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ULTIMACY'S MEANING FOR MEANING ULTIMATELY: WHY GOD STILL MATTERS IN THE END

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ABSTRACT: This paper explores a common oversight in the philosophical literature on meaning, arguing that the nature of God's ultimacy prohibits a shared conception of "meaning" between Christian theists and non-theists. The contemporary debate between Supernaturalists and Naturalists often assumes that God's existence would provide quantitatively more meaning in life than God's non-existence. Thus, they primarily question whether a sufficiently meaningful life is possible without God, or whether God's added meaning is a coherent and net benefit to our lives. However, I argue that the nature of God's ultimacy, following from the doctrine of creation *ex nihilo*, requires that meaning be understood fundamentally as a value-relation grounded in God. God does not quantitatively augment meaning, but qualitatively determines what meaning means. As such, Supernaturalists and Naturalists frequently speak past one another when discussing questions of sufficient or quantitative meaning, which assume the possibility of a common conception and metric for comparison.

KEYWORDS: Meaning; Ultimacy; God; Death; Creation

Introduction

If there were no God, could human beings still live meaningful lives? Given the vastness of time and space and the comparative transience and triviality of human life, many thinkers have historically answered in the negative. Nonetheless, many contemporary analytic philosophers argue life can be abundantly meaningful in a godless universe. Although these positions apparently hinge on the relation between temporality and meaning, underlying the debate is a more fundamental contention about the axiological role of ultimacy. Theists traditionally argue that *ultimate* meaning is necessary for *any* meaning to exist, therefore requiring the existence of God or

immortality. Alternatively, non-theists often argue that meaning can exist sufficiently in a more limited sense, bounded by a finite human life.

However, this debate rests at an impasse. Each side inadequately considers the role of ultimacy in shaping and comparing their differing conceptions of meaning. Consequently, philosophers on differing sides of the issue effectively speak past one another when assuming a modally shared conception of meaning is available. In the following, I will first illustrate the current conversation surrounding the relevance of God for meaning, relying primarily on the formative work of Thaddeus Metz and Joshua Seachris, to show how ultimacy plays a key conceptual role throughout the debate. Next, I will provide an overview of the doctrine of creation *ex nihilo*, following Simon Oliver, to characterize a prominent, traditional Christian conception of God's ultimacy. Finally, I will show that no common conception of meaning can be held between possible worlds in which God exists and in which God does not exist, given the nature of God's ultimacy. In conclusion, most of the debate between theists and non-theists over death's significance for meaning misses the point.

What Do We Mean by Meaning?

Meaning – Objective or Subjective?

To begin, I will clarify what is meant by *meaning* when we ask whether life is meaningful. Susan Wolf contributes a compelling aphorism that remains a touchstone for other philosophers today, that meaning exists where "subjective attraction meets objective attractiveness." (Wolf, 2010, p. 9) As she further explains, her goal is to wed the competing intuitions that meaning is intimately connected with a subjective sense of personal fulfilment as well as an objective sense of taking part in something larger than oneself (Wolf, 2010, p. 11). For Wolf, one's life must connect with something objectively valuable independent of one's own preferences to be properly meaningful (Wolf, 2010, p. 32).

Wolf's position is now known as a Hybridist position, in which meaning requires both subjective and objective conditions to obtain. However, her proposal spawned several contending positions that now span the range of Hybridism, Objectivism, and Subjectivism, all contending over the necessary conditions for grounding meaningfulness. In contrast to Wolf's position, Objectivism holds that the subjective experience of meaning is not strictly necessary for meaning to obtain; rather, only an objective criterion is required. One need not feel their life to be meaningful for it to be meaningful. Conversely, most philosophers do not hold to Subjectivism concerning meaning, which roughly states that the sole sufficient condition for meaning is that we experience a sense of meaningfulness or have our self-asserted concerns of meaning met (Johansson and Svensson, 2022, p. 43). Typically, Subjectivism is dismissed for its counterintuitive implications.[1] While more can certainly be said on the issue, the

[1] Typically, philosophers argue that performing trivial activities (such as counting blades of grass) or plugging into an "experience machine" might grant the *experience* of living meaningfully without the *actuality* of it. Thus, the subjective perception of meaning cannot be sufficient to guarantee meaning alone – or so the argument goes.

naturalist and theistic positions on meaning I will be engaging presume an Objectivist or Hybridist account, in which meeting some mind-independent, objective criterion remains essential for meaningful living. This condition will prove critical for reflecting on the role of ultimacy for meaning.

Meaning – the Current Consensus on the Concept

Since Wolf, Thaddeus Metz is probably the most significant philosopher to develop the discourse on meaning. He recently provides a summative position on what most philosophers of meaning think about the concept:

> …a very large majority have maintained that the concept of life's meaning essentially includes something about individual human lives, with a focus on what they do, where what they do is good or choice-worthy for its own sake to a noteworthy degree, and, furthermore, is typified by love/morality, wisdom/enquiry, and the arts/creativity, as well as absent from a life that either rolls a stone up a hill for eternity or is alone in a virtual reality device. (Metz, 2022, p. 28)

Within this summary position, a few key criteria are worth highlighting. First, "meaning" is a category of value which minimally applies to individual humans, though the specific property which makes humans "meaning-bearers" remains unspecified.[2] Second, meaning primarily confers to those meaning-bearers in virtue of their actions – making decisions, pursuing specific vocations, fulfilling certain purposes, and the like. Third, it seems meaning requires humans to be acting in relation to "intrinsic final values," as are typically encapsulated in "the good, the true, and the beautiful." (Metz, 2013) While one can argue the precise nature of what counts as an intrinsic (or final) value, the Objectivist/Hybridist holds that some actions or goals are worth pursuing in and of themselves, without further reference to ulterior ends or additional value-conferring criteria. Finally, the mode of engagement is purposely left vague. Fulfilling a greater purpose, transcending our finitude, or gaining broad esteem have all been asserted as principled accounts of how one achieves meaning, yet no singular principle easily captures the breadth of meaning's conceptual territory (Metz, 2013, Ch. 2).

