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## The meanings of God: reply to four critics

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### ABSTRACT

In this article, I briefly reply to four critics who have critically engaged with my book *God, Soul and the Meaning of Life* in a special issue of the *International Journal of Philosophy and Theology*. I view them mainly as addressing the ‘meaning’ of God in three distinct senses, namely, in terms of how best to understand the word ‘God’ and related terms such as ‘the spiritual’, whether God is central to what gives our lives a particular sort of final value, and how beliefs about God might be central to interpreting what on the face of it are non-religious beliefs and practices in contemporary Western society. My remarks are intended to continue the dialogue about these definitional, axiological, and hermeneutic meanings of God.

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### Critical engagement with *God, soul and the meaning of life*

In this special issue of the *International Journal of Philosophy and Theology* four philosophers reflect on various aspects of my book *God, Soul and the Meaning of Life*<sup>1</sup>. That book is substantially expository; it provides an overview of contemporary analytic philosophy of religion insofar as it has addressed what would make human life meaningful. Its overarching interpretive claim is that the field has undergone a shift, such that God and a soul as characteristically conceived by the monotheist tradition is now viewed much less often as being necessary for meaning in life *as such*, but rather as necessary for a *great* meaning in life compared to what would be available in their absence. However, in the book I do routinely judge, say, by presenting arguments for and against positions, by suggesting that the field needs development in certain ways, and by implicitly accepting much of the framework of contemporary Anglo-American philosophical debate.

The four philosophers who have addressed this book question my judgements in various ways, much of which casts doubt on my approach to the ‘meaning’ of God in three distinct senses, namely, in terms of how best to understand the word ‘God’ and related terms such as ‘the spiritual’ (Fiona Ellis), whether God is central to what gives our lives a particular sort of final value (Aribiah Attoe, Charles Taliaferro), and how beliefs about God might be central to interpreting what on the face of it are non-religious beliefs and practices in contemporary Western society (Paul Slama). Addressing the issues in this order below, my brief remarks are intended to continue the dialogue about these definitional, axiological, and hermeneutic meanings of God.

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## Ellis: expansive naturalism and the meanings of 'God' and 'spirituality'

*God, Soul and the Meaning of Life* is framed around a contrast between a supernaturalist perspective and a naturalist one in respect of what might make life meaningful, which is roughly understood as what would make a human person's existence particularly estimable or admirable, involve realizing a purpose much higher than our own happiness, enable us to make sense of our lives, and constitute a compelling life-story. Supernaturalism is the view that God or a soul is central to a meaningful life, while naturalism is roughly the denial of that. In the book, I define 'God' and 'soul' in terms of spiritual substances, concrete things that exist but are not composed of sub-atomic particles and are independent of our spatio-temporal universe, while naturalism is equated with the view that physical properties are what mainly constitute life's meaning.

In Fiona Ellis' contribution, one of her principal aims is to 'deny that God and the spiritual are to be dualistically opposed to the natural world'<sup>2</sup>. In making this claim, she is not suggesting that, if certain spiritual substances independent of nature existed, they would nonetheless interact with it and thereby 'hallow' it (cf. Taliaferro). Instead, Ellis is claiming that we must 'naturalize spirituality', that is, understand talk of God, soul, and the like in physical terms. She wants to show that 'the theist is not bound to view the spiritual dimension in terms which set it apart from nature'<sup>3</sup>.

I am in fact quite sympathetic to what Ellis calls 'expansive naturalism', an understanding of the natural world that transcends the terms and even concepts of the sciences (and hence I reject a 'scientistic naturalism' of the sort Taliaferro mentions<sup>4</sup>). I believe that introspection and *a priori* reflection are substantial sources of knowledge, that there is an objective realm of values constituted by physical properties that we can be mistaken about but that we can also empirically apprehend<sup>5</sup>, and that reality is 'too big' for us to grasp fully. In the light of these aspects of nature, Ellis can be read as advancing what has been labelled a 'predicate theology'<sup>6</sup>, in which religious terms signify not perfect non-physical substances but rather desirable attributes constituted by physical properties.

