*Ratio (new series)* XVI 2 June 2003 0034–0006

# THE IMMORTALITY REQUIREMENT FOR LIFE'S MEANING

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*Abstract*

Many religious thinkers hold the immortality requirement, the view that immortality of some kind is necessary for life to have meaning. After clarifying the nature of the immortality requirement, this essay examines three central arguments for it. The article establishes that existing versions of these arguments fail to entail the immortality requirement. The essay then reconstructs the arguments, and it shows that once they do plausibly support the immortality requirement, they equally support the God-centred requirement, the view that God's existence is a necessary condition for life to be meaningful. The paper concludes by explaining why we should expect any argument for the immortality requirement also to constitute an argument for the God-centred requirement.

## Introduction

This essay considers the question of what, if anything, makes a life meaningful. This question is roughly equivalent to asking, 'Which conditions of a human's existence are worthy of substantial esteem?' or 'How can a person identify with something great?'[1] Many religious thinkers maintain that for anyone to be oriented toward something higher in the relevant sense, one must possess a soul that will forever survive the death of one's body. This is an instance of a more general view that is here called the 'immortality requirement' (IR). According to the IR, a person's life is meaningless if she is not immortal.

Which sort of immortality is most likely relevant for having a meaningful life? How are immortality and God related, so far as meaningfulness is concerned? Which general conceptions of meaning make the IR plausible? Is the IR in fact true? These questions are obviously worth addressing, but contemporary

[1] I have sought to analyse the sense of the question of what makes a person's life meaningful in 'The Concept of a Meaningful Life', *American Philosophical Quarterly*, 38 (2001), pp. 137–53.

Anglo-American philosophers have devoted little attention to them. The analytic literature has thoroughly addressed the conditions under which we could survive the death of our bodies and whether such conditions obtain. However, the issues of whether and why an immortal afterlife might be central to meaning have been slighted. There lacks sustained, critical discussion of conceptual distinctions, argumentative strategies, and logical relationships germane to the IR.

This essay aims to help rectify this situation. It would be presumptuous to pronounce the IR to be either true or false, at least at this stage of enquiry into the doctrine. This paper therefore seeks to analyse the IR and to defend a circumscribed yet substantial thesis about it: the immortality requirement is plausible only if the God-centred requirement is plausible to a comparable degree. The God-centred requirement is the view that God's existence is a necessary condition for life to be meaningful. After differentiating what is merely compatible with the IR from what is essential to it, this paper examines three major arguments for the IR which, on the face of it, are not arguments for the God-centred requirement. It turns out that, as these arguments stand in the literature, they actually fail to support the IR. This essay reconstructs the arguments, and it shows that once they do plausibly support the IR, they comparably support the God-centred requirement. The paper concludes by explaining why we should expect any attractive motivation for holding the IR also to be a good reason for adopting the God-centred requirement.

## An analysis of the immortality requirement

The immortality requirement is the view that one's life must be eternal in order for it to be meaningful. The IR is not just the weak claim that immortality could enhance the meaning of one's life; it is instead the strong thesis that life would be meaningless if it were to end. While this is a bold contention, several important thinkers have held it and it will be interesting to examine how it can be supported.

The IR is not so strong as to claim that immortality is sufficient for a meaningful life. Such a thesis would be counterintuitive in at least two respects. First, presuming that everyone is immortal if anyone is, this thesis would imply that either everyone's life is meaningful or no one's life is meaningful. But we seem to think

that some people have meaningful lives while others do not. Second, if immortality were sufficient for meaning then an eternal life in hell would be meaningful, which seems incorrect. Hence, immortality is plausibly proposed to constitute merely a necessary condition for meaning, not a sufficient one.

Notice that the IR differs from the claim that people need to believe in an eternal life for their lives to be meaningful.[2] The IR is also different from the view that one can learn about the meaning of life only by getting answers from God in an afterlife.[3] The IR is rather the view that immortality itself (not the belief in it) is a necessary metaphysical (not epistemic) condition of life's meaning.