Therefore, I take "meaning" to loosely refer to how persons rightly relate to intrinsic value. For example, if I am to defend writing this paper as a "meaningful activity", I would argue that I am properly engaged with the good, the true, and the beautiful in an appropriate capacity. Notably, meaning then elicits from a proper engagement of those values according to who or what *I am*. For instance, if a monkey at a typewriter accidentally wrote this same paper it would not be meaningful for the monkey. The

[2] Elsewhere, Metz uses the term "meaning-bearer" to designate the specific aspect of a human life which bears meaning, whether its holistic narrative structure or individual activities, or (as he concludes) a mix of both. Here I use the term more broadly to capture that "human life" bears meaning regardless of what specific aspect of human life allows it to do so. See Metz, 2013, Ch. 3 for further detail.

monkey is not properly engaged with the material in the same sense in which I am. Alternatively, if a supernatural or otherworldly being of great knowledge wrote this paper, perhaps it would not be meaningful due to this paper's triviality in accordance with that creature's capabilities. The meaning relation must therefore account for the natures of the subject (the "meaning-bearer"), the object (or "intrinsic value"), and their form of engagement.

This threefold relation establishes the battle lines on which differing conceptions of meaning contend. As I will argue, theists and non-theists tend to characterize the nature of each of these relata differently, resulting in competitive visions of what meaning *is*, even while mutually acknowledging this abstract formulation. So, although philosophers might agree with this broad "concept" of meaning, they may differ dramatically in their "conceptions" of meaning which effectively explain the concept with further depth and precision (Metz, 2013, pp. 18-19).

Naturalism and Supernaturalism

For those who are optimistic about the existence of meaning, God's existence is not so much a *metaphysical* concern as an *axiological* one. What matters here is God's role in grounding and conferring value and so enabling meaning, regardless of God's alleged existence. On one hand, optimistic Naturalists of Metz's variety typically believe meaning can elicit from sheerly physical properties, as can be discovered and described through the tools of science (Metz, 2013, p. 72 and Metz, 2019, pp. 6-7).[3] God *might* exist on this view, but his role in conferring meaning to human beings is either formally superfluous or conceptually irrelevant. On the other hand, Supernaturalists believe spiritual conditions, such as the existence of God or a soul, deeply impact our capacity to live meaningfully (Metz, 2019, pp. 6-7). Supernaturalism further divides into two categories: (1) Extreme Supernaturalism takes a spiritual condition to be *necessary* for meaning, and (2) Moderate Supernaturalism only claims that spiritual conditions greatly *enhance* meaning in some important way (Metz, 2019, pp. 9, 27). In other words, an Extreme Supernaturalist might believe that there can be no meaning whatsoever if God does not exist, but a Moderate Supernaturalist might hold that meaning can exist in a Godless world, though it might be comparatively impoverished of meaning.

The Naturalist/Supernaturalist division usually partitions upon the perceived relevance of cosmic factors for enabling personal meaning. Typically, Supernaturalists tend to emphasize the relevance of the meaning *of* life and correspondingly *sub specie aeternitatis* (SSA) perspectives on meaning, which seek to explain how cosmic categories (such as "life" or "the universe") can hold meaning themselves as well as profoundly matter to our personal pursuits of meaning (for example, see Seachris, 2013). Alternatively, Naturalists of Metz's variety typically argue that meaning *in* life considerations need not invoke SSA perspectives. In other words, human beings can be sufficiently content in their pursuits of meaning by solely attending to the *sub specie*

[3] This position would also contrast with varieties of pessimistic Naturalism, which argue that metaphysical naturalism proves insufficient for meeting the felt human need for meaning.

humanitatis (SSH), or localized human, perspective, without any required reference to cosmic meaning or grander perspectives on the ultimate "meaning of it all" (Seachris, 2013, p. 607).[4]

Ultimacy and Sufficiency

Thus, "ultimacy" is a concept which often arises in contentions between Naturalists and Supernaturalists, though it usually remains poorly defined. Especially for Extreme Supernaturalists, the existence of *any* meaning is contingent upon something like the existence of *ultimate* meaning. Even for Moderate Supernaturalists, ultimate meaning is usually claimed to depend upon God, even if *some* meaning can be found in a possible world without God.

Naturalists may grant that ultimate meaning is not available in their framework, but rather, they may be content to posit a cosmic situation which enables *sufficient* meaning. As Iddo Landau argues, conversations regarding meaning typically concern whether our lives are sufficiently valuable or worthwhile (Landau, 2017, p. 12). This does not deny that human lives are intrinsically valuable, but rather asks if we have used our intrinsically valuable lives sufficiently well. "Value" and "meaning" are distinct here – meaning is concerned with how we valuably develop our lives or connect with value as such. We might then posit that satisfying a certain threshold or criterion of value grants our lives meaning. However, it is not obvious that this threshold is so high as to require "ultimacy" or a criterion of connection to something infinitely valuable. As Landau subsequently argues, perfect or exceptional conditions should not be our standard for judging the meaningfulness of our lives (Landau, 2017, Ch. 3). Attaining some partial, limited meaning may be well enough for human beings, who by nature are limited and finite.