It is open to Ellis and others to use religious terms in that way<sup>7</sup>, but I reply here by indicating one reason not to do so, given the aim of facilitating philosophical debate about the meaning of life. The problem is how to articulate and evaluate the positions on life's meaning that have grown out of the Abrahamic faiths. At least since Aquinas, one influential (and 'extreme') view has been that God, understood as a person with the utmost perfections who is beyond nature but is its source, constitutes meaning in life such that, if God so construed does not exist, our lives are meaningless. On the one hand, whatever meaning is to be found on Earth is a function of participating in God's nature, while, on the other hand, superlative meaning is conferred by enjoying the beatific vision, apprehending God in Heaven without the impediment of a body. More recently there has been the (more 'moderate') view that, while physical instantiations of the good, the true, and the beautiful would make our lives somewhat meaningful in the absence of a morally perfect, omniscient, and all-powerful person who exists independently of the universe and is its source, a greater, deeper, or everlasting meaning would be possible only if such a spiritual being existed. If we construed 'God' and 'the spiritual' strictly in naturalist terms, as Ellis seems to propose at times, then we could not express and appraise these views, or at least would need an entirely new terminology to do so.

Ellis might reply that she need not be understood as suggesting that we use words such as ‘God’ and ‘spiritual’ only to connote natural properties, but that it is simply open for us to do so. Instead of narrowing the use of these words, perhaps she is merely broadening it. That would be fair, and I myself accept her claim that a ‘theism’ of (roughly) naturalistic moral realism, if true, would make some meaning available to our lives of a sort lacking if the only value available to us were the satisfaction of whatever desires we happen to have (as per Richard Taylor’s scientific naturalism). However, a question remains as to which theist or religious account would be preferable in respect of life’s meaning, Ellis’ expansive naturalism or the more traditional approach that I label ‘supernaturalism’<sup>8</sup>. Would a more choice-worthy sort of meaning be on offer if and only if the spiritual were not naturalized in the way Ellis proposes? For all that Ellis has said, that question remains open.

### **Attoe and Taliaferro: God’s bearing on meaning in a life**

In contrast to Ellis, Aribiah Attoe and Charles Taliaferro work with more traditional understandings of the spiritual. Attoe provides four reasons to reject the idea that God, understood as a person who exhibits the ‘omni-properties’ and created human life for a purpose, could enhance meaning in our lives, let alone be necessary for it. In contrast, according to Taliaferro, for whom God is similarly understood as the ‘creator and sustainer of the cosmos’, God ‘is essential in accounting for the meaning of life’<sup>9</sup>. In what follows, I argue against both positions, at least for the main reasons that Attoe and Taliaferro provide.

According to Taliaferro, one reason for thinking that God is essential for any meaning in life is the metaphysical claim that ‘there would be no cosmos of any kind unless it was created and sustained by God’<sup>10</sup>. If it were the case that the universe could exist only because it had been produced by a perfect, spiritual person, then there is a clear sense in which the latter would be necessary for anything of value in the universe.

However, this reasoning does not ground the sort of philosophical claim that I and most others in the field are keen to evaluate. When religious thinkers maintain that God is ‘necessary’ or ‘essential’ for meaning in our lives, they characteristically do not mean that God is an instrumental or enabling condition for meaning, even if an unavoidable one. Instead, what they standardly have in mind is that meaning in life is identical to relating to God in a certain way or at least is constituted by so relating.

To see the point, consider that no one would suggest that oxygen is ‘necessary’ or ‘essential’ for meaning in our lives in an interesting sense. It causes or facilitates our existence, and we as human beings physically could not exist without oxygen, but oxygen obviously is not what makes life meaningful in the relevant way. Analogously, even if we as persons metaphysically could not exist without God by virtue of God unavoidably being the source of us and the universe as a whole, nothing would follow about whether a relationship with God is centrally what confers meaning on our lives, the key claim.

Elsewhere in his contribution Taliaferro does suggest two more promising grounds for thinking that relating to God could indeed constitute meaning in life. At one point he responds to a dilemma I posit in the book for those who believe that life would be meaningless in the absence of a relationship with God<sup>11</sup>. Either God would be quite unlike human beings or God would not. On the one hand, if God were like human

beings, then, although we could then understand how to relate to God, other humans would plausibly be sufficient for meaning in our lives. On the other hand, if God were quite unlike human beings, then, although other humans would plausibly be insufficient for meaning in our lives, we could not understand how to relate to God. The core idea is that the best explanation of why God might be necessary for meaning, and human beings might be insufficient for it, is that God's nature would be radically different from ours, but the more different God's nature is, the harder it is to grasp how meaning could come from relating to God. In reply, Taliaferro suggests that we draw on the testimony of mystics and others who report having communicated with God in order to understand what a relationship with God looks like.

