

GOD'S POSSIBLE ROLES IN THE MEANINGS OF LIFE. REPLY TO METZ

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I. INTRODUCTION

I am very grateful to Thad Metz for having taken the time to engage with my recent book, *God and the Meanings of Life* (Bloomsbury, 2016), and to the *EJPR* for having brought together his remarks on it and my reply to his remarks, below, by way of a critical notice of its publication.¹

It is of course a great honour for me to have had Metz read my work: Metz is the philosopher who has made the most sustained and substantial contribution to the ‘meaning of life’ field since it emerged in the Anglophone tradition of Philosophy in the latter quarter of the twentieth century. Thus, I cannot but be delighted to read him saying that he has found my own offering to the field ‘the most erudite and intricate book’ he has ever read on the topic in this tradition and to be told that it has ‘broadened’ his thought; ‘advanced reflection’; and placed those in the field under a requirement to ‘engage with its original and powerfully defended positions’. Given all that, I was not too disappointed (in part because I was not too surprised) to find that he nevertheless remains ‘unconvinced’ of its two main claims. Metz raises a number of critical points and, whilst I’d like to say at least something about all of them, I think I do best by focusing, as he does, on these two main areas of disagreement. Metz continues to endorse Monism and I continue to reject that; Metz continues to endorse Naturalism about meaning and I continue to somewhat-qualifiedly reject that too.

Philosophers in the Anglophone tradition who have taken themselves to be addressing the question, ‘What is the meaning of life?’, have — almost without exception (I note the exceptions in the book; I skip over them here) — construed it as, in Metz’s words, ‘one question and ... [offered] a single principle as an answer to it, with this principle typically focusing on ways of living in the physical world as best known by the scientific method’: they’ve been monists (the question is really one question and its answer is thus one answer); and they’ve been naturalists — at least methodologically, in the sense that they’ve thought that one can get on and answer this question without reference to whether or not there might be a God. Metz is typical of the field in both these respects and he remains unconvinced by my case for change in both respects. Allow me briefly to give a flavour of my case for change prior to turning to give my response to Metz’s reasons for resisting change.

A central claim of my book is that the question, ‘What is the meaning of life?’, is best approached first and foremost by realising that it is in fact many questions and, consequent on that, that these many questions have many different answers. By way of just some examples of what it seems to me (and I hope will seem to those reading this) plausible one is asking when asking ‘What is the meaning of life?’, allow me to suggest the following. One is asking what, if any, consequences there are of an aspect or period of an individual’s life, the individual’s life as a whole, humanity’s life, or life *per se* (*n.b.* there is ambiguity in the word ‘life’). One is asking if any or enough of these consequences are significant and positively evaluable. One is

¹ Thaddeus Metz, “God’s Role in a Meaningful Life. New Reflections From Tim Mawson”, *European Journal for Philosophy of Religion* 10, no. 3 (2018), 171–191. doi:10.24204/ejpr.v10i3.2538.

asking what, if any, purposes are served (or exist whilst failing to be served) by life in one or more of these senses. Is it here for something and as a result of someone's willing that it be here for that something; has it a telos in that sense? One is asking 'What is the point of it all? Why does anything at all exist? Why are we here?' 'Why am I here?' One is asking what, if any, ideals are instantiated in an aspect or period of a life or life in one or more of the larger senses — 'What, if anything, does it 'stand for?'' One is asking what, within life in one of these senses, is desirable or valuable in itself? What — if anything — makes life worth living, worth going on with, for the individual or group living it? One is asking whether it is emotionally or spiritually satisfying or, more centrally, whether it is the proper object of such an emotion/mood even if it is not yet had. Would it (or some temporal portion or aspect of it even if not the whole) appropriately ground a feeling of 'existential repletion'? One is asking whether it has an internal coherence, whether it has holistic properties of certain sorts. Relatedly (but differently, for this is always to the good), one is asking whether it displays the sort of structural properties that Metz (amongst others) has in mind when he talks about one's life as a story, but a story with a certain value-infused direction. Most simply, do any bad parts earlier lead to good parts later (and good parts that it's implausible to suppose would have come about in any case or have been replaced by ones at least equally good had it not been for the bad parts). What is the right story into which life, in any of its senses, fits?