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[4] The division between theists and naturalists I am describing thus far does not capture the rich tapestry of metaphysical middle-ground positions between traditional religious ontologies grounded in a personal God and a stark scientific naturalism as Metz seemingly describes. For example, Wildman (2017) characterizes and compares a variety of "ultimate reality" models. He concludes with a preference for what he terms a naturalistic, ground-of-being ultimacy model, which maintains that ontological and axiological structures exist in religiously accessible ways on purely naturalist (non-anthropomorphic) terms. Similarly, Michael Levine (1994) poses a naturalistic variety of pantheism, and more recently, Tim Mulgan (2016) introduces the concept of Ananthropocentric Purposivism, which entails that the universe has purpose, but human existence is irrelevant to it. In short, compelling and religiously interesting varieties of naturalistic or non-theistic ultimacy can provide axiological foundations by which to ground and interpret assessments of life's meaning. However, the implications of these positions are not typically elucidated in the contemporary meaning literature. The form of naturalism I am engaging considers ultimacy to be foundationally irrelevant for establishing a common conception of meaning or determining what degree or quality of meaning counts as sufficient for human affairs. These naturalists do not offer robust, alternative cosmic perspectives to theists to further explain their axiological assertions, but simply resist the notion that SSA claims inherently matter for SSH perspectives on meaning. While I cannot here address the significance of these alternative conceptions of ultimacy for meaning, my analysis supports future approaches which explicitly do so.

However, it is unclear that separating the "sufficient" condition for meaningful living from considerations of ultimacy can be so easily accomplished. J.L. Schellenberg proposes a useful conception of ultimacy as entailing three conditions: (1) metaphysical ultimacy; (2) axiological ultimacy; and (3) soteriological ultimacy (Schellenberg, 2016, p. 166). Metaphysical ultimacy refers to something being fundamental to the nature and existence of all other things, such that nothing can be rightly understood in its essence and purpose apart from that which is metaphysically ultimate. Axiological ultimacy refers to something of "unsurpassable" inherent value, greater value than which no other can be conceived. Soteriological ultimacy refers to something that bestows upon us the greatest or deepest good for which we can strive according to our nature (Schellenberg, 2016, pp. 168-170). Notably, all these claims about a "something" that is ultimate are contentious – they need not refer to anything in the actual world. I will also not argue (contra Schellenberg) that they *need* to be jointly construed. Even for Schellenberg, these categories are purposely vague. Nonetheless, they do together aptly characterize a sense of ultimacy central to the Christian theological tradition in reference to God.[5] I consider this sense of ultimacy as "objective" because it makes ontological claims – about the nature of all reality, the nature of God (or the ultimate "thing", however conceived), and the nature of our own good in relation to that ultimate. Ultimate meaning therefore entails something like proper engagement with an ultimate object or condition which meets at least some of these criteria of ultimacy. However, what counts as "sufficient" meaning is also necessarily framed by ultimate conditions.

Due to the nature of what is meant by *ultimacy*, cosmic questions concerning meaning reveal themselves as implicitly relevant to one's analysis of personal meaning insofar as we can speak meaningfully of ultimate metaphysical conditions. In short, "ultimacy" entails the potential consideration of itself at all levels of analysis in virtue of its metaphysical fundamentality.[6] The question remains open how much the existence of axiological and soteriological ultimacy would also thereby infuse *all* our value considerations, and so wholly determine a corresponding conception of meaning. Soteriological ultimacy nearly entails this conclusion, though it is possible that some measure of fulfillment (perhaps "sufficient" fulfillment) is possible even apart from ultimate fulfillment. On one hand, Extreme Supernaturalism advocates the

[5] Schellenberg's account is particularly useful here for clarifying and linking ultimacy's metaphysical and axiological dimensions. Nonetheless, other theoretical approaches focus on different aspects of ultimacy, or resist even this level of specificity. For example, Wildman states, "Ultimate reality is reality as it is most truly, most simply, most comprehensively, most significantly" (Wildman, 2017, p. 5). Nonetheless, Wildman frequently connects his proffered models of ultimacy with the "axiological depth structures" of reality.

[6] Thus, a prominent Christian sense of this claim about ultimacy is not that all analysis *must* include God, but rather that all analysis is subject to a more fundamental (or theological) analysis, as all things relate to God. Echoing Thomas Aquinas, John Webster asserts: "The object of Christian theology is twofold: God the Holy Trinity and all other things relative to God." (Webster, 2015, p. 1) He later clarifies: "Theology is a comprehensive science, a science of everything. But it is not a science of everything about everything, but rather a science of God and all other things under the aspect of createdness." (p. 3)

necessity of the connection between any value and ultimate value, or relatedly, between sufficient fulfillment and ultimate fulfillment. On the other hand, Moderate Supernaturalism and Naturalism agree that ultimate value need not subsume all value relations, leaving space for meaning to exist apart from ultimate considerations. They differ only in terms of whether and how the existence of ultimate value makes a positive difference for meaning. However, any theory which advocates an objective criterion for meaning is potentially pressured by the existence of an objective ultimate. The question is precisely how best to account for ultimacy while recognizing that it forcefully blurs the neat separation between both cosmic and human perspectives.

Life Ends – But So What?

Classically, many theists have argued that the existence of God is necessary to enable the possibility of living a meaningful life. At least within the Christian tradition, the most prominent perspective on meaning is a version of Extreme Supernaturalism which instinctively views meaning through a SSA lens. Specifically, death poses a real threat of meaninglessness. Famously, the narrator of Ecclesiastes laments the final futility of his endeavors and the common end to which all humans and animals are destined. The failure of our efforts to effectively endure renders our strivings for meaning ultimately moot. It is only God in the end who can grant our lives meaning (Bartholomew, 2016; Longman III, 2016). As the author concludes: "Fear God and keep His commandments, for this is man's all." (Eccl. 12:13 NKJV) A straightforward and common rendering of Ecclesiastes would conclude that we are created to keep God's commandments, and we can only find meaning in alignment with his will. All our efforts apart from God fail to be ultimately meaningful, as they eventually cease to persist.