It is true that there is a large literature on religious experience and that it provides detailed reports from those who claim to have heard God's voice, otherwise received messages from God, or experienced the world as infused by God. I am afraid that I am inclined to think we must first establish that God exists in order to know that such testimony is reliable, in contrast to the suggestion that we can establish that God exists, as well as what it is like to relate to God, from the testimony. God's recurrent silence in the face of torture and other kinds of intense suffering provides strong reason to doubt that God is present at all and hence to doubt the testimony. It also makes it unclear how, if God in fact exists, I am to relate to God meaningfully – how is my life to be made more significant by this person who could easily stop the torture and is aware of it but says nothing to me and elects not to stop it? That is not a morally perfect being so far as I can understand one, and, if a human person were to behave in that way, I would be befuddled at how to have a meaningful relationship with her, even if at other times she were to speak to me or others.

A second suggestion from Taliaferro in support of the idea that God's existence would at least make life more meaningful, if not be essential for it, is that God alone would avoid the condition in which 'nothing that we say or do or make matters to an indifferent cosmos, and that, at some point in the future, the cosmos will be as if there never was life at all'<sup>12</sup>. The point is strong when considering the universe in this, actual world, for all we can tell of it. It does appear that we are, if not the only intelligent life, at least permanently cut off from any other intelligent life, and that we, both as individuals and as a species, are quite unlikely to survive forever (let alone in ways that redeem losses).

However, for God to be *necessary* to avoid the conditions of indifference and death, there would have to be no possible natural world that could avoid them. When it comes to metaphysical possibility, it appears that conceivability is all we have to rely on or is at least one source of justified belief. If I can coherently conceive of a state of affairs, that is some reason to take it to be possible. And I can indeed coherently conceive of a world without God in which the cosmos is neither indifferent to us nor devoid of life. Just imagine that people were able to upload their consciousness into an infinite succession of different bodies (and not more than one at a time) in an ever-expanding universe and that intelligent alien civilizations were much closer in proximity to Earth. Is that possible world more remote or less likely than one in which God exists?

Attoe would be sympathetic to my criticisms of Taliaferro, but I also cannot bring myself to accept Attoe's reason for rejecting the relevance of God<sup>13</sup>. Attoe suggests that counterfactual (what he calls 'hypothetical') thinking is revealing only when it 'offers us knowledge of realistically useful possibilities' or has 'pragmatic relevance'<sup>14</sup>. So, it is, for

Attoe, revealing to think about what would happen if the trigger of a loaded gun pointed at a person were pulled, insofar as the gun and person exist. We can then know that the person would be severely harmed, and we can also infer that we should avoid pulling the trigger or even pointing a loaded gun at him. In contrast, according to Attoe, it is not revealing to think about what would happen if events took place in respect of things that do not exist. Considering what would happen if a rainbow-coloured unicorn were to do certain things ‘does not really matter in philosophical discourse’, since, for all we know, it does not exist. We cannot know what would happen in that world in which it existed, and we cannot infer anything about how we should act in this world.

Supposing that general account of which counterfactuals are informative were true, Attoe suggests that it would tell against the view that life would be meaningful if one fulfilled a purpose that God had assigned to one. Considering what would happen if God assigned one a purpose and one then fulfilled it is not revealing for Attoe, since the evidence of God’s existence is comparable to that of a rainbow-coloured unicorn or a ‘tree whose fruits reveal our purpose to us’<sup>15</sup>.

Of course, some philosophers, presumably Taliaferro, would be inclined to marshal evidence in support of God’s existence. That is one way to reply. However, my reply is different, and is instead a matter of questioning Attoe’s general account of when counterfactuals are sources of knowledge and have implications about how we ought to act.

Consider some counterexamples that concern what is non-instrumentally valuable and non-instrumentally disvaluable. Think, first, about well-being (happiness) and woe (unhappiness). Grade states of pain on a scale of a low of 1 to a high of 10. Imagine that there were a device that prevented feeling pain at states 9 and 10 but that informed people of significant danger, say, with a noticeable tickle. Would one be better off if one possessed and used that gadget? I submit that one would. I can know a person would have a less unhappy life with such a device, even though it does not exist and even if it were physically impossible for it to exist. It is true that, supposing that device is unavailable, a person can have no reason to act in one way rather than another, although some philosophers hold that it would be reasonable for a person to exhibit certain emotions, say, to regret that the device is unavailable.

