972; Mulgan 2015; Tartaglia 2015).

might one be able to tell a good story about the human race? One readily sees why God, especially, has been so frequently invoked to answer these kinds of questions.

The latter issue, regarding the meaning in a life, is about whether and how a given person's life can be meaningful. What, if anything, about one of our lives can merit considerable pride or admiration, or which goods should a person seek out that are worth much more than base pleasures, or how, if at all, can one live in a way that would ground a compelling autobiography?

Standard answers to these questions in the Western tradition appeal to the famous triad of 'the good, the true and the beautiful'. The 'good' in the first instance signifies beneficent ways of relating, e.g., advancing justice, giving to charity and loving family and friends. The 'true' refers to intellectual enquiry and ideally understanding, ranging from a formal education about the natural world, on the one hand, to wise self-awareness, on the other. The 'beautiful' picks out creativity, and so initially brings to mind composing or interpreting artworks, but it could also consist of, say, being funny or devising a novel technological gadget.

Both religious and non-religious theorists commonly deem these to be characteristic sources of meaning in life (as Blessing 2013: 116–17 points out), but they disagree over when and why they are. Both kinds of theorists also tend to agree on actions that lack meaning, with a very large majority concurring that the following confer no meaning on a life: chewing gum, taking a hot shower, watching sitcoms while eating ice cream, living the rest of one's life alone in a virtual reality (an 'experience machine', as many analytic philosophers call it, following Nozick 1974: 32–5), digging a hole and then filling it up and then digging a hole again and filling it up and so on indefinitely, killing one's innocent spouse for the insurance money, hating other people simply because of their race. *Some* of these actions are worth doing, but not because they would make one's life more significant. If one believes that some of these actions could do so, one has to tell a story that invokes some *further* condition, such as helping others or being rewarded for having made a sacrifice. Setting these kinds of conditions aside, the actions are widely taken to be meaningless for lacking the kinds of valuable properties mentioned earlier, or so most philosophers believe. The disagreement between them is instead mainly over precisely what is missing from such actions, and specifically whether (and how) spiritual conditions are relevant.

Note that if a group's existence were significant, there would not be any direct implication for the meaningfulness of the group's individual members, at least not by definition. Humanity's meaningfulness does not logically imply any particular human's meaningfulness. Similarly, if the lives of some persons

were meaningful, it would not immediately follow that the human race as a whole is meaningful. So, the two enquiries are conceptually distinct, even if some philosophers believe that substantively they do influence each other.

There is some disagreement about whether one of these enquiries is primary or foundational in some way (for the minority view that the meaning of life is key, see Seachris 2009 and Tartaglia 2015), but this Element does not go into that matter in any depth. Instead, it usually addresses both enquiries side by side, while devoting somewhat more space to meaning in life since it has been the predominant focus of English-speaking philosophers for at least the past 100 years.

## 2.2 Conceptions of Life's Meaning

So far, this Section has sought to analyze the concept of life's meaning, or what is widely deemed uncontested amongst competing enquirers, viz., both those who favour spiritual accounts of it and those who do not. Now the Section turns to conceptions of life's meaning, that is, highly contested theories of what would constitute life's meaning.

Of key concern is how to distinguish religious from non-religious views. Here, the word 'supernaturalism' is used to connote accounts according to which God or a soul (or of course the pair) as standardly understood in the Jewish, Christian and Islamic faiths is central to making life (whether of the individual or of the group) meaningful. So, God is understood to be a perfect being, that is, a spiritual person beyond the realm of subatomic particles in (our) space-time who is the source of the universe and who is all-knowing, all-good and all-powerful. A soul is taken to be an immortal, spiritual substance that contains our identities and that will survive the deaths of our bodies. A supernaturalist is one who maintains that either God or a soul (or the pair) is central to life's meaning. At least one spiritual condition is deemed to be necessarily constitutive either of meaning as such or of a great meaning, where the relevant life is either that of an individual or of humanity.

Employing the term 'supernaturalism' is not meant to suggest that, for religiously oriented meaning theorists, the natural world is utterly irrelevant to making life meaningful (a concern expressed in Cottingham 2016a: 48–50). One might deem human beings to have been created in God's image, with meaning being constituted by how one treats them, for just one example. The term is instead meant to indicate that the physical world cannot confer much, if any, meaning in the absence of some connection with a spiritual dimension.