Several different interpretations of the IR are possible, depending on the way immortality is understood. The concept of immortality at the core is that of a life which will never end. Beyond that, there are several different conceptions of immortality. First, one may conceive of eternal life in temporal or atemporal terms. An immortal life could be one that will never cease to be in time or one that will transcend time altogether. Second, a life that never ends could conceivably be realised in various ontological forms. Consider, on the one hand, a soul that permanently becomes part of a spiritual realm upon bodily death, and, on the other, a life that forever remains embodied in the physical world, e.g., vampires in an infinitely expanding universe. Third, there are sundry ways of thinking about the modal status of immortality. Some think of immortality as a matter of being unable to die, while others think of it merely as a matter of being able to live forever (usefully called 'immortability'[4]).

No version of the IR implies anything about whether we are in fact immortal. Of course, many believers in immortality do hold the IR, but it would be possible to hold the IR and think that we will perish along with the inevitable deaths of our bodies. Hence, the IR also does not imply anything about whether our lives are in fact meaningful; it is compatible with nihilism, the view that our lives are meaningless.

[2] This is one major claim in David Swenson, 'The Transforming Power of Otherworldliness', repr. in E. D. Klemke (ed.), *The Meaning of Life*, 2nd edn (New York: Oxford University Press, 2000), ch. 3.

[3] For this view, see Michael Levine, 'What Does Death Have To Do with the Meaning of Life?' *Religious Studies*, 23 (1987), pp. 457–65.

[4] A term used by William Ernest Hocking, *The Meaning of Immortality in Human Experience* (New York: Harper & Brothers Publishers, 1957), pp. 74, 154.

Finally, the IR is logically distinct from the God-centred requirement, which holds that life can be meaningful only if there exists a purely spiritual being who grounds the natural universe and who is all powerful, all knowing, and all good. One can conceptually accept the God-centred requirement while denying the IR, e.g., some think that fulfilling God's purpose or being remembered by God would be sufficient for meaning, even if one were not granted eternal life.[5] Conversely, there is no logical contradiction in believing that immortality but not God is necessary for a life to be meaningful.

Although the immortality requirement and the God-centred requirement are logically distinct, the remainder of this paper defends the view that they are not plausibly distinct. Specifically, the rest of this essay aims to establish that any plausible motivation for adopting the IR is also strong reason to hold the God-centred requirement.

## Perfect justice

One common argument for the immortality requirement is that life would be meaningless if the injustice of this world were not rectified in another world. *Ecclesiastes* expresses the concern that there is no afterlife and hence that life is 'vanity' since both good and evil people share the same fate.

> For what happens to the sons of men happens to animals; one thing befalls them; as one dies, so dies the other. Surely, they all have one breath; man has no advantage over animals, for all is vanity. All go to one place; all are from the dust, and all return to dust. . . . All things come alike to all: one event happens to the righteous and the wicked. . . . As is the good, so is the sinner; he who takes an oath as he who fears an oath. There is an evil in all that is done under the sun: that one thing happens to all.[6]

[5] For those who espouse this perspective, see Delwin Brown, 'Process Philosophy and the Question of Life's Meaning', *Religious Studies,* 7 (1971), pp. 13–29; and Charles Hartshorne, 'The Meaning of Life', *Process Studies*, 25 (1996), pp. 10–8.

[6] *Ecclesiastes* 3: 19–20 and 9: 2–3 in *The Holy Bible*, New King James Version. For a recent statement, see Philip Quinn, 'How Christianity Secures Life's Meanings', in Joseph Runzo and Nancy Martin, eds., *The Meaning of Life in the World Religions* (Oxford: Oneworld Publications, 2000), ch. 3. Note that neither text explicitly states that an *eternal* afterlife is necessary for perfect justice.