For a second example, think about moral status, the condition of meriting moral treatment for one’s own sake or being the object of a direct duty. Pens lack moral status, while characteristic living human beings have it; if we have moral reasons to treat a pen a certain way, it is not directly because of facts about the pen, but rather indirectly because of facts about the pen’s owner or the like. Now, imagine that I were to meet an intelligent race of Martians who had been hiding beneath the surface of their planet but had recently emerged to greet humanity. Would I be wrong to use them as target practice with my crossbow without their consent? I submit that I would be wrong to act in that way, and, moreover, wrong because the Martians have a moral status; I would be doing an injustice to these self-conscious beings who are able to communicate. I can know these beings would have a moral status, even though they do not exist and even if it were physically impossible for them to exist on Mars. That is, from this thought experiment, which is not ‘derived from real states of affairs but from the intellect of the subject’<sup>16</sup>, I can learn that it is not only the fact of being human or a member of *Homo sapiens* that confers moral status. Furthermore, in this case I might well have reason to act in one way

rather than another, for it might plausibly help reveal to me why human beings have a moral status when they do and, hence, which human beings matter morally for their own sake and to what degree.

Not only are these counterexamples to Attoe's general account of when counterfactual thinking is revealing, but they also serve as analogies. That is, what goes for un/happiness and moral status plausibly goes for meaning in life. Meaning in life is characteristically understood, by definition, to be a non-instrumental good, and not valuable merely as a means to something else. If I can learn about what would enhance the net happiness of my life with a purely hypothetical thought experiment, I can probably learn about what would produce more meaning in my life with one. And if I can learn about what gives beings a standing entitling them to certain kinds of treatment, and also about how I should treat beings in my vicinity, from a counterfactual that is not 'directly derived from a state of affairs' and does not concern the 'very real existence' of things<sup>17</sup>, then I can probably learn about what (if anything) gives meaning to life, too. Hence, if we are going to reject the idea that meaning is a function of fulfilling God's purpose, it probably should not be merely because, for all we can tell, God does not exist.

### **Slama: God as central to the meaning of modern western culture**

Paul Slama's article considers God's implications for meaning not in terms of how to understand the definition of 'the spiritual' and not in regards to living so that a certain non-instrumental good is exhibited in one's life. Instead, he is interested in how to understand the nature of contemporary ways of life in the West and holds that interpreting them can be done sensibly only in the light of reflections on God. I read his primary contribution as hermeneutic, providing a reading of modern Western culture, and specifically of what many find of value in it, in the way one might interpret a book or a film.

My approach in *God, Soul and the Meaning of Life* is analytic, a matter of formulating propositions with care, considering their logical implications, and assessing their truth or at least justifiability by appeal to what is less controversial than them. Slama maintains that there is another useful way to approach thought about life's meaning that is less rational and abstract, one that considers the unconscious and concrete historical processes that inform our judgements of how to live. Although that is not my method, I am a pluralist about approaches to life's meaning and am loathe to suggest that the subject matter demands only a single kind of treatment.

According to Slama, much of the way people live these days in the West is often described as 'non-religious', but in fact cannot be understood fully without reference to people's orientations towards God. In a nutshell, Slama's claim is that people have transposed the ideal of God directing us to fulfil a purpose to that of a boss overseeing a managerial process. God has a plan for the universe into which we must fit, while a firm's board has a plan that workers must help to realize. God's purpose is the same for everyone in God's universe, e.g. to honour God or love our neighbour, while a firm also has an aim, of maximizing profit, that comprehensively applies to all who are a part of it. God's plan often involves sacrificing our happiness on Earth or at least undergoing a trial that renders us unhappy, while a firm requires us to forgo satisfaction upon spending most of our day in the workplace. If we do not fulfil God's purpose, then we feel guilt and

suffer the threat of punishment (or, in the case of Calvinism, the unwelcome discovery that punishment is to come), while if we do not obey the dictates of a firm's manager, we end up feeling like failures and risk getting fired. If in contrast we do fulfil God's purpose, we can look forward to a reward in Heaven, while if we help a firm achieve its aims, there is the hope of getting rich. 'Thus, the ethical concepts that Metz presents, along with others, as naturalistic, are in fact essentially supernaturalistic not only because of their origin, but also because of their fundamentally religious, liturgical deployment, where a new, more universal God, a global God, is somehow driving economic globalization'<sup>18</sup>.

I do not know enough historical detail to confirm, but I accept as likely the claim that capitalism and much contemporary Western thought about success grew out of religious belief and practice. In addition, the parallels that Slama draws, which have often been advanced by anarchists such as Mikhail Bakunin and libertarian Marxists such as the Situationist International, are indeed suggestive. Still more, the parallels could be and have been extended, to include, for just two examples, state officials in relation to citizens and teachers in relation to students. So, it is fair for Slama to draw the conclusion that the significance of much modern day life, which is characteristically construed as secular, cannot be adequately grasped without a monotheist framework. As Nietzsche would say, the way we live means that God is alive and well despite our atheism.