In contemporary philosophical terms, William Lane Craig expresses this ancient concern poignantly:

> If there is no God, then man and the universe are doomed. Like prisoners condemned to death, we await our unavoidable execution. There is no God, and there is no immortality. And what is the consequence of this? It means that life itself is absurd. It means that the life we have is without ultimate significance, value, or purpose. (Craig, 2013, p. 159)

However, as Craig eventually notes, the issue is not 'duration' itself that either enables or undermines the possibility of meaning, but rather, the dependence of meaning upon ultimacy (Craig, 2013, p. 160). Even life's perpetuity is no guarantee for life's "significance, value, or purpose." For Craig, the lack of *ultimate* significance, value, or purpose directly threatens the possibility of *any* meaningful joy in our pursuits as well as any impetus to live morally (Craig, 2013). In final analysis, Craig argues that no objective, existentially and morally fulfilling conception of meaning can be intelligibly held absent the existence of God and human immortality. As Craig has it, all attempts

at finding meaning in the world apart from God equate to a kind of metaphysical bootstrapping. We can hold some comparatively *relative* meaning without God, but this variety of meaning fails *practically* to enable the kind of value, morality, and existential satisfaction we seek. For Craig, sufficient meaning in life requires ultimate meaning in life. And ultimate meaning requires God.

Unsurprisingly, contemporary philosophers have challenged this traditional thesis from various angles (Greene, 2021; Landau, 2017, Ch. 3-6; Metz, 2019; Metz, 2021; Trisel, 2002). Critiques range from challenging the internal coherence of theistic conceptions of meaning (such as Craig's) to questioning the necessity of ultimate ends to justify the sort of meaningfulness with which most of us can be content. One influential argument in the literature asserts that admirable individuals such as Ghandi or Mother Theresa still appear to live meaningful lives even if God does not exist. Or alternatively, saving the life of a child still seems meaningful absent the existence of God (Metz, 2019, pp. 25-26). Even if these historical figures and moral activities could only attain non-ultimate meaning, the partial meaning they do obtain would count as sufficiently "meaningful" nonetheless – or so the argument goes. Further, this meaningfulness does not seem to be merely subjective. As many argue, saving a child's life is an objectively meaningful act, regardless of our cosmic situation. On this account, a child's life is intrinsically valuable, such that it does not rely on anything further to grant it that value. Per this argument, intrinsic values need not depend upon any relationship to ultimate value.[7] Consequently, a sufficiently meaningful life need not depend upon advocating any particular vision of an SSA perspective on meaning. The SSH perspective proves sufficient for obtaining meaning without connecting it to a grander cosmic schema or metaphysical picture. Put otherwise, meaning *of* life anxieties need not undermine meaning *in* life possibilities.

These worries concerning the non-necessity of God or ultimacy to ground meaning have led most theistic philosophers to adopt Moderate Supernaturalism. On this account, God is not the ground of meaning *per se*. However, for many Moderate Supernaturalists, God still provides the possibility of an ultimate meaning which Naturalist accounts cannot easily posit (Metz, 2021, p. 106). Importantly, meaning within this schema is not *qualitatively* different from a competing Naturalist account of meaning, but rather God enables a *quantitative* difference in how much more meaningful our lives can be given God's existence. If this is the case, the impending end of our lives, humanity, or the cosmos should not be the preferred lens for determining the possibility of living meaningfully. Rather, these ends simply place limits on the degree or depth of meaning we can attain.[8] On this account, God is not strictly necessary for living a sufficiently meaningful life, but God is a "good news

[7] Metz dubs the contrary assertion the "Perfection Thesis," which states that *any* value must derive from *ultimate* value. Metz criticizes this thesis as untenable, though necessarily held by all Extreme Supernaturalist conceptions of meaning. For his discussion, see T. Metz, (2013), *Meaning in Life*, pp. 144-146. See also Erik Wielenberg (2012) and Robert Audi (2012), who argue for the existence of intrinsic value apart from reliance upon God or an ultimate source.

[8] This does not entail that death does not matter *at all* in any given conception of meaning, only that its reality as such is not dispositive as to whether life can be sufficiently meaningful.

story" for how meaningful our lives can be. We can live meaningfully for longer and to a much greater degree.

The true debate then rests not on whether we live eternally *per se*, but rather on the relevance of ultimacy for meaning-seeking. For instance, theistic philosopher John Cottingham suggests that the search for ultimate meaning might be an "ineradicable" characteristic of human nature, which we defy at the risk of "violence to our fundamental human aspirations." (Cottingham, 2013, pp. 110-111) Cottingham worries that if we attempt to settle for limited or partial meaning in our lives, we may discover that some essential aspect of humanity suffocates amidst such limited aspirations.[9] The question of whether death threatens us with meaninglessness depends on whether for a human life to be *sufficiently* meaningful, it must also be *ultimately* meaningful.