There are two ways in which justice requires different conditions to befall the righteous and the wicked. First, those who have suffered from wrongdoing are owed compensation for their losses. Second, those who have been evil deserve punishment for their wickedness, and those who have been upright deserve reward for their goodness. Obviously, neither compensatory nor retributive justice is perfectly done in this world. Hence, one might think that life could not be meaningful if there were no afterlife in which perfect justice were done. Note that God *qua* ideal judge (i.e., a perfectly impartial, powerful, and omniscient personal being) does not seem to be necessary for just conditions to obtain; both a Karmic, impersonal force or a personal being whose powers are not as robust as God's would be sufficient.[7]

The straightforward problem with the present argument for the IR is that while perfect justice might require an afterlife, it is not clear that it requires an *eternal* afterlife. The immortality requirement is the robust claim that, for our lives to be significant, they must either continue infinitely into the future or enter an atemporal realm where there is no distinction between past and future. It seems that humans would deserve an eternity in heaven only if they did something infinitely good (or an eternity in hell only if they did something infinitely bad). We may reasonably doubt that infinite (dis)values are possible in a finite world. And even if they were, it would not follow that infinity is needed to give people what they deserve. The trouble is that, supposing one can do something infinitely (dis)valuable in a finite amount of time here on earth, it would seem that a response proportionate to this deed requires merely a finite amount of time. If infinitely good or bad deeds are possible in a finite timespan, then so are punishments and rewards matching these deeds. Hence, the immortality requirement apparently gains no support from the view that meaning requires perfect justice to be done.

How might the perfect justice theorist respond to this problem? One way would be to appeal to metaphysical consider-

[7] Although there are many ways that reward for conforming to moral rules could be administered, it might seem that only God could be the source of moral rules themselves. If moral rules were identical to God's commands, then a conception of life's meaning in terms of reward for moral excellence would support the God-centred requirement. But this point is mentioned here only to be set aside, since divine command theories (and other God-based moral views) have notorious problems, and since the divine command theory has already received substantial attention.

ations about what could make an afterlife possible. That is, one might argue that if a person were able to survive the death of his body at all, then he would have to be immortal. Perhaps the only way to separate from one's physical self is to have a spiritual self that lacks parts and hence is indestructible. If that were true, then imposing any posthumous scheme of reward and punishment would require immortality.

There are two serious problems with this suggestion. For one, many thinkers view personal identity in terms of a chain of memories, which chain could conceivably outlast a given body and yet not last forever. For another, even if personal identity were constituted by a spiritual substance (and not merely a chain of memories), it is still conceivable that one could have a spirit that outlasts one's body but dissolves at some point. There is no compelling reason to think that there must be an utterly incorruptible aspect of one's identity in order for one to survive the death of one's body.

Let us examine a second response on behalf of the perfect justice rationale for the IR. So far, we have considered the argument that life would be meaningless without perfectly just responses to *imperfect virtue*. The perfect justice theorist might do better if she claimed that life would be meaningless without perfectly just responses to *perfect virtue*. On this view, immortality is necessary not for rewarding relatively good people, but primarily for enabling people to become absolutely good. This view is inspired by some of Kant's remarks:

> The achievement of the highest good in the world is the necessary object of a will determinable by moral law. In such a will, however, the complete fitness of dispositions to the moral law is the supreme condition of a highest good. . . . But the perfect fit of the will to moral law is holiness, which is a perfection of which no rational being in the world of sense is at any time capable. But since it is required as practically necessary, it can be found only in an endless progress to that perfect fitness. . . . This infinite progress is possible, however, only under the presupposition of an infinitely enduring existence and personality of the same rational being; this is called the immortality of the soul.[8]

[8] Immanuel Kant, *Critique of Practical Reason 3rd Edition*, Lewis White Beck, tr. (New York: Macmillan Publishing Company, 1993), pp. 128–9.

We can avoid Kant's technical terminology and theoretical baggage and still find something worth discussing. Kant himself does not speak in terms of life's 'meaning' (any more than the author of *Ecclesiastes* does), but his remarks are relevant for a conception of meaning that promises to ground the IR. When Kant speaks of the 'highest good,' he is referring to the best state of affairs for finite rational beings. For Kant, the highest good is our *final end*, not only in the sense that it must be our foremost goal, but also in that we may conceive of the world as having been created for such a state of affairs. Now, the purpose that we must above all pursue and that is grounded in the order of the universe, according to Kant, is moral perfection and happiness fitting that condition. And since moral perfection is possible only if we are immortal, immortality is necessary for the highest good, for the purpose the fulfilment of which confers meaning on our lives.