When we see the diversity of questions that take shelter under the umbrella, 'What is the meaning of life?', it is instantly implausible that any one thing could be the answer to all of them — the way in which these questions are so variously framed precludes it as even a conceptual possibility. Even if we narrow our focus to the various senses in which life, considered as our individual lives, might be meaningful (what I call the individualistic interpretations of the question, which is what contemporary scholarship has focused on), it is, I maintain in the book, very implausible that these reduce to one and the same thing — a gradient final value — and that God would be irrelevant to how much of this meaning (*these meanings*, I would maintain) our individual lives could have. And, if we broaden our focus to take in what I call the cosmic interpretations, it becomes clear without need for much argument that God — were He to exist — would be extremely relevant to their answers, through taking centre stage in the correct metaphysics. Finally, it also becomes clear, albeit with need for more argument, that, whilst God's existing and having purposes for us would detract from the meaning of our individual lives in at least one sense (in short, our existence wouldn't so fully precede our essence, as Sartre might have put it), it would — on balance — add more to our individual lives' valuable meanings than it would take away. This is my somewhat-qualified rejection of naturalism. I don't give any reasons in the book to reject naturalism *per se* as a metaphysical thesis and my view is that if this is as Godless world, our individual lives still have meaning in various ways, many of which are valuable; it's even possible, though unlikely, that humanity's life has a meaning or two too — we might, for example, have been created by benevolent Martians, who seeded our planet millions of years ago so that creatures such as us would evolve in time to join them at a feast when they returned to our solar system having completed their round-the-galaxy trip. But I claim in the book that if there is a God of the classical theistic sort and thus (the 'thus' is examined, but not extensively argued for, in the book) a heavenly afterlife awaiting us all, then our individual lives — on such a hypothesis correctly to be considered as *ante-mortem* plus *post-mortem* lives — are (on balance) more meaningful than if there hadn't been a God and thus (again the 'thus' is examined, though not at length) this *ante-mortem* life had been all the life that we had coming to us. The motto of the book is a passage from *The Book of Job*, which may be translated as, 'The Lord giveth and the Lord taketh away.' My conclusion is that, if He exists, The Lord giveth more than He taketh away.

Metz is unconvinced by pretty much all of this.

II. MONISM

Allow me to start from a concession Metz makes to my view that 'the' question, 'What is the meaning of life?' is really many questions. He says this of it:

there is a kernel of truth in this image. It probably best captures what ‘we’ mean by ‘life’s meaning’, where ‘we’ includes just about anyone who has used the words ‘life’s meaning.’²

His ‘beef’, as he puts it, with my view is that he doubts ‘it would best serve the function of facilitating philosophical debate’ to take ‘we’ so inclusively; we should instead focus on the ‘we’ that picks out, from amongst the larger crowd, analytic philosophers who take themselves to be writing in the field. My ‘beef’ with this is that it is Procrustean. Metz develops five points in support of the restriction he favours. I respond to them as follows.

First, Metz points to a couple of features of my view, *viz.* that some of the things one is asking about when one is asking ‘What is the meaning of life?’ are more central than others to one’s reflective concerns and that the individualistic interpretations of the question finally emerge as amongst the most central. I would concede then that if it is, as I maintain it is, that analytic philosophers have characteristically missed out on addressing large parts of the question, ‘What is the meaning of life?’, it is not that they have missed out on addressing at least some of the most central parts, which are indeed to do with the various sorts of meanings that our individual lives may have. (Though they have characteristically thought that there is only one sort of meaning that our individual lives might have, in which thought, I maintain, they have also erred.) Well, I maintain, missing out a less central part of something is still missing out a part of it. But, Metz presses,

these [less central] ... sorts of meaning are lacking in value or beyond our power to affect. Since they are practically unimportant, they should not be honoured theoretically with the dignity of the title of being about ‘life’s meaning.’³

I do not in fact assert of all of these less central meanings of life that they are lacking in value altogether (though some are); I argue that some are simply relatively lacking in value and that some — whilst relatively lacking in *intrinsic* value — have their value enhanced by extrinsic logical and metaphysical connections, bringing them closer to the centre. Nor should we let the fact (if it is a fact) that we cannot affect some of them — e.g. we cannot do anything to affect whether or not there’s a God and thus to affect (at least some of) the meanings of life that come or go of metaphysical necessity with Him — make us think that we should not honour/dignify or what have you these sorts of meanings of life as genuine meanings of life; our inability to affect them (if it is true we are unable to affect them) doesn’t make them not genuine meanings of life; it just makes them meanings of life that we can’t affect. And indeed I argue in the book that we can affect some of them; if there’s a God, we can pray to Him to give us a vocation (or refrain from doing so), and there are meaning-of-life reasons weighing on both sides when deciding whether or not to do so, issues of great practical importance. There is yet no reason then for us to favour the restriction that Metz would have us favour. But Metz has a second point.