Naturalism is not quite simply the rejection of supernaturalism, because of the logical space for non-naturalism, the view that meaning is constituted by

properties that are neither supernatural nor natural. Consider, for instance, the views of Immanuel Kant, insofar as he conceives of the highest good for finite persons in terms of the exercise of noumenal agency, which is neither a physical nor a spiritual property for him. A naturalist does reject supernaturalism, but further claims that physical properties are sufficient for a (greatly) meaningful life, whether of a person or of the species. The physical roughly consists of subatomic particles in our space–time and what is composed out of them, as is particularly well known through the scientific method.

### 2.3 Meaning and Metaphysics

Supernaturalism and naturalism are views about what would confer meaning on life. They are accounts of what would manifest a certain sort of value, and so are to be contrasted with metaphysical views, i.e., accounts of what exists. Theism is one such metaphysical view, and in the present context, it is the claim that something spiritual – characteristically God, but perhaps a soul on its own – exists, or that we can know such exists, while atheism here is the denial of theism. The term ‘theism’ is hereby used in this Element more broadly than is often the case; usually it is taken to mean the claim that God and a soul exist, or that God exists but not a soul, but here a possible variant of so-called theism is the claim that a soul exists but not God.

Most supernaturalists are theists, while most naturalists are atheists. That is, most of those who believe that the existence of God or a soul would alone make life’s meaning possible or substantial also believe that the relevant spiritual conditions exist. And most of those who deny that the existence of God or a soul would alone make life’s meaning possible or substantial also deny that these spiritual conditions exist.<sup>4</sup>

However, a supernaturalist could consistently be an atheist; one might think that God and a soul are necessary for life’s meaning but deny that they exist, committing one to the ‘nihilist’ view that meaning is impossible for us. Albert Camus (1955) is famous for having held something like that combination of positions, as did Leo Tolstoy (1884), at least prior to having come to believe in God (albeit on faith). Similarly, one could be a naturalist who is a theist; there is no logical contradiction in holding that God and a soul exist, but that neither one is central to what makes life meaningful.

There is only a sparse literature addressing the competing likelihoods of the four combinations of views about meaning and metaphysics, viz., supernaturalism-theism, supernaturalism-atheism, naturalism-theism and naturalism-atheism. Although it is clear that philosophers most often cluster around the first

<sup>4</sup> Parts of the next two paragraphs have been cribbed from Metz (2019: 357–8).

and fourth positions, there is as yet little systematic discussion about whether they should.

One strategy to make headway that the field might consider is how metaphysical issues would affect the meta-ethical matter of ‘where values come from’.<sup>5</sup> For example, if God does not exist, and the human species is merely a product of natural selection, then chances are that our value judgements, including those about meaning, arose because they enhanced fitness. And that function, in turn, probably did not depend on thought about a spiritual realm (see Metz 2013a: 242–4, 2016a: 74–6). For all we can tell, belief in God and a soul are relatively recent developments in human history and could not have influenced hominid evolution. Plus, the sort of perfection inherent to these concepts would have been unlikely to affect our reproduction in a world in which it does not exist; instead, imperfect standards achievable in a purely physical world would have most likely served the function of fostering human reproduction. This rationale suggests that in an atheist world, human beings would likely make naturalist judgements about meaningfulness, i.e., that the supernaturalist-atheist combination is implausible.

Conversely, if God existed and were the source of the universe, presumably He would also be the source of what is good for its own sake in it, including meaningfulness. In addition, He would do as much as He could to prompt us to become aware not merely of what is meaningful, but also of why it is. Hence, there is *prima facie* reason to believe that theism would support supernaturalism; even if it is not inconsistent to hold naturalism-theism, supernaturalism-theism might be more coherent.

These have been sketches of arguments, and not full-blown defences. However, they indicate how there might be theoretical leverage for favouring some of the four logically possible combinations of views about metaphysics and meaning as more substantively plausible than others. While that is of philosophical interest in its own right, it would also have an important bearing on our knowledge of what is meaningful, in the event we were confident about what exists. For example, if the supernaturalism-theism combination were shown to be more plausible than the naturalism-theism combination, and if we knew that theism were true, then there would be some evidence in favour of supernaturalism. These kinds of rationales are currently lacking sophisticated exploration in the field.

<sup>5</sup> For recent ‘pro-theist’ (and ‘anti-theist’) positions that are not squarely about life’s meaning, but that consider the conceptual relationships between metaphysics and God’s value (or disvalue), see Penner and Arbour (2018), Schellenberg (2018) and Tooley (2018).