The problem with the Kantian response is that it is hard to see why one should think that moral perfection requires immortality. Talk of 'perfection' suggests an intrinsic maximal state, a condition in which the best has been achieved at a given time. Although there would arguably be *more* moral perfection possible if one lived forever, it is not clear that living forever is necessary for moral perfection itself. We seem able to conceive of a morally ideal agent who eventually dies, perhaps an unresurrected Jesus.

How might we motivate the view that an immortal soul is necessary for moral perfection? One possibility is that one's physical nature is incompatible with moral perfection. Some philosophers have held that our sensuous nature interferes with the functioning of our rational, moral nature so much that the latter cannot be perfected until it is free of the former.[9] Others have suggested that a pure moral disposition is one that cannot be corrupted.[10] However, neither view entails that immortality is necessary for moral perfection. Even if it were true that pristine virtue requires a nature that is spiritual or cannot become bad, it does not follow that such a nature must never come to an end. Hence, we still lack a reason for thinking that doing perfect justice to a moral

[9] See, e.g., Plato's *Phaedo*.

[10] The idea of unchangeable purity is at least part of Kant's conception of moral perfection. See his *Religion Within the Limits of Reason Alone*, Theodore Greene and Hoyt Hudson, trs., (New York: Harper & Row Publishers, 1960), pp. 46, 57, 61, 65.

agent (even a saint) requires that agent to have an immortal nature.

Let us explore a third reason why one might think that doing perfect justice to a virtuous agent requires her immortality. To reward a person is to contribute to her well-being. Now, if a person's well-being were a function of satisfying her strongest desires (regarding her own states, experiences, activities, and relationships), and if a person's strongest desires were for eternal bliss of varying degrees, then giving a highly virtuous person her deserved reward would require her immortality.

There are two problems with this response that must be overcome. First, the desire satisfaction theory of human welfare, as construed so far, has counterintuitive implications. Suppose that (for whatever reason) a person strongly wanted to suffer mental anxiety and physical torment for the sake of satisfying no other want. The desire satisfaction theory implies that such a person would be doing quite well for having such a desire fulfilled, which seems absurd.

Second, this appeal to the desire satisfaction theory of welfare fails to buttress the immortality requirement in the right way. Immortality theorists hold that immortality is 'necessary' for a meaningful life in a sense much stronger than the claim that immortality is required, given certain contingent desires. The standard version of the IR holds that immortality is necessary for any human life to be meaningful. But some people do not want to live forever in heaven, perhaps because they are not acquainted with the concept; by the current rationale, therefore, immortality is not required to reward them and hence is not necessary for their lives to be meaningful.

To deal with these problems, let us amend the desire satisfaction theory. Consider this attractive version of the desire satisfaction theory of human welfare: a person's life goes well insofar as the desires that she would have if she were functioning normally and aware of the various states of being possible for her are satisfied. To function normally involves being mentally healthy or choosing autonomously, e.g., not suffering from conditions such as neurosis, depression, duress, and adaptive preference formation. And being aware of possible states of being is a matter of being acquainted with various paths one's life could take. Putting these ideas together, this view holds that the satisfaction of only those desires that would be formed by a person who is (roughly) free and informed determines that person's welfare.

Such a view solves the two problems facing the earlier version of the desire satisfaction theory. First, since normally functioning human beings do not intrinsically desire to undergo pain, this theory does not entail that fulfilling such a desire contributes to a person's well-being. Second, since people who are sane and autonomous would invariably want eternal bliss once the idea occurred to them, this theory entails that the desire for heaven is not contingent.[11] By the present theory of well-being, then, eternal life in heaven is necessary to reward the highly virtuous (given that they would strongly desire it). And supposing it is true that life's meaning depends on being highly virtuous and receiving reward for it, we have an argument that entails the immortality requirement.

Having finally constructed a valid argument for the IR from considerations of perfect justice, it is time to enquire into whether this rationale also grounds the God-centred requirement. There is strong reason to believe that it does, for God is something that every normally functioning human being would presumably want in her life, upon acquaintance with the idea. One need not be terribly religious to admit that one would like, say, to commune with a perfect being or to live in a universe that is oriented toward a spiritual end.[12] And if mentally healthy people familiar with the concept of God would strongly want to relate to God, then the God-centred requirement follows from the claims that fulfilment of a person's strongest wants constitutes her well-being and that a person must receive well-being consequent to superior virtue for her life to be meaningful.