Second, Metz points out that the way he wishes us to continue to think about ‘What is the meaning of life?’ — as inquiring about the nature of a single gradient final value that individual human lives may have — has in fact been ‘the focus of the field’. Indeed, at one stage, he says that contemporary philosophers take it as ‘definitional’ that this is the only thing that the question is about. And he suggests that in that ‘one point of specifying the content of a concept (or the definition of a phrase) is to understand philosophical debate, that is a reason to restrict the concept’. But, of course, if one wishes not simply to clarify how the issue behind the question ‘What is the meaning of life?’ has been understood, but the issue itself — the meaning of life — and if one wishes to show how this issue is in fact a multitude of issues and this multitude of issues has been only partially understood (and thus indeed significantly misunderstood by being supposed to be singular), then such a challenge to the self-understanding of philosophical debate is essential. One of my aims in the book is to show that the content of the question ‘What is the meaning of life?’ is far broader than it has been taken by contemporary philosophers and thus to move the debate on in a particular way: not move it on solely within its borders as they are currently taken

2 Metz, “God’s Role in a Meaningful Life”, 174.

3 *Ibid.* 177.

(though I do aim to do that too, not least by attacking the thought that we should be monists even about the mythical (so I contend) unitary gradient final value that is meaningfulness in an individual's life), but move it on to territory that contemporary philosophers have not understood as properly within its borders at all. Thus, it is intrinsic to one of my aims to do what Metz, who thinks the debate's current self-understanding of its borders needs no revision, must thus think of as trying to move it to irrelevant ground. Again then, Metz has failed to give us reasons for his preferred restriction, rather than merely rearticulate his preference for restriction. Metz has a third point.

'A third reason to construe talk of 'life's meaning' narrowly is to help avoid people talking past one another.' Here I agree on the desirability of the outcome but think of my anti-Monism as a means, not an obstacle, to our achieving it. Philosophers in the field are — on my analysis — often talking past each other already in one significant way: they think they are in substantive disagreement about the one and only thing that is the meaning of life, whereas in fact, as there *is* no such one and only thing, they are often actually articulating different, but non-contradictory, meanings of life, each of which is equally legitimate. In the book I point to a particular dynamic that operates within the field. A particular theory of the meaning of life (understood as being about the essence of meaningfulness in an individual's life) is advanced by a particular philosopher — meshing with some of our pre-reflective intuitions about paradigmatically meaningful and meaningless lives. Another philosopher then comes up with a counterexample that appears decisive. On this first philosopher's theory, we can now see, e.g. that we'd have to say of a particular person, whose life may be taken without question to be meaningful that his/her life was not meaningful. But obviously it is. That theory is thus beaten. A new theory is proposed. It is now the one to beat. And the cycle repeats. This is standardly interpreted by philosophers working in the field through a quasi-Popperian lens of 'Bold conjectures; conclusive refutations'. But it could be — indeed, in the book, I argue, should be — re-envisioned as one of 'Bold conjectures; partial confirmations and partial refutations'. The claim that *the* meaning of life just is x ; therefore, all and only lives that exhibit x are meaningful and meaningful to the extent they exhibit x is indeed bold and most contributions to the debate are written in this bold style. But such bold conjectures are refuted in their own terms by a single counterexample of a sufficiently robust nature (i.e. *prima facie* plausible and immune to reflective-equilibrium-undermining); and such counterexamples just keep coming. If one instead recasts the claim as 'The meaning of life in one particular and non-exhaustive sense of 'meaning' and in one particular and non-exhaustive sense of 'life' is just x ; therefore, all and only lives in this particular sense that exhibit x are meaningful in this particular sense and meaningful in this particular sense just to the extent they exhibit x ', that cannot be refuted in such a way. A putative 'counterexample' to such a claim could simply point the way to another sort of meaning and/or life, and further fruitful discussion. When each philosopher's theory is reconfigured as a theory of a particular type of meaning focusing on a particular type of life, conflict largely disappears. Metz finishes his own book by saying of his fundamentality theory that it is now the one to beat. This is in many ways a fitting end to a book largely devoted to beating up other people's theories, but a more irenic future is open to us than joining the fight Metz is content to perpetuate. We can see the views of others, not as ones to beat, but rather as ones with which to join forces so that together we may more fully map a territory that is far larger than had hitherto been supposed. We'll not talk past each other, as we'll no longer suppose we're in disagreement about the one unitary gradient final value that is all that talk about the meaning of life can be about. When we abandon the shibboleth of supposing that this is all that there is to talk about, we'll talk together and make progress together in talking about life's meaning in all its fullness. Again then, Metz has given us no reason to favour his restriction.

