Transcending Limits:

Nozick's Exploration of Meaning and God's Unlimitedness

"My purpose is not to emphasize our limits as knowers

but to note the power of our imaginations."

Nozick (14)

In the essay "Philosophy and the Meaning of Life," found within the book "Philosophical Explanations," Robert Nozick proposes that the key to comprehending how theistic religions can impart meaning to human existence lies in the concept of God's boundless nature. This unlimited quality is an expansive backdrop, capable of imbuing the comparatively finite lives of theists with profound meaning. Furthermore, Nozick argues that meaningful lives are not restricted solely to the theistic realm defined by God's boundlessness because, paradoxically, God's boundlessness imposes a limitation upon itself. This perspective emerges from Nozick's theory of "limited transcendence," which involves transcending our inherent limitations to connect with a broader context that possesses limitations but imparts meaning to our lives—albeit within defined boundaries (Nozick, 25). In essence, Nozick's theory suggests that meaning can be found in life beyond the confines of theistic religion.

In my perspective, Nozick's argument is compelling because it operates within the confines of the philosophical toolbox he has chosen. By this, I mean that Nozick has deliberately structured his argument by drawing upon specific theories of knowledge, such as philosophical skepticism, while excluding others, like theistic testimony. Within these

self-imposed constraints, it is reasonable to entertain that God's boundlessness is a limitation unto itself and can imbue non-theistic lives with greater meaning when reframed as a philosophical concept known as "limited transcendence."

However, it is worth noting that if Nozick were to incorporate theistic testimony into his view, the argument would become more intricate and challenging to substantiate. For instance, Nozick references the theory of Brahman as endorsed by the monist school of Advaita Vedanta to illustrate the imperfection of a personal God's boundlessness. He disregards testimony from theistic sources like the Isa Upanishad, where Brahman is portrayed as complete. According to this perspective, although various parts of completeness may be derived from the whole, the essence of completeness inherent to Brahman remains unaltered. Brahman's completeness persists even as different components are extracted from it, owing to its intrinsic nature of completeness. This contrasting viewpoint, rooted in theistic testimony, adds complexity to the discourse.

The concept of limited transcendence raises the question of whether a connection to God's boundlessness is essential for addressing the meaning of life. Nozick ponders this query when he asks, "How can all this, even if true, truly provide meaning for our lives?" (Nozick, 11). Nozick suggests that it might achieve this by involving us in a divine plan wherein we fulfill a role assigned to us by God. However, this proposition presents a challenge, particularly for non-theists. They may question why they should strive to fulfill such a divine plan when, as Nozick puts it, "those who doubt whether life has meaning need not have doubted that it is good to do certain things" (Nozick, 11). Non-theists can perform virtuous deeds and act morally uprightly without subscribing to God's

boundlessness. Nozick contends that the practice of goodness, which encompasses performing virtuous acts, does not inherently hinge on belief in God's boundlessness. Yet, he remains dissatisfied with this scenario. He argues that it is insufficient for God to have a purpose for us; there must also be some discernible meaning. According to Nozick, this is not evident, especially since he does not endorse the concept of God's unlimitedness.

Is there a viable attempt to combat the sense of meaninglessness in our lives that holds intrinsic significance apart from the presumed meaningfulness associated with God's boundlessness? Nozick delves into this question, emphasizing that "imagining God grappling with the meaninglessness of His existence forces us to scrutinize how meaning becomes attached to His purposes" (Nozick, 12). He raises a fundamental query: Can a non-theist conclude that God's existence becomes meaningful solely because it imparts meaning to the lives of theists? Amidst the myriad possibilities concerning the intentions and purposes behind creation, Nozick asserts that the mechanism through which God could bestow meaning upon our lives remains uncertain. He goes so far as to suggest that even if we were to identify some boundless and infinite aspects of meaning-production within God, it would not necessarily clarify whether the experiences of limited and finite beings could successfully provide a sense of meaning to non-theistic lives.

Considering Nozick's skepticism regarding the meaning offered by theistic religions prompts us to delve into his conception of meaning. While Nozick reflects that "for a life to have meaning, it must connect with other things… beyond itself" (Nozick, 16), he also evaluates that God's boundlessness, which involves connecting to a broader context whose meaning remains obscure, undermines the original pursuit of understanding the

meaning of our lives. As he puts it, when "we can have reached a context Y [God's unlimitedness] so wide that X [the meaning of our lives] is no longer of any importance [concerning] it" (Nozick, 18), the context Y becomes so vast that its intrinsic meaning, if it exists at all, becomes elusive. Nozick contemplates whether the concept of meaning is not primarily tied to limits but rather to relationships. He questions whether our lives can still possess meaning despite being linked to the enigmatic notion of God's unlimitedness. If this is the case, he wonders why our finite lives cannot also have meaning when connected to other finite lives, which, despite being equally problematic, are inherently closer to our reality.

