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Theism and the Meaning of Life

Abstract

Theists are inclined to assert that human life would be meaningless if there was no personal immortality and God did not exist. The present paper aims to evaluate the truth of this claim. The author first explores the conception of meaning that is at the roots of the theistic position. After pointing out some difficulties with it, the author shows that, on a plausible alternative interpretation of what it is for an activity to have meaning, human life would fully qualify as meaningful even if it were not inscribed in a universal divine plan.

1 Introduction

[¹] Theists often argue that, without God and immortality, human life would be meaningless. For example, William Lane Craig asks:

If each individual person passes out of existence when he dies, then what ultimate meaning can be given to his life? Does it really matter whether he ever existed at all? It might be said that his life was important because it influenced others or affected the course of history. But this only shows a relative significance to his life, not an ultimate significance. His life may be important relative to certain other events, but what is the ultimate significance of any of those events? If all the events are meaningless, then what can be the ultimate meaning of influencing any of them? Ultimately, it makes no difference.¹

[²] Craig adds that both immortality *and* God's existence are necessary for life to be meaningful:

[I]t is important to see that it is not just immortality that man needs if life is to be meaningful. Mere duration of existence does not make that existence meaningful. If man and the universe could exist forever, but if there were no God, their existence would still have no ultimate significance. To illustrate: I once read a science-fiction story in which an astronaut was marooned on a barren chunk of rock lost in outer space. He had with him two vials: one containing poison and the other a potion that would make him live forever. Realizing his predicament, he gulped down the poison. But then to his horror, he discovered he had swallowed the wrong vial—he had drunk the potion for immortality. And that meant that he was cursed to exist forever—a meaningless, unending life. Now if God does not exist, our lives are just like

1. William Lane Craig, 'The Absurdity of Life Without God,' in E. D. Klemke (ed.), *The Meaning of Life*, 2nd ed. (New York and Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000), 42. The chapter originally appeared in William Lane Craig, *Reasonable Faith: Christian Truth and Apologetics* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway Books, 1994), 51–75.

that. They could go on and on and still be utterly without meaning. We could still ask of life, 'So what?' So it is not just immortality man needs if life is to be ultimately significant; he needs God and immortality. And if God does not exist, then he has neither.²

[3] My aim in this paper is to determine whether Craig's claims are true. Any serious discussion of theism must deal with the question whether God and immortality are necessary for life to have meaning, for theists regard their doctrines as having a distinctive advantage over secular conceptions of life. They insist that taking leave from traditional religious beliefs leads to despair and to the feeling that life is pointless and absurd.³ The root of the theistic stance is the conviction, nicely captured in Craig's texts, that life would be meaningless without God and immortality. In what follows, I shall start by analyzing Craig's idea of meaning. After bringing to light some problems in his argument, I shall defend a different view of what gives meaning to life. On this view, immortality and God are not necessary for life to be meaningful.

2 The theistic conception of meaning

[4] The texts we have read show that, for Craig, to have meaning is to matter in a higher scheme. From Craig's perspective, if x is due to die and is part of a world that will itself die, and x does not contribute to a higher plan, then the existence of x has no meaning. In the first text, Craig argues that, if a human being dies and her actions have no lasting effects, because the world itself perishes, then her life was meaningless. If, in the end, all comes to nothing, then it does not matter in the first place whether a particular person existed or not. But if no divine plan for the world exists, then all our efforts do indeed come to nothing, because *everything* comes to nothing. Hence, our lives are meaningless without God.

[5] For Craig, in order to have meaning, our lives must make a difference to a higher scheme. And theism sees human actions as doing just that. If God exists and has a plan for us and the world, then our actions do a sort of double duty. On the one hand, they affect other people and events in this world; on the other, they further or hinder God's ultimate plan. Also, the moral quality of our actions shapes our relationship with God, since this depends on how we act in relation to His plan. Theistic morality focuses on the *imitatio Christi*. It holds that people should take part in redeeming the world. Thus, human actions have both local and cosmic significance, since they affect the struggle between good and evil, religious and secular values that will end when the Kingdom of God comes. In short, theism tends to equate meaning with a form of transcendence: a life is meaningful if it plays a role in a plan that is not of this world.