Metz tells us that 'A fourth reason to narrow the scope of what 'life's meaning' includes is to help advance philosophical enquiry.' This I find question-begging. Allow me to illustrate. Is putting blinkers on one's horse a better way of getting it to see something? Well, it is perhaps a better way of getting it to see a proper part of what its visual field might otherwise have taken in; and if this is all that there is of the road it has to travel, then it will plausibly advance better with blinkers than without. But if, by so restricting its field of vision, one condemns the horse to miss out on seeing large parts of the road ahead, one makes it more likely to stumble. Thus, if Metz is right, the road is a narrow one and thus this fourth point is

correct; if I am right, the road is far broader than Metz supposes, and thus this fourth point is incorrect. Therefore, this fourth point, whatever else it is, is not an *additional* reason to think Metz is right to favour the restriction that he does; whatever reason-giving force it might have is parasitic upon points such as Metz's first three, which points, I have argued, give us no reasons at all to favour restriction.

Metz then goes on to talk about something which Nozick calls 'impact'. I do in the book count this as a sort of meaning that an individual's life, humanity's life, and life *per se*, have to at least some extent, albeit that I argue that it's not an intrinsically valuable sort of meaning. However, in that causing something to come about is a necessary condition of causing something significantly valuable to come about and in that causing something significantly valuable to come about is a relatively (intrinsically) valuable sort of meaning, it is drawn closer to the centre of our concerns when we ask, 'What is the meaning of life?', closer than Metz would perhaps allow. In any case, Metz argues that rather than risk muddling this in-itself-valueless sort of thing with valuable meaning, we should lay it to one side and indeed lay it outside our discussion of the meaning of life altogether; that would facilitate a better taxonomy. But there is no reason here to favour Metz's view over mine. Whatever taxonomic *structure* would be most useful in picking apart what I would say are different meanings of life and Metz would say are different sorts of things only one of which is finally to be accorded the label 'a meaning of life' (and thus the label 'the meaning of life') may be constructed equally well on either labelling scheme. It's just that on mine, we'll drop the label '*the* meaning of life'; label 'impact meaning' what Metz's would call 'impact' *simpliciter*; and so on. Again then, Metz has given us no reason to think that it is misguided to deny Monism.

Metz's fifth point seeks to deflate one of the reasons I give against Monism — that seeing the polyvalence of the question 'What is the meaning of life?' helps explain why we always feel dissatisfied (as I claim we do) with every particular answer that is given to it; we always (so I claim) think, 'That can't be all that there is to be said about it.' Metz cites his own account of what makes for meaningfulness in an individual's life and he says that, whatever else one might be dissatisfied about after having been exposed to it, it's plausible that it's not the meaning of life about which one's dissatisfied — this, his account, may be all that there is to be said about that. But I disagree. Whenever someone finishes the sentence, 'The meaning of life is...', however they finish it, one always feels dissatisfied by what they've said about the meaning of life; one always thinks, 'That can't be all that there is to be said about the meaning of life.' Of course this is an empirical claim and I only maintain it as in general true; there are exceptions — Metz himself, it appears, when he reflects on his own theory; other philosophers in the field too, no doubt, when they reflect on their own theories (though not on those of others). But I do maintain that it is in general true and that the falsity of Monism goes some way to explain why this should be so. On my view, when one asks, 'What is the meaning of life?', one asks an assemblage of largely overlapping, but significantly different, questions all at once. No wonder then that no one formula (even a complex one, such as Metz's) can capture the answers to all that one was asking about. Partial answers just are dissatisfying — as this very piece that you are currently reading is no doubt inadvertently proving. But, in any case, I should move on.

III. NATURALISM

As I have said, I do not actually argue against Naturalism in every way in which that term could be taken. But I do argue favour of the view that the issue of whether or not there's a God is very relevant to the answers to many of the questions that shelter under, 'What is the meaning of life?' (a) Whether or not there's a God makes a difference to the correct answers to many of these questions and (b), if there is a God, then for us as individuals the difference He makes is on balance positive — our lives are more meaningful (and in an overall positive way) if ours is a Godly universe than they would have been had it been a Godless one. Both of these claims could be true but there not actually be a God.