The quest for "sufficient" meaning requires answers to anthropological questions. If sufficient meaning entails satisfying an objective criterion or threshold, we must say something about the nature of the meaning-bearer to whom that condition relates. As is likely, subjective satisfaction alone is inadequate to the task. For Objectivists and Hybridists, we can be mistaken about whether our lives are meaningful. However, such anthropological questions cannot be obliquely answered in a metaphysical vacuum. Especially, if we live in a possible world in which God or an ultimate being exists, we cannot, by definition, understand what human beings essentially are without considering their relation to what is ultimate. And so, the question can be partially answered – ultimacy is at least somewhat determinative of what counts as sufficiently meaningful for any given meaning-bearer, because ultimacy fundamentally determines how we interpret the essential nature of the meaning-bearer.

A Representative Philosophical Debate

In a recent and enlightening conversation, Joshua Seachris, a Moderate Supernaturalist, argues contra Thaddeus Metz that questions of meaning invariably "lean" toward questions about our place in the cosmos and the final end toward which our existence points (Metz and Seachris, 2024, pp. 33-34). Both claims result from an understood integrity between meaningfulness and "framing." Understanding how our concerns, pursuits, and sensibilities integrate within the broader cosmos completes a robust conception of meaningfulness in a deep, satisfying, and fitting way. However, not only does the nature of the cosmos re-frame how we construe meaning within our individual lives, but also the nature of our ends. Both our personal and cosmic ends frame the way in which we interpret the meaningfulness of our more immediate activities (Metz and Seachris, 2024, p. 51). For example, saving a child's life might be inherently meaningful, but in a theistic world, it may include the added depth of

[9] Some recent work in the psychology of meaning corroborates this concern. One significant study finds atheists are more likely to view their lives as lacking meaning, which is associated with downstream negative effects for well-being. Of course, further study is required. See Nelson, T. A. et al. (2021).

integrating into God's cosmic intention for loving humanity. In this way, theism may be said to augment the amount of meaning accessible in life.

Expectedly, Metz, as a Naturalist, is critical of Seachris's perspective. Metz begins with several commonly held intuitions about what constitutes a richly meaningful life and concludes that meaning elicits from "…the presence or absence of using one's intelligence in constructive, robust, and progressive ways." (Metz and Seachris, 2024, p. 98) Indicatively, the spiritual reality of the cosmos does not bear special significance for his analysis. Meaning is primarily a product of humans using their (broadly understood) rational capacities to engage with the world in positive ways, which may or may not include the existence of spiritual realities or ultimacy.

Metz has three significant criticisms of Seachris's Moderate Supernaturalism for my purposes. First, even if cosmic perspectives are considered, it is far from obvious that the existence of a cosmic ultimate (let alone, say, the Christian God) is solely capable of meeting this (supposed) universal longing among humans for final or ultimate meaning (Metz, 2024 and Seachris, p. 179). Other religious and conceivably naturalist alternatives abound for meeting human longings for meaning which seem to be sufficiently fulfilling. Second, Metz criticizes Seachris's Moderate Supernaturalism for failing to uphold the potential for real meaning within an atheist universe (as would be required by a Moderate Supernaturalist framework). If meaning is infinitely greater in a possible world with God in it, such meaningfulness would dwarf the comparatively trivial meaningfulness of lives in a possible world without God (Metz and Seachris, 2024, p. 176). If Metz's criticism lands, Moderate Supernaturalism at best reprises into Extreme Supernaturalism, with its attendant issues. Finally, the idea that life is more meaningful because we are loved or created by God does not hold for Metz. In short, when we ask whether someone's life is meaningful, we are not usually concerned with whether that person is loved by others or created by God (Metz and Seachris, 2024, p. 117). Passive conditions such as these are not salient when we ask if someone's life is meaningful.

While Seachris lacks the space to fully respond to all Metz's criticisms, he does set some groundwork for potential responses to be developed. First, he opines a conceptual position between Extreme and Moderate Supernaturalism, in which perhaps only subjective meaning is available absent the existence of God (Metz and Seachris, 2024, p. 155). Second, he suggests that notions of "passive" meaning, which obtain in virtue of what we *are* rather than what we *do*, might be more significant than Metz believes, even influencing how we pursue "active" meaning (Metz and Seachris, 2024, p. 161). Finally, Seachris maintains that the SSA perspective saliently influences "meaning *in* life" questions in virtue of framing our meaningful activity, not only in terms of degree, but also normatively (Metz and Seachris, 2024, pp. 200-201).

If this conversation is understood as relatively representative, we can see where an apparently fundamental impasse arises between many Naturalists and Supernaturalists (particularly in the Christian tradition) on meaning. First, the Naturalist presumption of God's relative indifference to meaning grates against the theist's traditional interpretation of God's universal and primary relevance to the meaning of all existence. Both advocates admit meaning can exist within theistic and non-theistic possible worlds in some sense, but neither can easily hold to a conception

of objective meaning which successfully maintains across those possible worlds. Second, each holds starkly differing intuitions about humanity's existential nature, that is, what counts as sufficiently meaningful or whether meaning implicitly grasps toward ultimacy. Finally, there's an unyielding disagreement about the relevance of passive or cosmic conditions for eliciting meaning in our lives. This impasse suggests that Metz and Seachris are speaking past one another at some level. However, this should be unsurprising. The existence of God almost certainly transforms how we understand what it means to live meaningfully in virtue of God's ultimacy. These philosophers' intuitions about meaning differ because their conceptions of meaning do not entail *quantitative* differences, but profound *qualitative* differences. Conceptions of ultimate meaning do not simply *add more meaning* to the world, but fundamentally determine *what meaning means*. God is not simply a "good news story" for meaning, but a different story altogether.