[6] On this view of meaning, life is indeed meaningless without God. For, according to theism, the higher plan is *God's* plan. There is no plan, and hence no

2. Craig, 'The Absurdity of Life Without God,' 42-43.

3. Craig refers to some classics of existentialism and to Beckett's *Waiting for Godot* to support this point. Cf. Craig, 'The Absurdity of Life Without God,' 41.

meaning, without Him. But why is immortality, too, a requirement for meaning? If to have meaning is to play a role in the divine scheme, then even non-immortal creatures could lead meaningful lives by contributing to God's plan for as long as they live. A theist would probably answer this challenge as follows. God's plan includes a bridge of love with all His creatures and calls all human beings to share in the eternal Kingdom they can help realize. Having us enjoy His Kingdom for all eternity is part of God's plan. If we were supposed to help realize a plan that excludes us, then, contrary to His benevolence, God would treat us as means, not as ends. Only an indifferent God could ask human beings to put their hearts and souls into realizing His aims, and then completely drop them out of the picture as a spent tool. So, if God is benevolent, His plan must be as inclusive as His goodness.⁴

3 Some difficulties

^[7] Is the theistic analysis of meaning correct? Craig's interpretation reflects a quasi-linguistic approach. Although the question of the meaning of 'meaning' is far from settled among philosophers of language, the notion of meaning is often put in relation with the ability of a word or expression to refer to something other than itself. Similarly, for Craig and other theists, human life can only have meaning if it helps realize something higher than itself, a divine plan that transcends the limits of human existence.

^[8] A difficulty with this conception of the meaning of life, however, is that it only pushes meaningfulness back a step, without explaining it. Yes, one may concede, human lives are meaningful if God exists and we can help realize His plan. But how is the plan itself meaningful? That is, once the plan has been realized, and people enjoy immortality in the Kingdom of God, in what sense are their eternal lives meaningful? For theists, such lives are paradigms of meaningfulness. Yet, it does not seem that their meaning would derive from the contributions they make to a higher plan, for, once God's plan is realized, there are no further goals to attain.

^[9] In essence, there seem to be two possibilities, both problematic. Either eternal life in the Kingdom of God is meaningful because it contributes to an even higher plan, or eternal life with the Creator has meaning *per se*. If one chooses the former line, then an infinite regress ensues, since, if it is to be meaningful, any level of existence will need a higher scheme to fit into. This seems to dissolve the notion of meaning instead of explaining it. If, on the other hand, one chooses the latter line and stops the regress at life in the Kingdom of God, then one is changing the definition of meaning in passing, because fitting into a higher scheme has now dropped out of the picture as a requirement for meaningfulness. But if there is no such requirement, then one should have considered stopping the regress right away, finding meaning in the world and human life regardless of whether they

4. Not all theists, however, consider it inconsistent with God's nature to treat His creatures as means. See, for example, Richard Swinburne, *Is There a God?* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1996), 104–106.

fit into a higher plan. If fitting into a higher scheme is not required for the divine plan to have meaning, then why was it required for the lower level of existence, unless it was assumed all along that human life as it is can have no meaning apart from a higher plan?

^[10] A theist may reply by drawing attention to Craig's distinction between *relative* and *ultimate* significance. The first passage quoted above explains that, from the theistic perspective, actions and events have relative significance when they only influence other actions and events; but they have *ultimate* significance insofar as they contribute to God's plan. *A fortiori*, God's plan itself has ultimate significance. Just as God is *causa sui*, His plan derives its meaningfulness from the fact itself that it *is* the divine plan.

^[11] This reply would seem to defeat the worry that eternal life in the Kingdom of God may not be meaningful by the theistic standards of meaningfulness. A theist may simply remark that eternal life in the Kingdom of God is not the sort of thing about which one would ask 'In what sense is *it* meaningful?' If one understands the theistic conception of God as the ultimate being, then one understands that there is no room for asking 'Who or what made God?' Similarly, if eternal life in the Kingdom of God has ultimate meaning, then there is no question as to the source of its meaning. Being beyond this sort of inquiry is the very essence of having ultimate meaning.