Recall that it is not the purpose of this essay to investigate the soundness of any argument for the IR. No doubt it would be worthwhile to ascertain whether the premises of the revised perfect justice argument are true. However, such a project is beyond the scope of this paper, the aims of which are to reconstruct the major arguments for the IR and to establish the claim

[11] Some might object that a normally functioning human being could be aware of the nature of pain and intrinsically desire it (or could know of bliss and not want it for its own sake). That is, the contingency element might still be present in the amended version of the desire satisfaction theory. If so, one could revise the theory again, making human well-being in general turn on the desires of *most* human beings, suitably construed. It is surely true that most human beings would want eternal life in heaven, if they reflected on it and were not subject to 'heteronomous' influences.

[12] Cf. Pascal's remark that 'the infinite abyss can be filled only by an infinite and immutable object, that is to say, only by God Himself. He alone is our true good. . . .' *Pensées* #425.

that any plausible motivation for the IR is also one for holding the God-centred requirement. Let us therefore move on to the second major argument for the IR.

## Ultimate consequence

In the most widely read text on the immortality requirement, Leo Tolstoy argues that something can be worth striving for only if one faces no prospect of death.[13]

> Sooner or later there would come diseases and death (they had come already) to my dear ones and to me, and there would be nothing left but stench and worms. All my affairs, no matter what they might be, would sooner or later be forgotten, and I myself should not exist. So why should I worry about all these things?[14]

One way of putting Tolstoy's point is that life would be meaningless if nothing were worth pursuing and that nothing is worth pursuing if it will not have an 'ultimate consequence.'[15] Since a human life could apparently make a permanent difference only if it were immortal in some capacity or other, Tolstoy's rationale seems to support the IR (and to do so without supporting the God-centred requirement).

This reasoning received a decent share of attention from analytic philosophers during the 1960s. The central criticism to emerge was that death intuitively cannot undercut the worth of performing certain constructive actions. For example, Anthony Flew remarks that it would be odd to 'think of a doctor despising his profession on the Keynesian grounds that in the long run we are all dead.'[16] Such a case suggests that helping others can be

[13] Leo Tolstoy, 'My Confession', Leo Wiener, tr., repr. in Klemke, *The Meaning of Life*, ch. 1.

[14] Tolstoy, 'My Confession', p. 11. Cf. Bismarck's statement: 'Without the hope of an afterlife, this life is not even worth the effort of getting dressed in the morning,' as quoted in Thomas V. Morris, *Making Sense of It All: Pascal and the Meaning of Life* (Grand Rapids, MI: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1992), p. 26. For a recent Tolstoian statement, see William Craig, 'The Absurdity of Life Without God', in Klemke, *The Meaning of Life*, ch. 4.

[15] For someone who speaks this sort of way, see C. H. D. Clark, *Christianity and Bertrand Russell* (London: Lutterworth Press, 1958), p. 30.

[16] Anthony Flew, *God and Philosophy* (New York: Harcourt, Brace, & World, Inc., 1966), p. 105.

worth doing, even though the helping agent will die and the helping action will have no infinite effects.

It is open to Tolstoy to deny intuitions of the sort Flew invokes, and indeed he does. For instance, with regard to helping his family, who are of course likewise mortal, Tolstoy asks, 'Why should they live? Why should I love them, why guard, raise, and watch them?'[17] However, Tolstoy would have a stronger response to Flew if he could explain why it at first seems as though it is worthwhile for a mortal to help others and why this judgement is false in the final analysis.[18]

Although the claim that our lives must have an ultimate consequence for them to be choiceworthy is eminently questionable, let us grant it. There remains a serious problem with the inferential structure of the Tolstoian argument, as it is neither deductively valid nor strongly inductive. We can accede the premise that an ultimate consequence is necessary for meaning and still deny the conclusion that immortality is necessary for meaning, for immortality is not the only way for a life to have an ultimate consequence. One's life could make a permanent difference if it made a lasting impression on other infinite things. For instance, suppose that one made a substantial contribution to God's plan and that God fondly remembered it forever. Or imagine that angels eternally sung one's praises. Or envision generations of mortal humans recounting tales of one's great deeds successively into infinity. Tolstoy seems particularly worried that his life will 'sooner or later be forgotten,' that it will seem as though he never existed or added anything to the world, but this condition could be prevented in several ways without Tolstoy's being immortal. Tolstoy's rationale therefore fails to entail that being immortal is necessary for one's life to be meaningful.