The (a) part of the thesis follows from the falsity of Monism pretty non-problematically; if we are in part asking cosmic questions (as I say we are), then of course whether or not there's a God is going to make a big difference to the correct answers to these. In the book, I advance several lines of argument which converge in support of the (b) part of the thesis, which I label Optimism (as well as some which

push us in the direction of Pessimism) and I acknowledge that the weighing of some of these arguments depends at crucial stages on what I call ‘temperament’. I cannot repeat these arguments here, nor engage with all three of the critical points Metz makes as cogent to them, but I would like to say a little bit about what I take to be his biggest objection to the (b) part of the thesis — his third point. Metz says this:

If an eternal afterlife would enhance meaning in our lives, it would do so to such a huge extent as to make it unreasonable to judge an 80 year life capable of being meaningful ... the intuition that Mawson ... should be ... seeking to capture is that a meaningful life on balance is possible in an atheist world, just not of the sort that is most desirable. Mawson needs to be able to conclude that the lives of Einstein, Mandela and van Gogh would still have been meaningful to a real degree in the absence of God and Heaven... [However] Mawson can conclude that a theist world could make life much more meaningful than an atheist world, ... only at the cost of having to forgo a firm judgment, which he shares, that some substantial meaning is still possible in the latter world.⁴

My response, in short, is that I can in consistency say all the things that I’d like to say about such cases, which are in fact all the things that Metz says I should like to say.

First, suppose ours is what Metz calls an ‘atheist world’ (I use the term ‘Godless world’ in the book), then our lives are meaningful in various valuable ways and some people’s lives — I too use the standard examples, Gandhi, Mandela, *et al.* — are more meaningful than those of some others — I tend to use as my example someone I call ‘the wastrel’. If ours is what I call a Godly world, then (for a variety of reasons, the simplest of which I call ‘the quantitative point’: we all have an everlasting heavenly afterlife ahead of us which extends *post-mortem* and *ad infinitum* our *ante-mortem* lives, with their overall meaningfulness intensified) these lives are on balance even more meaningful — indeed they are potentially infinitely so. I say ‘potentially infinitely’, as we will never reach an actually infinite age. (This is perhaps important to stress in blocking a Metz-type worry; we do not need to compare lives of actually infinite value with those of finite value.) Now it is true — as I say in a passage Metz quotes and indeed in some other places in the book — that if ours is a Godly world (and Heaven follows for all of us in the way I suppose) then, over time, in the afterlife, the differences between the meaningfulness of Gandhi’s life and the wastrel’s life — construed now in both cases as being made up of *ante-mortem* and *post-mortem* sections — will shrink in relative terms, though not in absolute terms. (In the book, I actually use the example of Mother Teresa and Hitler to make the point: a difference in total meaningfulness between their two lives will track with them *ad infinitum*; Hitler will always be behind on the total (and, though the gap will shrink without limit with time, on average) meaning-quality of life.) But that all just seems very plausible to me. And it strikes me that, on this view, I can say the things Metz thinks I should want to say, including those things that he contends it’s problematic for me to say. I can say the following:

The heavenly *post-mortem* sections to our lives, which they have in Godly worlds, enhance their meaning and — given their everlastingness — enhance it without limit, but that does not make it unreasonable to judge as meaningful the first — *ante-mortem* — sections of our lives in such worlds (if indeed these sections are on balance meaningful; I think almost all of our *ante-mortem* lives are); they are as meaningful in these worlds as they are in Godless worlds where they’re all we have. The intuition that a meaningful life is possible in a Godless world is right; it’s just that even more meaningful lives are our destiny if we live in a Godly one (and I’m right in my Universalism). The lives of Gandhi *et al.* are still meaningful to a real degree in the absence of God and Heaven. But, in the presence of God and Heaven, they get to be even more so, in absolute terms. It is indeed true that, as in Godly worlds (on Universalism) the same *post-mortem* addition of meaning is made for the wastrel as for Gandhi, so the *relative* differences between the two diminish with time, tending to nothing over the span of eternity. I can in consistency say that a Godly world makes our individual lives (considered correctly then as composed of *ante-mortem* plus *post-mortem* sections) an ever-finite-yet-ever-increasing amount more meaningful than they are in a Godless one (where they are considered correctly as composed of their *ante-mortem* sections alone); I do not have to forgo a firm judgment that some substantial meaning is still possible in

4 Metz, “God’s Role in a Meaningful Life”, 187-188.

the latter world. In general, the goods of this life are good. Of course they are. They don't become less good just by virtue of continuing on — intensified and *ad infinitum* — in a next life. That's why it's rational for most of us to love this life and it's rational for all of us to hope for the next.