^[12] But is the distinction between relative and ultimate significance anything more than an assumption? This is the important philosophical question here. Is the distinction independently motivated or does it simply stem from the preconception that nothing human can have meaning unless it is related to some ultimate reality? The theistic view is vulnerable to the standard reply to arguments that introduce the divine in order to block an infinite regress. A non-theist may ask: If it is possible for something to have ultimate meaning, i.e. to have meaning *in itself*, why couldn't human life – considered in isolation from immortality and the existence of God – be one such thing? Why exactly is the theist unwilling to locate meaning in human life *per se*? Why not stop the regress earlier?

^[13] The reason why theists are unwilling to stop the regress earlier cannot just be that, without God and immortality, human life is finite and transitory. For, through his example of the stranded astronaut, Craig himself points out that immortality would not by itself be sufficient for meaningfulness. Adding an infinite extension of time to human life would not make it meaningful by theistic standards if God did not exist. So, the reason why, for theists, our lives must fit into a divine scheme to have meaning is simply that, from the theistic perspective, nothing has meaning if God does not exist. The existence of God is a precondition of meaningfulness. But this is precisely the point at issue between the theist and the non-theist. One cannot assume it. Rather, one must prove it.

^[14] The non-theist wanted to know why the theist is unwilling to find ultimate meaning in human life apart from God; and the theist replies that human life cannot have meaning apart from God. This hardly answers the non-theist's question. If, as Craig does, the theist promises an analysis of the concept of

meaning capable of showing that human life cannot have meaning apart from God, this analysis had better be based on something other than the mere assumption that human life cannot have meaning apart from God. On pain of circularity, theists cannot assume the conclusion non-theists ask them to motivate.

[15] Another difficulty in the theistic argument is that it contains an equivocation. As we have seen, theists view a human life as meaningful only if it has a kind of ultimate significance. They define 'meaningful' as 'inscribed in and contributing to God's ultimate plan.' Call this sense of 'meaningful' 'meaningful₁.' There is, however, another common interpretation of 'meaningful.' Often, we take 'meaningful' in the sense of 'choiceworthy, fulfilling, valuable in itself.' More precisely, when applied to a life, the adjective 'meaningful' usually means 'worth living, good on balance for the person who has it, characterized by valuable accomplishments' as when we deny that a Sisyphus-like existence or a life spent in a coma from beginning to end would be meaningful. Call this second sense of 'meaningful' 'meaningful₂.' Now, given their definition of 'meaningful,' theists can certainly assert that, without God and immortality, human life would not be meaningful₁. This is true because tautological. If 'meaningful' is defined as 'inscribed in and contributing to a divine plan,' then if there is no God, human life is not meaningful₁. Theists however, perhaps without realizing this equivocation, treat their proposition that, without God and immortality, human life would not be meaningful₁ as evidence for the much stronger and emotionally charged conclusion that, without God and immortality, human life could not be meaningful₂ either. The flaw in this argument lies in using equivocation to go from the premise ('Without God and immortality, human life is not meaningful₁') to the conclusion ('Without God and immortality, human life is not meaningful₂') in the absence of the key universal premise 'Everything which is not meaningful₁ is not meaningful₂,' whose truth the theist has not secured and appears to be simply assuming.

4 Meaning and Value

[16] The question before us has thus come into sharper focus. Can human life be meaningful₂ even without God and immortality? Can a person's existence be valuable, fulfilling, and worthwhile even if it does not partake in a higher dimension?

[17] It seems to me that, if one disambiguates 'meaningful' as I did above, even a theist would have to concede that being meaningful₁ is not a requirement for being meaningful₂. This result follows from a basic feature of human existence: human beings have access to *value*. There is room in our lives for what is good. Consider a simple example. Imagine a person who wishes to help the less fortunate and has built in herself the confidence and strength to act on that desire. Her means are limited, but she makes the most of what she has and, over the course of her life, succeeds in significantly relieving the suffering of a number of people who, without her help, would certainly have succumbed to famine and disease. Suppose also that God exists but, for whatever reason, His plan does not

include the woman in our example. Her life is finite and transitory. It does not fit into an ultimate scheme.