How then might we move past this conversational impasse? I would suggest that a methodological change is required. Philosophers engaged in debates about the relevance of God for meaning often begin by establishing commonly held intuitions about living meaningfully and then abstract from these intuitions to more general principles. I do not mean to disparage this method entirely, but in this instance, it yields shortfalls. Given the nature of what ultimacy *is*, the specific characterization of what we hold as ultimate has the power to transform our fundamental intuitions and perceptivity. In other words, instead of asking what role ultimacy plays in our mutual experience of meaning, we must ask what role ultimacy plays in *how we experience* meaning. If meaning were fully subjective, then our experience of meaningfulness would directly dictate what meaning, in fact, means. However, if there is a definitionally objective condition for meaning, then our intuitions about meaning can prove misleading. Indeed, a dialectic exists here, in which not only do our experiences of meaning inform us about reality, but also our understanding of reality informs us about our experiences. Too little attention is paid to this latter dialectic movement in the current conversation on meaning. Thus, I will begin by considering one way in which Christians might construe God's ultimacy and show why it yields similar yet competing intuitions regarding meaning compared to Naturalist philosophers.

Creation *Ex Nihilo* – From Doctrine to Ultimacy

My next aim is to show that a traditional metaphysical understanding of creation *ex nihilo* within the Christian tradition yields an analogous yet qualitatively incompatible conception of meaning from that commonly held in the philosophical literature. I am not here claiming alongside Craig that God's ultimacy is required for either a genuinely moral or existentially satisfying life of meaning. Rather, I am claiming that from *within* this influential theological perspective, "meaning" cannot be understood without God.

While I cannot here do full justice to the topic, I will follow Simon Oliver's recent work on the theology of creation to identify salient characteristics of the doctrine. Importantly, Oliver provides a compelling account of creation *ex nihilo*, relying

especially on Thomas Aquinas. The doctrine of creation is highly relevant to the topic at hand, as it provides the framework for comprehending God's relationship to being. As such, the doctrine implicitly factors throughout the whole of Christian theology (and has strong reverberations in both Judaism and Islam). Theologian John Webster refers to it as a "cardinal doctrine", in which, "…God inaugurates an order of being other than himself, and this work is presupposed in all subsequent assertions about that order of being…" (Webster, 2013, p. 156) Therefore, the doctrine of creation is critical for explaining the nature of God's creation.[10]

First, creation is, for Oliver, "…a purely free, completely unique, totally gratuitous and wholly unnecessary act." (Oliver, 2017, p. 37) This claim establishes creation as at once properly "other" to God, as well as personally and intentionally brought into existence. Creation does not exist separately from God, occupying an isolated or self-contained metaphysical space which is potentially competitive with God. But neither is creation a necessary expansion or thoughtless emanation of God, implying a univocal extension of God's identity (Oliver, 2017, p. 37). Rather, creation's existence is one of perpetual participation in God's existence. To wit, the difference between God and creation is not akin to distinctive entities within a shared ontological plane, but rather, a difference in modes of existence. God exists necessarily; creation exists contingently, by participation in God (Oliver, 2017, pp. 47-48). The *source* of existence or being is univocal for both, but creation's participatory relation to that source distinguishes it from God. Thus, God's relation to creation is at once intimately immanent as its progenitor and sustainer, but also utterly transcendent as an uncreated and necessary being (Oliver, 2017, p. 51). In sum, creation *ex nihilo* seeks to establish both an intimate link as well as a significant separation between God and the created order.

So far, we can say the doctrine of creation establishes both a kind of metaphysical contingency as well as a relevant autonomy for creation. God inheres the created order, but the created order also has a proper independence from its creator. From this follows the doctrine of divine providence. Since creation relies upon its relation to God for its existence, God also imbues creation with providential "purpose." (Oliver, 2017, p. 63) The value, or as Oliver puts it, "the good" of any aspect of creation, derives ultimately from a participation in and likeness to the goodness of God, as it instantiates in the particular and finite form of the creature (Oliver, 2017, pp. 69-70). Indeed, creatures flourish not by escaping their finitude, but rather by inhabiting their finitude as God intended and so more fully participating in the divine goodness (Oliver, 2017, pp. 82-83). From this relationship follows the whole of classical Christian ethics and the economy of salvation. On this account, creatures are created for a particular end in the divine life in which we are perpetually called to participate by our very being.

As Oliver notes, one issue that often arises in this view of creation is that the creature seems "debased' – that is, lacking any value, significance, or liberty in and of itself

[10] I am not claiming creation *ex nihilo* is the sole doctrine capable of illustrating God's relation to creation. For example, an eschatological approach can achieve similar results, in which all axiological relations are ultimately defined according to their culminating *telos*, as modes of participation in the Godhead. In fact, the doctrine of creation highly implies an eschatological counterpart, given the teleological continuity between creation and eschaton. However, I here lack space for that exploration.

(Oliver, 2017, p. 58). Put otherwise, God axiologically overwhelms his own creation in this relationship. Following Aquinas, Oliver responds that creatures do in fact exhibit intrinsic value and autonomy, but these *are also* gifted from God. As a classical theist, Oliver resists placing God and creation on the same ontological plane, which then allows him to follow Aquinas in posing a non-competitive causal relationship between God and his creation (Oliver, 2017, pp. 74-76). As Oliver understands it, God is not a "first cause," but rather the ontological foundation for causation itself – God and creatures occupy different orders of causation. Thus, each maintain the integrity to act non-competitively even while God's actions maintain a certain logical primacy and teleological priority.[11] Nonetheless, creation can rightly be said to exhibit intrinsic value and liberty in its relation to God, as God is not member to the same ontological, and therefore causal order.