For a Tolstoian to resolve this problem, he must contend that not just any ultimate consequence is needed for constructive actions to be worthwhile. Instead, a particular kind of ultimate

[17] Tolstoy, 'My Confession', p. 12.

[18] Probably the strongest explanation is that while such activities seem to merit performance from an everyday perspective, *from a broader perspective* nothing is worth doing unless it will have a ultimate consequence. Oswald Hanfling makes this kind of point in *The Quest for Meaning* (New York: Basil Blackwell Inc., 1987), pp. 22–4. Cf. Thomas Nagel, *The View from Nowhere* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1986), ch. 11. Space precludes criticism of the point. For one who questions the authority of the objective standpoint, see David Schmidtz, 'The Meanings of Life', in Leroy Rouner, ed., *Boston University Studies in Philosophy and Religion, Volume 22; If I Should Die: Life, Death, and Immortality* (Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press, 2001), pp. 170–88.

consequence is needed for a life to be choiceworthy, namely, one bearing on *oneself*. Now, such a view needs to be motivated, not merely asserted. Why believe that for a given project to be worth doing, it must have some eternal ramification for the person doing the project?

Here is an answer worth considering. Meaning depends on not just any sort of intrinsic value (e.g., bodily pleasure) but on a special sort of intrinsic value. Specifically, suppose that meaning depends on an infinite value. Now, if interacting with an infinite value required an immortal condition, then it would follow that meaning requires immortality. Some remarks of another immortality theorist, William Ernest Hocking, suggest this sort of view:

> The best of our experiences are normally long looked-forward-to and long remembered. . . . Without this natural time dimension we know we have not 'done justice' to the event: meanings may be seen instantly, but they are not 'realized' (by beings with our time-extended mode of thinking) except with a certain amplitude of the process of pondering. Deprived of their due aftergrowth they fail to attain their proper value. . . . And if there were such a thing as 'eternal value' accessible to us mortals, it would rightly call for unlimited time for its realizing.[19]

Actions are worth doing only if they give due consideration to their objects. Giving due consideration to an 'eternal value' requires an infinite amount of time in which to honour it, part of which will involve remembering one's involvement with it. Now, if the only objects able to confer meaning on our lives have 'eternal value,' then it follows that for the actions relevant to meaning to be worth doing, one must have an eternal life. This line of thought provides a reasonable explanation of why, e.g., an infinite chain of mortal humans who remember us would not be an ultimate consequence sufficient to make our actions worthwhile; *we* must not fail to honour eternal values if we want our lives to be meaningful, and this requires that *we* live forever.

So, there is now a version of the ultimate consequence rationale that supports the IR. Does this rationale also support the God-centred requirement? It appears that it does. What is an eternal value? What is the sort of value that would require an

[19] Hocking, *The Meaning of Immortality in Human Experience*, pp. 68, 141.

infinity to recognise? The natural answer is of course 'God.' Talk of honouring an 'eternal' or 'infinite' value points directly to the idea of communing with a perfect being. One might object that a 'bootstrap' approach would work here, i.e., that one's own immortal nature might have a superior intrinsic value requiring an infinite amount of time to honour. This claim is not implausible, but it is irrelevant; the problem is that the immortality requirement gains no *unique* support from the argument that meaning requires honouring an infinite value which, in turn, requires eternal life to accomplish. The God-centred requirement is equally well supported by this rationale.

## Transcending limits

Questioning the meaning of something in general appears to be a matter of asking about its relationship with other things. If we ask for the meaning of a word, we are told about its relationship with other words or with objects in the world. If we ask what rising inflation means for the economy, we are told about its effects on unemployment or interest rates. Robert Nozick proposes that we likewise think of asking for the meaning of an individual's life as a matter of asking how it 'transcends limits' or 'connects with something beyond itself.'[20] And Nozick suggests that mortality is a boundary which, if not crossed, renders a life meaningless.