Even if Nozick were to entertain the concept of God's unlimitedness, would it not require a connection to something external to imbue it with meaning, much like how we link our lives to a broader context to derive significance? Nozick's contemplation of the abstraction of mathematical numbers leads him to the insight that "something can be infinite, yet quite limited" (Nozick, 20). However, when something is considered unlimited in encompassing all, could it genuinely lack anything external or beyond itself? Consequently, Nozick realizes that the fundamental assumption inherent in the question of meaning—an association with a broader context—might not hold in the case of God's unlimitedness. Therefore, he deduces that the labels "meaningful" and "meaningless" may not apply to the idea of God's unlimitedness since it lacks anything external, even though it presupposes the existence of something external. Could it be possible that the notion of God's unlimitedness is transcendent in that it does not necessitate anything external to bestow meaning upon it?

Nozick contemplates that even if the concept of God's unlimitedness were to possess a transcendent quality, it would still leave open the question of why our lives should hold meaning rather than being deemed meaningless, as God's transcendence allows for both possibilities. Initially, Nozick speculates that the unlimited itself could serve as its meaning, positing that "it is in virtue of being unlimited that [the unlimited] can be its meaning" (Nozick, 21). He draws an analogy to illustrate this point: much like an infinite mathematical set stands in a unique relationship that finite sets cannot achieve due to their finite nature, the unlimited could similarly establish a distinctive relationship with itself, that of being its meaning. However, Nozick questions why, if the unlimited can be its meaning, limited and finite beings like us cannot also be our meaning. Why is it necessary for us to link our lives to a broader context to imbue them with meaning? Nozick contemplates that this requirement exists because "meaning involves external connections, as for a limited and finite being, meaning necessitates transcending limits" (Nozick, 21).

However, could it be that we, as finite and limited beings, possess the capacity to hold the key to our meaning, much like Brahman holds the key to its meaning? Is it possible that, in our fundamental natures, we are, like Brahman, inherently unlimited? Nozick introduces an intriguing notion when he suggests, "We might consider the theory that Brahman is limited by being [unlimited] and, in doing so, it acts to overcome and transcend these limitations, even going so far as to transform itself [or parts of itself] into [limited and finite beings]" (Nozick, 23). According to this theory, the unlimited does not perceive itself as boundless since it must transform into finite and limited beings to

eventually revert to the idea of its nature being limitless. In essence, under this theory, the unlimited is, paradoxically, limited, and it is only perceived as boundless in the eyes of those who are themselves finite and constrained.

Consequently, for Nozick, the concept of God's unlimitedness imposes a limitation upon itself and cannot fully account for the meaning of non-theistic lives. Similarly, as finite and limited beings, we can partake in the boundless, much like the unlimited. This participation allows us to contribute to the meaning of our lives through inclusive relationships and connections, affirming that meaning can be derived from interactions with other finite and limited beings.

This is how Nozick might counter a theist's challenge asserting that lives lack meaningfulness outside of a theistic framework because each finite life would supposedly derive its meaning solely by referring to other finite lives. Nozick could argue that even if one were to grant the existence of God's unlimitedness (although he does not), it still does not possess intrinsic meaning. He has demonstrated that God's unlimitedness imposes a limitation upon itself. Given this self-imposed limitation, it would need to seek a broader context beyond itself to bestow meaning upon itself. However, no matter how extensively it seeks this broader context, it inevitably forfeits its purported intrinsic meaning, if it has any. Thus, while it can contribute meaning to our lives, it remains constrained in its scope, offering a form of limited transcendence rather than genuinely unlimited, as Nozick has elucidated (Nozick, 25). Nozick firmly asserts that "to fall short [of that unlimitedness] is not to be bereft of meaning" (Nozick, 25).

Similarly, it does not logically follow that falling short of unlimitedness implies that meaning for our finite lives can only be obtained from other finite and limited beings. As Nozick argues, these beings may partake in the property of unlimitedness within his theory of limited transcendence. After all, these beings are closer in reality to us than any abstract concept of God's boundlessness (Nozick, 25).

I argue that Nozick's limited transcendence emphasizes recognizing "the power of our imaginations" rather than solely underscoring our limitations as knowers (Nozick, 14). Staying firmly within his philosophical framework, his theory appears quite comprehensive, and he has undoubtedly succeeded in conveying his ideas effectively. However, had he ventured beyond the boundaries of his philosophical framework, his argument might not have withstood critical examination. Nonetheless, it is essential to note that such a move would have taken him outside pure philosophy and into different territories of inquiry.

Works Cited

Nozick, Robert. *Philosophical Explanations*. Harvard University Press, 1981.