[18] Under these circumstances, how would a theist answer the question ‘Would God look at the woman’s life as meaningless?’ Let us bypass the issue that a theist may refuse to analyze God’s reactions and motives on grounds that the divine mind is inscrutable to us. Theism actually involves the belief that it is possible for us to gain some degree of insight into what God wants, at least into what He wants from human beings. Theology does not generally refrain from describing divine requirements and expectations from the point of view of God himself. So, it is certainly open to the theist to wonder how God would react in a certain situation and how He would evaluate it.

[19] Would the generous woman’s life strike God as meaningless, then? What would a theist say? It seems clear to me that even a theist would have to answer that the woman’s life, although meaningless₁, would not necessarily strike God as meaningless₂.⁵ The reason is that (a) the kind of theism that has been the subject of this essay – namely, the theism of religions such as Christianity – regards God as a moral God; and (b) there is *value* in what the woman does. By God’s standards,⁶ her generosity is *good*, and given the place generosity plays in her overall life plan, her existence qualifies as meaningful₂, because she is consistently engaged in doing something worthwhile, something that has value at the time when it is done, although not necessarily on a universal scale. The kind of God theists envision would acknowledge that the woman’s good actions have value because they proceed from sheer generosity and, at the time when they are performed, rescue other human beings from suffering and death. In short, our example reveals that what is not meaningful₁ may nevertheless be meaningful₂, *even by theistic standards*, since having access to certain goods is sufficient to make a human life meaningful₂ in the eyes of the moral God theists believe in. It is wrong to assume that not being meaningful₁ is sufficient for not being meaningful₂.

[20] I am not here suggesting that only the lives of moral saints and benefactors of humanity are meaningful. Rather, the point is that, at least for the majority of people, existence affords the opportunity to attain the kinds of goods that make a human life worthwhile and fulfilling. These are not limited to acts of generosity, but include the standard morally significant goods achievable by human beings: love, compassion, friendship, family, understanding, joy, the appreciation of beauty and nature, acting morally for morality’s sake, etc. The items

5. I have not introduced a definition of ‘meaningless₁’ and ‘meaningless₂’ but the definition can easily be derived from the above definition of ‘meaningful₁’ and ‘meaningful₂.’

6. As is well known, the notion of a moral God invites the question whether God gives certain commandments because they are good or the commandments are good because God gives them to human beings. My argument does not require addressing this dilemma, since I focus on the theistic belief that God values generosity, not on theistic interpretations of God’s reasons for valuing generosity. Whether generosity is valuable in itself or is so simply by divine stipulation, it remains that theists conceive of God as valuing and rewarding generosity. My point is that there can be generosity in a life that does not continue in a higher dimension, and so theists would have to concede that this life would appear valuable to God regardless of whether it makes a contribution to His plan.

in this list are good. A life provided with them, or at least provided with the opportunity to attain some of them, is meaningful by the kinds of moral standards theists themselves adopt and through which they frame their idea of a good God.

[21] Suppose it was part of the theistic faith to believe that God created two races of people. Suppose also that both races were capable of moral goodness and both had access to the kinds of goods described above. But let only individuals in one race be immortal and partake in the realization of God's plan. From a theistic point of view, the most plausible approach to interpreting God's attitudes towards this situation would be the following. God would judge that the creatures He made immortal are more fortunate; their lives are preferable. But He would not look down on the lives of his non-immortal creatures as meaningless. He may regard them as tragic lives, given that any suffering that occurs in them will not be compensated for in an afterlife, but He would not regard them as meaningless lives, since they contain significant opportunities to achieve goods of the sort a moral God values.

[22] We have come to a very important point. A life that has access to moral goods but does not fit into a larger context, and thus comes to a definitive end, is not as fortunate as a life that has access to moral goods for all eternity. But these two kinds of existence are related as a good life to a better one, not as a meaningless life to a meaningful one. Suppose a person were offered to choose between three alternatives: an eternal life with access to moral goods, a finite life with access to moral goods, or no life at all.⁷ Suppose also that the offer of an eternal life with access to moral goods was subsequently withdrawn. Would this reveal that the choice of a finite life is a meaningless one—a choice that is ultimately on a par with no life at all? It seems clear that a standard human life, namely a life that contains the typical mix of joys and sorrows and provides access to the goods of love, family, friendship, beauty, art, etc., is choiceworthy and preferable to no life at all regardless of whether it lasts forever and makes a contribution to a higher plan. It would be hard for a theist to show that this would be a meaningless₂ life, given that it is unlikely that even God would regard it as such.