> A significant life is, in some sense, permanent; it makes a permanent difference to the world – it leaves traces. To be wiped out completely, traces and all, goes a long way toward destroying the meaning of one's life. . . . Attempts to find meaning in life seek to transcend the limits of an individual life. The narrower the limits of a life, the less meaningful it is. . . . Mortality is a temporal limit and traces are a way of going or seeping beyond that limit. To be puzzled about why death seems to undercut meaning is to fail to see the temporal limit itself as a limit.[21]

Many conditions that intuitively confer meaning on a life do seem to be instances of transcending limits. For example, finding a cure

[20] Robert Nozick, *Philosophical Explanations* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1981), ch. 6, and *The Examined Life* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 1989), ch. 15.
[21] Nozick, *Philosophical Explanations*, pp. 582, 594, 595.

for cancer is a way of going beyond one's narrow interests, creating a great work of art is a way of connecting with complexity or beauty, and discovering the basic laws of the universe is a way of linking to reality. And it also seems true that immortality would be an instance of transcending a substantial limit, namely, the limit of time. Hence, Nozick may reasonably think that mortality is a limit the crossing of which is central to meaning.

However, this argument obviously needs to be tightened up if it is to provide strong support for the IR. Exactly which kinds of limits must one transcend in order to acquire meaning? Breaking the speed limit and pinching a stranger are ways of 'crossing boundaries,' but these are not prima facie candidates for a meaningful life. Furthermore, why believe that the limit of time is a boundary that specifically must be crossed in order for one's life to meaningful? Why would loving another person or creating a work of art not suffice?

Nozick's main strategy for specifying the relevant limits involves thinking of meaning as transcending limits that keep one from something intrinsically valuable. '(M)eaning is a transcending of the limits of your own value, a transcending of your own limited value.'[22] On this view, one must protect, produce, or respect inherently worthy objects that are beyond one's person. Unfortunately, this rendition of the transcendence argument does not yet entail the immortality requirement. Both love and creativity can constitute 'a connection with an external value' in the absence of immortality. Clearly, we need a careful specification of the intrinsic values with which a person must connect (and of how to connect with them) in order for the transcendence rationale to entail the immortality requirement.

Let us reformulate the transcendence rationale this way: a meaningful life is one that connects in the strongest possible way with intrinsic value farthest beyond the animal self. The animal self is constituted by those capacities that we share with (lower) animals. These include our being alive, experiencing pleasures and pains, and exercising perceptual capacities. These conditions might be intrinsically valuable, but they do not seem to have the sort of intrinsic value with which one must connect to acquire significance; a life is not meaningful merely for being alive or feeling pleasure. Instead, on this view, a life is meaningful for intensely

[22] Nozick, *Philosophical Explanations*, p. 610. See also pp. 594, 611, 618.

linking up with intrinsic values that are qualitatively superior to our animal natures.

Such a conception of meaning plausibly gives support to the immortality requirement, for one's immortal nature itself would constitute a value farthest beyond one's animal nature. Classical theists had a number of reasons for thinking that intrinsic value supervenes on a soul that enters an atemporal realm.[23] For one, a life beyond time would have the inherent good of independence, of not being substantially confined by or dependent on other things. An atemporal spiritual entity would be free not only from decomposition, but also from a conscious point of view restricted to the moment. For another, an immortal soul manifests the intrinsic value of unity. Integrity and oneness are better than disintegration and fragmentation, and an atemporal, spiritual life amounts to the former. A being that survives its body and is beyond time would lack extension or the 'feebleness of division' (Anselm). Now, supposing that immortality so construed has a high intrinsic value, one way of intimately connecting with value far beyond one's animal self would be to *honour one's soul*. Perhaps what makes a life meaningful is coming to learn that one has a soul and taking care not to degrade it.[24] In order to connect intensely with value that is qualitatively superior to the animal self, one must not only instantiate the perfection of immortality – the most intense relationship one could have to an exceptional intrinsic good – but also treat it as more important than one's physical, sensual nature.