### 3 Extreme Supernaturalism

For a long time in the history of Western philosophy, those who thought spiritual conditions are central to life's meaning tended to think that they are necessary for it. This latter, binary view is labelled an 'extreme' form of supernaturalism, for it entails that if neither God nor a soul exists, then humanity as a whole and individual human lives are all utterly meaningless.

A number of major philosophers from the medieval and modern periods held such a view. For Aquinas, the beatific vision, i.e., apprehending God without bodily distortion, is our final end; for Pascal, God is what alone can provide a sense of fulfilment, 'He only is our true good' (*Pensees* #425); for Kant, human persons could not achieve their highest good without the existence of both God and a soul; for Kierkegaard, faith in God is the only way to connect with the eternal and unchanging, essential for overcoming despair and finding meaning in one's life; for Tolstoy, life is not worth living if one lacks a soul and is destined to die along with one's body instead of to unite in paradise with God.

This Section spells out the major rationales for this version of supernaturalism, and indicates why contemporary philosophers have tended to doubt them. The aim is not to show that the arguments for extreme supernaturalism are indeed unconvincing, but to recount the history of the debate, with some suggestion about argumentative strategies that merit exploration in the twenty-first century.

When it is claimed that God, for instance, is 'necessary' for life's meaning, this is shorthand for 'identical to' it (in part). The claim is not merely that there would be no meaning without God, but rather that there would be no meaning without God because meaningfulness *essentially consists of* human life relating to God in a certain way. Hence, it will not support extreme supernaturalism to argue that because the universe would not exist without God having created it, there would be no human life at all and hence also no meaning either in or of human life. At best this reasoning would show that God is instrumentally necessary for life's meaning, i.e., that God is merely a means to the production of meaning, but this is not the relevant claim, which is instead that God must constitute life's meaning as an end.

Philosophers have presented five major arguments for the view that life's meaning is identical (in part) to God or a soul, which, in catchwords, appeal to God's purpose (3.1), relationality (3.2), an afterlife (3.3), humanity's origin (3.4) and humanity's prospects (3.5).<sup>6</sup> The first three concern meaning in life, the latter two the meaning of life.

<sup>6</sup> For other, less influential defences of extreme supernaturalism, see Hartshorne (1984), Smith (2000), Svenson (2000), Ellis (2011) and Metz (2013a: 119–22).

### 3.1 God's Purpose

The most influential argument for extreme supernaturalism about meaning in life is that a person's life is more meaningful, the more she fulfils a purpose that God has assigned to her. By this view, if God does not exist, or if He does but we fail to realize the end He has appointed us, then our lives are meaningless. By a 'simple' or 'pure' version of this view, it is just the fulfilment of the purpose that confers meaning, and not any gift or reward of eternal life in Heaven consequent to having done so (e.g. Brown 1971; Cottingham 2003).

There is of course disagreement about what God's purpose is (or would be, depending on one's metaphysics), with one major distinction being between those who believe His purpose is (or would be) universal in scope and others maintaining it is (or would be) particularized. The universalists are at home in the Christian and Islamic faiths, in which the same purposes of loving God and one's neighbour or glorifying God, respectively, are thought to have been assigned to all human persons. Amongst philosophers it has been common to hold that God's purpose would ground a universal moral system, one that applies to all human beings and that confers meaning on our lives when we live up to it (e.g. Cottingham 2005: 37–57; Craig 2013). In contrast, according to one strain of Judaism, (at least some) commandments from God as laid down in the Torah apply specifically to the Jewish people, and some philosophers believe that God would have to have a purpose unique to each individual in order to confer meaning on our lives (e.g. Affolter 2007; cf. Salles 2010).

The standard objection to a purpose-based account of why God is necessary for meaning is that not just any purpose assigned to us is intuitively meaning-conferring, and that it is the content of the purpose, not the fact that it has come from God, that makes it meaningful to fulfil or not. Consider, for example, the difference between serving as food for intergalactic travellers (Nagel 1971: 721; Nozick 1981: 586–7) or committing rape (Sinnott-Armstrong 2009: 106), on the one hand, and donating money to the poor, on the other. If God were to assign the former purposes to human beings, they would not confer meaning on our lives, or so most readers will think. If not, then the mere fact that God is the source of a purpose is not what makes it meaningful; it is rather what the purpose would have us do, making the fact that it has come from God irrelevant.

This standard objection now has a standard reply, which involves two claims. First, the point is made that God could not assign a purpose that would intuitively fail to confer meaning when we fulfil it since its content would be fixed by His inherent nature as beneficent, loving, just or more generally all-good. 'Since God is perfectly good, his purposes for human life will assuredly