[23] Human lives are always meaningful₂ because they are choiceworthy. Strong reasons exist for wanting to live a human life. As long as a person's existence is choiceworthy, one cannot show that it is meaningless₂. To be devoid of meaning, a life would have to consist of uninterrupted suffering with no glimpses of moral or intellectual goods. But, for the most part, this is not the human predicament.

[24] That the enjoyment of intrinsic goods makes a life meaningful₂ receives confirmation from theism itself. For theists derive their conception of the *ultimate* goods – the goods of the afterlife whose availability is supposed to give human existence ultimate significance – from their conception of the intrinsic goods that

7. What I am asking the reader to envision is a situation along the lines of *Republic* 617d–618b. Like in Plato's myth of the souls awaiting reincarnation and selecting a kind of life from an array of options, we are here to imagine an unborn chooser who has some prior experience of what human existence is like. Without such an experience, it is hard to see how one could make an informed decision—or even understand the terms of the decision to be made.

are available to human beings here and now, in a dimension where it is uncertain whether God exists. Love, fellowship, community, goodness, etc. are the essential elements of the theistic conception of the afterlife. But all that makes life in Heaven desirable is already to some extent present and available in this life. To be sure, the goods of the afterlife, if they exist, are greater and more lasting than the goods of this life. But, judging from theistic descriptions of them, they do not appear to be qualitatively different, especially in respect of the role love plays in them. It is surprising that theists tend to regard life as meaningless when considered in isolation from God and immortality, given that what is good about our existence is the model of their conception of the next life, the one they treat as giving meaning to our present lives.

5 Meaning and fragility

[25] There is, however, an important challenge to the notion that human life is meaningful even without God and immortality. This challenge derives from human fragility. It derives from the fact that our lives are exposed to suffering that appears incomprehensible and absurd because its causes lie in random circumstances or appalling human cruelty. Instead of rehearsing philosophical treatments of fragility and incomprehensible suffering, let me use a real-life example. I still have some faded newspaper clippings from the Winter of 1994, when the Bosnian capital of Sarajevo was under siege. The Serbian forces that surrounded the city shelled it almost daily. On January 23, 1994, the *Washington Post* reported:

A Serb mortar shell pounded into the middle of a group of children playing in the snow today, killing six and seriously injuring two others. A fresh snowfall had enticed the children to play outside in the new section of Sarajevo, which is surrounded on three sides by Serb artillery positions. A blood-soaked sled, swaths of red snow, and pieces of clothing, flesh and brains marked the spot of the explosion. Witnesses said the children had gathered around the sled at the top of a hill near their apartment building when the mortar round hit. Shrapnel from the blast decapitated 5-year-old Jasmina Brkovic and ripped through the chest and stomach of her 11-year-old sister, Indira, killing them both instantly. 'This world is a sick circus,' said Dzemo Kulenovic, a 38-year-old electrician who was at the scene of the attack. 'What can we say?'

[26] What Mr. Kulenovic's words capture, with greater immediacy than any philosophical analysis, is the absurdity of the tragedy he has just witnessed. A world where children play in the snow one moment and are ripped to pieces by a mortar shell the next moment is a sick world, one in which innocent lives are always one heartbeat from inexplicable tragedy. The article contains a brief description of what Mr. Kulenovich heard and saw:

8. John Pomfret, 'In Suffering Lands, Children Under Siege,' *The Washington Post*, January 23, 1994, A1.

'I was in my workroom when the first shells hit,' said Kulenovic, who lives on the first floor of the high-rise. 'They had been yelling and screaming and laughing up and down the hill so I knew they were okay. There was no time to tell them to run inside. The fourth one came down, there was the explosion and suddenly there was silence. I looked out, and all I could see was red.'⁹