We have seen that the conception of meaning *qua* intense connection with intrinsic value farthest beyond one's animal nature supports the immortality requirement. But does it also support the God-centred requirement? Yes, it does. God, a perfect being, would no doubt be the highest value with which a person could relate. One could get no farther away from one's physical, sensual nature than by relating to the deity. And the most intense relation for a person to have with the divine would be to become one with it or, as in Hinduism, to realise one's extant unity with it. Hence, the present conception of meaning equally supports the view that communing with God is necessary to make one's life

[23] The following compressed considerations can be found in rich detail in Plotinus, *The Enneads*; Anselm, *Monologion*, and *Proslogion*; and Aquinas, *Summa Contra Gentiles*, and *Summa Theologica*.

[24] This is the core of the view in David Swenson, 'The Dignity of Human Life', repr. in Klemke, *The Meaning of Life*, ch. 2.

meaningful. Transcending one's animal nature in the strongest possible way would plausibly require that one be immortal, but this could be either because one must honour one's soul or because one must merge with God. In sum, although the revised transcendence rationale provides reason to believe the IR, it, like the previous two major arguments, provides comparable reason to believe the God-centred requirement.

## Conclusion: The fundamental link between immortality and God

This essay has examined three central arguments for the immortality requirement from the literature. In each case, the paper presented a thinker's basic reasoning in favour of the immortality requirement, showed that it actually fails to support the immortality requirement as it stands, and then reconstructed the rationale. Once the three rationales were revised to support the IR, they turned out to support the God-centred requirement as well. Although this essay has not addressed every possible argument for the IR, there is arguably a broad lesson to be learned here. This paper concludes by bringing out the fundamental reason why each of the major arguments for the IR is also an argument for the God-centred requirement and by suggesting that this common denominator is strong evidence for expecting other arguments for the IR to have the same implication.

Let us review the discussion. The perfect justice rationale claims that the IR follows from the view that compensatory or retributive justice is necessary for a meaningful life. We initially found it unreasonable to think that giving people what they deserve would require immortality (as opposed to a finite afterlife). This claim seemed reasonable, however, once we supposed that rewarding those who have been virtuous would require satisfying the strongest desires they would have if they were functioning normally and aware of their options. One such desire would be for eternal bliss, and another would likely be for God in one's life, making God just as necessary for positive desert. The ultimate consequence rationale maintains that a meaningful life depends on making a permanent difference to the world. It was at first difficult to grasp why one would have to be immortal in order to make a permanent difference, but this notion was easier to accept when we considered that making a particular sort of

permanent difference, namely, responding proportionately to an infinite value, might be central to meaning. And since God is the most straightforward answer to the question of what constitutes an infinite value, the God-centred requirement also follows from this rationale for the IR. Finally, the transcending limits rationale holds that a meaningful life is one that overcomes certain boundaries in the right way. It was prima facie implausible to think that one would have to be immortal to transcend the kinds of limits relevant to meaning. Yet this became plausible upon taking the relevant limits to be ones that keep a person from intrinsic value that is much higher than her animal nature. Since God is no less of such a value than one's immortal nature, the God-centred requirement again follows.

In all three cases, the rationales support the IR in a straightforward way once an idealised evaluative claim is conjoined with them. The perfect justice rationale makes use of a claim about what is *best* for a human being, the ultimate consequence rationale invokes a claim about *infinite* value, and the transcending limits rationale appeals to a claim about the *highest* nature. Since meaning is an intrinsically good thing for a person to have in her life, linking meaning with immortality will require an intermediate judgement about *value*. In addition, it will require a judgement about *superlative* value since it must be of a sort that cannot obtain in any finite lifespan. And any judgement about superlative value that must be made in order to ground the IR will also ground the God-centred requirement, the view that a perfect being is central to life's meaning. That is the deep, logical reason for the tight, historical association between God and immortality in supernaturalist conceptions of meaning.[25]

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[25] I initially wrote this essay while I was a Visiting Researcher at the University of the Witwatersrand Philosophy Department, to which I express my appreciation for providing such a supportive environment. I thank David Benatar, John Martin Fischer, Darrel Moellendorf, Jim Stone, and Eric Wiland for reading earlier drafts and for providing useful comments. I am also grateful for the input received from participants at the Conference on Analytic Existentialism (Cape Town, August 2001).