Third, Oliver concludes his book on a discussion of creation as "gift," which has become a central theological concept for analyzing the nature of creation *ex nihilo* as both fundamentally good as well as gratuitous. In discussion with Mauss and Derrida, Oliver notes that typically, gifting is rarely if ever unilateral – rather, it establishes or develops a relationship between the gift-giver and the recipient as well as laying the groundwork for some form of reciprocity (Oliver, 2017, pp. 143-145). However, the doctrine of creation *ex nihilo* significantly upsets this configuration. According to this doctrine, *existence* is fundamentally a gift. For creatures, this entails not only that the capacity to *receive* the gift of creation is itself a gift, but also the ability to *reciprocate* is a gift (Oliver, 2017, p. 148). An important asymmetry maintains between God and creation, in that all being and goodness fall within the divine economy of gift. In one sense, creation is a unilateral gift; there is nothing creation can return to God that was not first given to it. However, creation is also called into a reciprocal relation with God, returning thanksgiving to God and participating in the life of the Godhead (Oliver, 2017, p. 153-154). In conjunction with the doctrine of divine providence, the nature of this reciprocity also constitutes the flourishing of the creature as such. Following John Milbank, Oliver refers to this paradoxical gift relation as one of "unilateral exchange." (Oliver, 2017, p. 148) Again, due to the distinctive nature of both the imminent relation and transcendent separation between God and creation that the doctrine of creation *ex nihilo* posits, creation is at once a unilaterally given gift which also establishes a meaningful relationship of reciprocity between God and his creation.

For our purposes, this reveals a further connection between our metaphysical identities and our moral duties in virtue of our createdness. As John Webster elsewhere asserts, the category of moral goodness in which we partake as creatures is derivative of the metaphysical goodness of the created order (Webster, 2013, pp. 161-164). Analogously, we can expand this claim to assume that all value claims, moral obligations, and human flourishing find their grounding in our metaphysical reality in relation to God. Creation can at once hold intrinsic value while also recognizing said value's fundamental contingency upon its creator.

Finally, the doctrine of creation *ex nihilo* clearly connects God to our earlier notion of ultimacy. God is fundamental to our understanding of creation *as* creation, as both

[11] This is what Oliver (and Thomas Aquinas) refer to as the distinction between primary and secondary causality.

the metaphysical identity *and* intrinsic value we find therein is finally derivative of God's identity relative to his creation. Given this core Christian doctrine, traditionally understood, there is no competing account of reality from which value ("objectively" understood) can derive independently of God's act as Creator, nor is there an alternative teleology in which creation can flourish apart from this relationship. We can rightly then say that the classical Christian God is metaphysically, axiologically, and soteriologically ultimate. Therefore, existence can only ever be properly understood on those terms in reference to God, to include all value relations.

Towards the Incomparability of Christian and Naturalist Meaning

To summarize, following Oliver, I have claimed that the doctrine of creation *ex nihilo* seeks to uphold the following claims: (1) the relationship between God and creation is neither one of identity nor one of competitive separation; (2) creation is at once contingent upon God (we can say, metaphysically, axiologically, and soteriologically) while also maintaining an integral autonomy, significance, and value; (3) creation's flourishing is constituted by active participation in the Godhead; and (4) existence is fundamentally a positive, good gift of God to his creation to be responded to in thanksgiving. While I have touched upon some of Oliver's Thomistic metaphysics to support these claims, I have not sought here to robustly defend them so much as to show what they are seeking to explain theologically. Rather, my goal is twofold: to show how a theologically informed metaphysic properly dovetails with Schellenberg's picture of ultimacy while at once conveying how such ultimacy, when further characterized, potentially shifts how we describe and experience objective value relations.

Characteristics of Theological Meaning

Here, I will offer some suggestions for how a theologically informed doctrine of creation *ex nihilo* might inform how Christians construe meaning. First, in a possible world in which God (as I have described) exists, we must prioritize the *sub specie aeternitatis* (SSA), or cosmic, eternal perspective on meaning over the *sub specie humanitatis* (SSH), or first-personal, human perspective, given the SSH perspective can only be properly understood in the broader framework of the SSA perspective. The nature of God's ultimacy dictates this requirement, as all value considerations must be finally contingent on and related to God. Of course, possible worlds which do not have an analogous "ultimate" or are otherwise characterized by a different kind of ultimate would yield different consequences for determining where value exists (if at all) and how value relations operate.

Second, there is a fundamental reversal of meaning-conference in this theological picture. Prior to any actions which creatures might take to engage with intrinsic value, there is a prior "engagement" with intrinsic value in virtue of being created by God. Contrary to Metz, meaning is not first a result of our actions as properly engaged with intrinsic values, but first a result of Gods actions towards us. This entails a

prioritization of *passive* meaning over *active* meaning. Typically, passive meaning refers to the notion of having meaning in virtue of what we *are*, usually in relation to others, rather than what we *do*. For example, an infant's life might bear some meaning in virtue of the love her mother has for her. However, passive meaning is usually peripheral to the philosophical conversation on meaning. Philosophers tend to place an overriding salience on our actions to elicit meaning in life. The doctrine of creation *ex nihilo* does not negate the reality and significance of active meaning, but it does shift how we comprehend meaning's ultimate source as well as imply its universal availability and intersubjectivity. Put otherwise, active meaning ultimately depends upon a cosmic backdrop of passive meaning, or what we might call God's actions towards us.