[27] In an instant, laughter can give way to death and families can be condemned to a lifetime of grief. Events of this sort force us to ask: What kind of world do we live in? What kind of reality has a place for such reversals? The feeling one gets from contemplating these horrors and the enormity of the suffering they cause is that the world contains us but can do away with us at any moment. We cultivate our hopes and strive to achieve happiness, but chance or another human being's cruelty can easily destroy us. This fundamental disproportion between aspirations and reality is a powerful source of the idea that our lives are absurd and meaningless.¹⁰ We think we matter, and yet we don't. The world is not in tune with our hopes, desires, and projects. The possibility of our destruction looms everywhere; and human suffering, however enormous, seems to be nothing but a passing accident, a byproduct of the presence of sentient creatures in a world that merely tolerates them for a short time.

[28] From this perspective, theism appears to have an advantage over secular conceptions of life. For theism can reintroduce a sense of purpose and hope even in the midst of tragedy. The idea of God and the hope for immortality can help us look again at the world and our fragile lives as meaningful. This is because, as we have seen, theism has the conceptual resources for placing events and circumstances in a larger context. If the world and our suffering in it are part of a more encompassing reality where everything happens for a reason, the existence of the higher plane can redeem our suffering and ease a victim's sense of despair.

[29] It is a well known fact that it is part of the theistic intellectual enterprise to explain evil and make the idea of a good God consistent with the reality of human suffering. This may take the form of a full-blown theodicy or may simply revolve around an argument for the conclusion that, if a benevolent God exists, we are in a good predicament even if the suffering we endure is incomprehensible to us.¹¹ But whichever route theism takes, its basic tenets allow a believer to continue to regard life as meaningful despite its fragility. By differentiating between the here and now of events and their ultimate, ultra-mundane significance, theists can begin to explain the inexplicable and can often do so simply by appealing to the fundamental content of their faith. Christians, for example, only have to point to the figure of Jesus Christ to give an example of suffering that has double significance. From an earthly perspective, Jesus succumbs to cruelty and injustice, but from a higher perspective, His passion is the most meaningful event in history.

9. Pomfret, 'In Suffering Lands, Children Under Siege,' A22.

10. Cf. Thomas Nagel, 'The Absurd,' *The Journal of Philosophy* 68 (1971), 716–727.

11. For an argument of this kind, see Marilyn McCord Adams, 'Horrendous Evils and the Goodness of God,' in Robert Merrihew Adams and Marilyn McCord Adams (eds.), *The Problem of Evil* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1990), 209–221.

[30] And yet, despite the advantages it seems to have over secular perspectives, theism is not the only way to affirm that life is meaningful even if it is fragile. The divorce between the wide scope of our aspirations and the confining reality of suffering does not indelibly mark our lives as meaningless. For, even without the hope that God may eliminate all suffering and redress all injustices in the afterlife, it remains true that evil does not erase all that is good and valuable in the world. Evil can make us lose sight of the good, but the human experience is largely one of dealing with a *mixture* of good and evil, not with one or the other in isolation. To be sure, it is possible for human beings to suffer in ways that seem to admit of no relief. But this does not take away the fact that the kinds of moral goods that make life meaningful are available to everybody, even to those who are suffering the most.

[31] I am not suggesting that being aware of the existence of moral goods is sufficient to console, say, bereaved parents. It is highly unlikely that people who are suffering so much would respond favorably to the argument that they still got to love and enjoy their children before they died and may have other children in the future. But it is nevertheless true that intrinsic moral goods are available before and after any calamity and that, in time, people recognize this, if they choose to continue to live after suffering serious misfortunes. This recognition may or may not console one, but it shows that our lives are *tragic*, not meaningless. It is precisely because great goods are accessible to us that it is so painful to lose them. It is the fact that we are embedded in a meaningful context that makes suffering and sudden deprivation so hard to bear.

