

## What has God to do with meaning?

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**Short Answer.** A lot – presuming He exists.

**Longer Answer.** On my view, when one asks the question, ‘What is the meaning of life?’ one asks many questions at once. One asks what, if any, explanation there is for there being anything concrete at all - Why is it all here? More narrowly, one asks why ours is a universe that is conducive to life; and, more narrowly still, why humanity exists and why one as an individual exists - Why are we here? Why am I here? One also asks where it’s all going - Will anything; will humanity; will I persist? Or will all of us and everything of value that we manage to produce finally have its significance erased by the passage of time? And one also asks what is perhaps a harder-to-pin-down question (or, as I would have it, series of questions). One interrogates a feature (or, as I would have it, features) of one’s own individual life and the lives of others. This is the interrogation on which the contemporary literature has tended to expend itself, sometimes calling it the ‘meaning *in* life’ issue, so as to bracket-off the more ‘cosmic’, as they are sometimes called, issues that I’ve hitherto been talking about. A way into seeing these meaning-in-life questions comes by observing that some individuals seem to manage to lead lives which, more than others, have in them something which we may call ‘meaningfulness’. In this context, we might consider Gandhi on the one hand and contrast his life with, on the other hand, the life led by a monomaniacal collector of miniature teapots - someone who spends all his life alone and friendless in his warehouse-like home, trawling online auction sites so as to add items to his vast collection. Gandhi’s life seems more meaningful than that of the obsessive collector of miniature teapots. What is this thing (or, as I would have it, what are these things) called ‘meaningfulness’?

So, on my view, which I have in various publications called a ‘polyvalence’ view, there are many meanings of life and there are many meanings in life. If the question ‘What is the meaning of life’ is in fact all these questions, it perhaps needs no further argument to show that if there is a God, then He’ll have a lot to do with the answers to most, if not all, of them. Nevertheless, brief argument to this effect will be provided.

At the most cosmic level, through taking centre-stage in what is (if He exists) the correct metaphysics, God is the lead character in the story one must tell if one is to answer correctly the following questions. First question: why is there anything at all? Answer: Because God exists of metaphysical necessity. Second question: And why is there anything contingent? Answer: Because God chose to create something other than Himself. Third question: And why is there a universe conducive to life (and life of our sort – the life of persons), rather than an entirely dead universe (or one the life in which is destined never to reach any level of complexity above that achieved by microbes)? Answer: Because God chose to create such a world, no doubt due to recognising that it would instantiate certain values which would not be instantiated in an entirely lifeless world (or in a world the only life arising in which was microbial). These are the values brought to reality by there being self-conscious, free, morally significant persons such as ourselves, people who are able to enter into relationship with one another and with Him. Fourth question: And why am I here? Answer: Because God chose that you be so. This last answer though is really just the beginning of a journey and, as

one travelled farther along the path it points down, one would find many forks in the road and different guides offering different guidance over how to proceed. Should we believe in a 'meticulous providence' and/or theories of personal identity such that God intended me - not just someone in some broad ways like me - to exist? Should we think that every one of us has some particular vocation? How fine-grained is my vocation, presuming I have one at all? Why am I here? What - if anything (in general or in particular) - have I been put on this Earth to do? And so on.

So much then for what we might call 'meaning as explanation' - theistic explanations of why anything exists; why anything contingent exists; why life exists; why persons such as ourselves exist; and why we as individuals exist. What about what we might call 'meaning as destiny', questions such as 'And where is it all going?' 'Where are we going?' 'Where am I going?'

Again, God - presuming He exists - takes centre stage. Whilst again the theistic community is somewhat divided in its opinions on the nature of the role He may be expected to play, it speaks with one voice to the question of whether whatever significance we manage to achieve in our *ante-mortem* lives (and such echoes as that might generate in this world after we have departed it) is all the significance that we have. It is not. We, or some of us at least, go on from here to an afterlife in which all that is of value about us is magnified and preserved into eternity.

And as to meaningfulness? Well, very roughly, there are three broad views between which contemporary opinions on the nature of this are divided - the subjectivist, the objectivist, and the hybrid. On the subjectivist view, one's life is meaningful to the extent that one feels swept up in/existentially engaged with it and/or some major projects within it or aspects of it. On the objectivist view, one's life is meaningful to the extent that it and/or sufficient of one's activities within it or aspects of it engage in the right way with that which is of objective worth. On the hybrid view, one's life is meaningful to the extent that one does both - one feels subjectively attracted towards that which is objectively worthy of such attraction. (These are very rough sketches of the three main views - they may not be true in every particular to every variant.) Whichever of these views of meaningfulness one finds oneself feeling most sympathetically towards, one will be able to see God as relevant, presuming He exists, to one's life's meaningfulness. If God exists, then there is an activity - worshipping Him in perfect communion with one's fellow man for all eternity - which will be superlatively subjectively absorbing and objectively worthy and we - well, some of us at least (opinions are divided) - are destined finally to achieve this happy state.

So, if God exists, the correct answer to the title question is 'A lot'. But, as most philosophers writing on life's meaning in the last few decades (when the question 'What is the meaning of life?' has come to respectability within Analytic Philosophy) do not believe in God, so they reason that, as only things that do exist are going to be of relevance, God is not. Their naturalism - combined with a reluctance to engage in the traditional concerns of the Philosophy of Religion; an awareness that to answer what I have called the 'cosmic' questions of life's meaning would require engagement with (potentially religious) metaphysics; and the fact that most of those writing on the topic come to it from a background in 'value philosophy' - leads to what I have called a 'bowdlerising' of the

question. Most writing on life's meaning incline to interpret 'What is the meaning of life?' as inquiring solely into meaningfulness, as I have called it. And they then seek to provide understandings of meaningfulness (which they characteristically take to be a single gradient value [wrongly again, on my polyvalence view]) within an entirely naturalistic framework; and they think that we can assess how meaningful our individual lives are absent any engagement with the traditional concerns of the Philosophy of Religion. Still, if God exists, they are wrong - wrong about all this and much else besides.

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