Third, following Oliver, we can place this passive meaning in the category of *gift* and active meaning in the category of *response*. Meaning in a theological view takes on a dual relation in which a recognition of passive meaning elicits meaningful action understood through the lens of thanksgiving and worship. Parallel to Wolf, we can say that this meaning relationship elicits from a subjective alignment with an objective reality, in which our comprehension of the meaning *of* life perpetually transforms, orients, and characterizes our meaning *in* life pursuits.[12] And so, a theological perspective on meaning prioritizes the recognition or perceptivity of meaning prior to our active pursuit of meaning. Others have discussed the significance of expanding our capacity to perceive meaning around us (see especially Landau, 2017, Ch. 17), but if meaning is to be "objective," we must be seeing rightly.[13] Perceptivity of meaning is not a given and unambiguous capacity, but rather something over which we have some control to develop. Consequently, our perceptions can be misleading or at best partially accurate. Thus, in a theologically informed view of existence which prioritizes God's activity over our own, the capacity to perceive God's activity takes precedence, but also must be cultivated with some deliberation. Meaning ultimately elicits from proper responsiveness to who God is in this theological framework, and perceiving God in God's relation to creation profoundly motivates, characterizes, enables, and orients this meaningful activity.

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[12] Incidentally, I am not the first to offer a theological metaphysics of gift-exchange which implies "meaning" is characteristic of being itself. King-Ho Leung argues that the act of creation as gift entails that a "*personal* dimension of meaning" is "invested" in creation. Elsewhere, Leung argues that the nature of creatures as "created words" implies that they exist in reciprocal personal "conversation" with God in virtue of their being. In short, creation is inherently imbued with meaningfulness both in being given and being received by God. See respectively: K. Leung, (2022b) and K. Leung, (2022a).

[13] Iddo Landau helpfully emphasizes "recognition" as a salient way of discovering latent or unseen meaning in our lives. Not insignificantly, he relies on the spiritual writings of the 17th century Carmelite monk, Brother Lawrence, to convey his point. Brother Lawrence identified God's presence even in the humblest objects and activities and found great meaning in God's ubiquitous presence and care. In this spirit, one could say perceptivity is a result of spiritual discipline and insight. We can also question if Brother Lawrence was *correct* in his widespread perception of God's activity and, if not, what difference that might entail for Landau's argument.

As I understand it, this operative conception of meaning as understood from the perspective of creation *ex nihilo* is fundamentally incompatible with all Naturalist perspectives and a variety of other Supernaturalist perspectives. It is unclear to me how a conception of meaning construed as a responsiveness to a cosmic giftedness can be imitated from a non-theistic perspective at the very least. Significantly, even alternative naturalistic models of ultimacy usually negate the possibility of intentionality or personhood at the heart of existence, and so seemingly the possibility of existence as gift in all but a weaker, metaphorical sense. The essential nature of value and how existence relates to it are fundamentally different if God, as an ultimate being, exists as traditional Christianity posits God. My point is not to argue that this is certainly the best or even most coherent conception of meaning, but rather to show that, given certain modal premises, a common conception of meaning cannot be easily, let alone obviously, held between these positions. Significantly, philosophers often overlook how competing metaphysical frameworks interplay with our capacity for perceiving and interpreting our experiences of meaning. At end, Christian theists and naturalists almost certainly cannot mean the same thing by meaning.

As a result, Moderate Supernaturalism is incoherent as Metz categorizes it. The main issue is that Moderate Supernaturalism claims that the primary distinction between theistic and naturalist possibilities is the *degree* of meaning available to be attained. However, if a theological conception of meaning is necessarily, qualitatively different from Metz's naturalist conception, the ground for a quantitative comparison collapses. Indeed, a quantitative comparison becomes a category mistake. God is not quantifiable according to a common metric, but rather *is the metric*. The objective flourishing of a creature in this theistic frame is precisely proportional to its participation in the divine. And so, a Christian conception of meaning cannot exist in a Naturalist world, and a Naturalist conception of meaning becomes irrelevant or misoriented in a Christian world. They might share a general concept of meaning, in that we still are interested in how human beings positively develop and connect with intrinsic values, or more mundanely, live their lives well. But given that meaning must track with how we relate to objective value *as such*, no shared, specific conception of meaning can track across possible worlds with incompatible systems of value. If we are to say one conception is "better" for meaning, this does not result from a quantitative comparison (which likely relies upon a Naturalist way of seeing and comparing meaning), but rather from deciding which most aligns with the objective existential needs of the human condition. Yet here again, the question of "sufficiency" cannot be cast as a quantitative, comparative standard. What *is* sufficient, and even what intuitively strikes us as sufficient, is contingent on our metaphysical framework by which we interpret human nature and value relations. Supernaturalists and Naturalists might apparently share many intuitions regarding what counts as "sufficiently" meaningful, but those shared assumptions rest on entirely different frameworks of evaluation.

As a result, we might follow Craig's instinct or Seachris's "leaning" toward a middle-ground between Moderate and Extreme Supernaturalism. We could call this

position a Modally Chastened Extreme Supernaturalism, in which, a certain conception of meaning is only possible given the existence of God. Other conceptions of meaning can exist in possible worlds without God or with different understandings of God. However, given those conceptions will track with "objective" reality as it exists in those worlds, the nature of how meaning operates in those worlds will differ qualitatively. The debate on God's relevance for meaning, if it is to move forward, must be either willing to further venture into the realm of metaphysics or modify how it understands its objective requirement.

Conclusion

In conclusion, Metz, Seachris, and other philosophers frequently speak past each other, as the versions of meaning which each perceives and seeks are fundamentally incompatible. Given a world in which God exists, Extreme Supernaturalism must hold. However, Extreme Supernaturalism does not obviously hold modally. Naturalists and others must further elucidate their metaphysics to establish competing conceptions of meaning on their own terms, rather than assuming the availability of a modally compatible conception. So, when asked whether we can live meaningfully given a final end to our lives, the answer must unsatisfyingly remain, "Yes, no, and depends what you mean by meaning."

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