[32] Human lives are easily exposed to loss and grief, but this does not diminish the significance of the many goods we can equally easily incorporate into our existence. Moral development, compassion, love, and a broad range of positive character traits and emotions are well within our reach. Their attainment is often facilitated by natural human inclinations and predispositions, such as the desire for love or the tendency towards solidarity. The fact that these goods are *always* available, even under the direst of circumstances, shows that our lives are meaningful despite the hardship we all must face. I am not arguing, as is commonplace in certain treatments of the problem of evil, that good and evil are correlative, in the sense that they require each other in order to exist. Rather, I am pointing to the fact that, in the world as we know it, both evil and good are present; and as long as intrinsic goods continue to be available, human life is choiceworthy and meaningful, despite the suffering it involves.

[33] The lives of the unfortunate children whose death is described above were meaningful, and so are the lives of their parents. In order for these lives to be meaningful, it is not necessary that there be a God who redresses injustices in the afterlife (although this would, of course, be desirable, just as it would be desirable that there should be no injustices in the first place). Rather, what is sufficient to make all these lives meaningful is that, despite the tragedy that struck them, the people involved were at some point or other in a position to enjoy the kinds of goods that make a human life choiceworthy. The injustice they all suffered is not the mark of the meaninglessness of their existence. Although they were the

victims of a tragic set of circumstances that deprived them of certain fundamental goods, deprivation of goods does not amount to deprivation of meaning, if there is at least some time when one can access and enjoy those goods.

[34] The only kind of life that is conceivably meaningless is a life that does not have access to any goods whatsoever. This can help us see more clearly into the origins of the theistic position. The feeling that human existence is meaningless without God and immortality stems from the fact that the existence of God and a relationship with Him for all eternity are two great goods. If one first imagines the universe with these two immense goods in it, and then imagines it without them, one can easily feel that there are no real goods left to enjoy. But this feeling is merely the result of a loss of perspective, as when a room appears dark and unappealing when the lights are suddenly dimmed, or sunlight is replaced by artificial light. However, just as one gradually becomes accustomed to a different pattern of illumination, so examining the universe *per se*, without any reference to the ideas of God and immortality, reveals that our world still contains many great goods. The theistic view that the 'death of God' entails nothing but meaninglessness and despair is the result of the fact that the 'death of God' initially casts a shadow on the many goods that are available to human beings.

[35] One can easily dispel the shadow if one realizes that it proceeds from a shift in perspective. Craig's example of the stranded astronaut, as presented in one of the passages we read at the beginning of this essay, admits of a similar reply. Contemplating the predicament of a man who has nothing but a rock to sit on and must endure his solitude for all eternity does indeed come close to contemplating something meaningless. But this is simply the result of the fact that, by completely isolating the man, the example surreptitiously removes the vast majority of human goods from his life. Let the man be on the Earth, not on an asteroid lost in space. Instead of being alone, let him be surrounded by family, friends, and opportunities for growth and understanding. Let him live a human life with access to the full range of human goods. Suddenly, it is no longer obvious that his life would be meaningless. If it were a finite life, it would still contain many important goods capable of carving a niche for meaningfulness in the face of any suffering the man may endure along the way. And if he inadvertently drank the potion for immortality, as in the example Craig cites, the man would not sink into despair as long as, for example, the people who are important to him drank the potion too, and they could all reasonably expect to continue to enjoy the moral and intellectual goods that are available to them now.¹² An infinitely extended human life endowed with goods of the moral sort is in fact the model for theistic conceptions of the afterlife. So, with the appropriate modifications, the example

12. I disagree with Bernard Williams' view that an infinite human life would inevitably lead to unbearable boredom and a desire to die. As John Martin Fischer pointed out, many important pleasures and goods are repeatable, so that it is conceivable that we may derive satisfaction from them however many times we experienced them. See Bernard Williams, 'The Makropulos Case: Reflections on the Tedium of Immortality,' in Bernard Williams, *Problems of the Self* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1973), 82–100 and John Martin Fischer, 'Why Immortality is not so Bad,' *International Journal of Philosophical Studies* 2 (1994), 257–270.

of the man inadvertently drinking the potion for immortality does not lead to the conclusion that life, even if infinite, is meaningless without God. Rather, the modified example reveals that worthwhile relationships, understanding, and love are the ultimate sources of meaning for a human life. By themselves, without any need for a God to exist, they give our lives their significance and value, so much so that even theists craft their idea of eternal beatitude from the idea of a life where the supply of these goods never ends.