It is not clear what bearing these points have on the project of trying to answer the questions of what would in fact make life more meaningful or how we should live so as to make it so. There is an implicit critical element in the parallels Slama draws; the hierarchical and regimented organization that comes at the cost of human fulfilment is suspect. However, the criticism is not itself part of the project of demonstrating what the source of certain practices is and how their nature is similar to others; criticism is prescriptive or evaluative, while the latter project is descriptive or explicative. Slama seems suspicious of an analytical approach to life's meaning, but how else can one plausibly ground the critical tone of his essay except by making comparatively uncontroversial claims about what is good and bad in a human life and drawing the conclusion from them that certain ways of life are substantially lacking in meaningfulness understood as a non-instrumental value?

Slama is aware that he has not shown in this essay that monotheism is 'a conditioning position for all the evaluations of Western individuals'<sup>19</sup>, although he is sympathetic to the claim. I, however, do not believe that literally all Western thought about meaning in life is conditioned by monotheist thinking. It is worth highlighting apparent exceptions, so as to leverage intellectual resources by which to articulate alternatives to the status quo: consider someone tending a garden; note the one who spontaneously offers a ride to a stranger caught in the rain; think about reading a story to a young child before she goes to bed; reflect on a sister having written a beautiful eulogy upon the unexpected and early death of her brother; recall hearing music that has made one weep; remember the time one learned something deep about one's character; do not forget expressing one's love through physical intimacy<sup>20</sup>.

I confess that, in my own philosophical reflections on what makes life meaningful, I have tended to focus on large, intricate projects, ones that require sophisticated planning and consistent effort<sup>21</sup>, which might smack of managerialism. For instance, I have worked with paradigmatic cases of meaningfulness such as working to overthrow apartheid, striving to make discoveries about the nature of space-time, and painting *Guernica*. My hunch is that



monotheism grew out of prior judgements that these kinds of projects pertaining to the good, the true, and the beautiful would make life meaningful—as opposed to the other way around! However, setting that merely suggestive proposal aside, there are other intuitive ways to enhance meaning in life that do seem altogether free of monotheism and similarly ‘managerial structures’<sup>22</sup>. To the extent that modern life in the West prevents us from having enough of these states and relationships, Slama and the reader may reasonably draw the conclusion that our lives are less meaningful than they could be.

## Notes

1. Metz, *God, Soul and the Meaning of Life*.
2. Ellis, “Meaning, Desire, and God,” 310–322.
3. Ibid.
4. Taliaferro, “Meaning, Metaphysics, and Mystics,” 361–365.
5. For my particular version of moral realism, see Metz, *Meaning in Life*, 7, 91–96, 171–172.
6. See, e.g., Schulweis, “From God to Godliness.”
7. On a personal note, this is precisely the way I usually interpret religious texts, thinking in terms of holiness as opposed to a holy being and evil instead of a devil.
8. *Contra* Taliaferro, I do not call it ‘theism’ since the field uses that word to connote a metaphysical view about what exists (roughly, the spiritual); supernaturalism is in contrast an axiological view about what would make life meaningful (roughly, the spiritual), and does not imply anything about what exists.
9. See above 4.
10. Ibid.
11. Metz, *God, Soul and the Meaning of Life*, 22–24.
12. See above 4.
13. Attoe mentions four reasons to reject the God purpose theory, but, if only for reasons of space, I focus on the first one discussed in his article, which is particularly original. The other reasons are more familiar, and replying to them would involve appealing to common ideas about the value of free will in respect of a meaningful life.
14. Attoe, “Why the God Purpose Theory Fails,” 323–336.
15. Ibid.
16. Ibid.
17. Ibid.
18. Slama, “God and Meaning of Life,” 350–360.
19. Ibid.
20. One way to sum up these kinds of cases is to say that Ellis’ eloquent description of how we desire the good is present in many of our lives.
21. Metz, “The Good, the True, and the Beautiful.”
22. See above 18.

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No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author(s).

## Notes on contributor

*Thaddeus Metz* is often credited for having helped develop life's meaning as a distinct field in Anglo-American philosophy over the past 20 years. Metz has published articles on the meaning of life in journals that include *Religious Studies*, *Faith and Philosophy*, the *European Journal for Philosophy of Religion*, and the *International Journal for Philosophy of Religion*. As a fun fact, Metz was once featured as a clue on the nationally televised American game show *Jeopardy*: 'Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy entry written by Thaddeus Metz, or a movie co-written by John Cleese' was the answer to the question 'What is the Meaning of Life?'

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