



Defending the Purpose Theory of Meaning in Life

メタデータ	言語: eng 出版者: 公開日: 2015-11-25 キーワード (Ja): キーワード (En): 作成者: Poettcker, Jason メールアドレス: 所属:
URL	https://doi.org/10.24729/00006968

Defending the Purpose Theory of Meaning in Life

Jason Poettcker*

Abstract

In *Meaning in Life* (2013, Oxford University Press), Thaddeus Metz presents a robust and innovative naturalistic account of what makes an individual's life objectively meaningful. Metz discusses six existing arguments for purpose theory of meaning in life and offers objections to each of these arguments. Purpose theory is "the view that one's life is meaningful just insofar as one fulfills a purpose that God has assigned to one" (Metz, 2013a, p. 80). Metz also proposes a novel argument to undermine purpose theory by showing that it is inconsistent with the best argument for a God-centered theory of meaning. He argues that an infinite, immutable, simple, atemporal being could not be purposive or active. I aim to defend purpose theory against Metz's arguments and objections by arguing that Metz's novel argument against purpose theory fails. I argue that God need not have all these properties and that having these properties does not entail that God cannot be purposive or active. I also provide a new argument for purpose theory that addresses the concerns and inconsistencies that Metz finds with current versions of purpose theory. I conclude that purpose theory is not undermined.

1. Setting the stage

'Why is life made only for an end?
Why do I do all this waiting then?
Why this frightened part of me that's fated to pretend?
Why is life made only for an end?

Why in the night sky are the lights on?
Why is the earth moving round the sun?
Floating in the vacuum with no purpose, not a one
Why in the night sky are the lights on?'

"Blue Spotted Tail" (2011) Robin Peckinhold of the Fleet Foxes

Perhaps due to the enormous influence of Nietzsche (1886), Schopenhauer

* MA Graduate, Ryerson University, 350 Victoria St., Toronto ON, Canada.
Email: jasonpoettcker[a]gmail.com

(1900), Heidegger (1927), Camus (1942), Sartre (1946), and Russell (1903, 1957) and the rejection of the existence of a supernatural or divine creator, the question of life's meaning was either avoided or considered to have no positive answer by many analytic philosophers during the twentieth century.¹ Recently, interest in the question has re-emerged among contemporary philosophers such as John Cottingham (2003, 2005, 2008),² W.L. Craig (1994),³ and Joshua Seachris (2010, 2013),⁴ who each defend various supernaturalist views of meaning in life. They argue that the existence of God (or God and immortality) is necessary for a person's life to be objectively meaningful. In response to these supernaturalist views, philosophers such as Erik Wielenberg (2005), Susan Wolf (2010), and Thaddeus Metz (2013a) argue that a person's life can be meaningful insofar as one pursues subjective or objective goods found in the physical world. They take an "optimistic naturalist view"; namely, that even if there are no supernatural entities and human life as a whole has no objective meaning because it is the product of the blind forces of nature, *individual* lives can still be objectively meaningful.⁵ Thus, God is not necessary for meaning in life. Metz has recently emerged as a front-runner in this debate with a book-length argument for a naturalist theory of meaning in life. In *Meaning in Life* (2013), Metz presents a robust and innovative naturalistic account of what makes an individual's life objectively meaningful. First he surveys all of the naturalist and

¹ Susan Wolf (2010b) explains that the question "What is the meaning of life?" has been avoided because it has already been answered and the answer is depressing, or it is considered to necessarily depend on the existence of God and is thus "not in the purview of secular philosophers" (Cited in Seachris (2013a: 305). Joshua Seachris also notes that analytic philosophers have been mostly silent about the question either because they doubted it had an answer or they were suspicious that the question was "incoherent and meaningless" (2013a) p. 2.

² John Cottingham argues that God is necessary for meaning in life because he is the only basis for objective morality. He writes: "The religious perspective – or at least a certain kind of religious perspective (more of this later) – offer the possibility of meaningfulness by providing a powerful normative framework or focus for the life of virtue. ... To act in light of such an attitude is to act in the faith that our struggles mean something beyond the local expression of a contingently evolving genetic lottery; that despite the cruelty and misery in the world, the struggle for goodness will always enjoy a certain kind of buoyancy" (2003), pp. 72-71.

³ Craig (1994) writes: "Without God, there can be no objective meaning in life. ... For the universe does not really acquire meaning just because I happen to give it one." (Cited in Seachris (2013a, p.164).

⁴ Joshua Seachris argues that the meaning of life is a "narrative that which provides the deepest existentially relevant explanatory narrative framework through which to answer this existentially relevant cluster of questions. This narrative framework is what ultimately tracks what is being requested in asking, "What is the meaning of life?" ... If the theistic God does not exist, then my intuitions are with them, and life is not a dramatic narrative," [thus life would not be objectively meaningful] (2010), p. 110, p. 299.

⁵ Seachris, (2013a), p. 10.

and supernaturalist theories and finds them wanting. Then he presents his own novel “fundamentality theory” which, he argues, “accounts for the meaningfulness of the good, true and beautiful, and avoids the objections to other theories while incorporating their kernels of truth.”⁶ Metz’s summarizes his theory as follows: “A human person’s life is more meaningful, the more that she employs her reason and in ways that positively orient rationality toward fundamental conditions of human existence.”⁷ In other words, one can increase the meaningfulness of one’s life by rationally choosing to pursue goals that positively affect human individuals, groups, and their environment. These goals include “moral achievement, intellectual reflection, and aesthetic creation.”⁸ I am responding to his novel arguments against one supernaturalist theory of meaning called purpose theory.

2. Metz’s new argument against purpose theory

Metz defines purpose theory as “the view that one’s life is meaningful just insofar as one fulfills a purpose that God has assigned to one”⁹ A purpose theorist holds that God must both exist and provide us with a purpose that we must fulfill in order for there to be objective meaning in life. This is one kind of supernaturalist theory of meaning of life. Metz presents a new argument against purpose theory which aims to show that the most compelling motivation for God-centered theories is in tension with purpose theory. First, he builds his case for why we should think that his formulation of God-centered theory is the best standard for appraising purpose theory. Then he argues that God having the properties simplicity, immutability, atemporality, and infinitude constitutes the best reason for thinking that God alone could make our lives meaningful. Finally, he argues that if God has these properties it would be impossible for him to provide us with a purpose. I will explain Metz’s new argument and then argue that his novel argument is not successful in defeating purpose theory. I will also provide a new argument for purpose theory that addresses the concerns and inconsistencies that Metz finds with current versions of purpose theory.

Metz first explains that his argument against purpose theory rests on

⁶ Metz, (2013a), p.13.

⁷ Ibid., p. 409.

⁸ Ibid., p. 19.

⁹ Ibid., p. 80.

accepting that the God-centered theory he presents is the most promising. If one is not convinced that this theory is the most promising, the rest of the argument loses its force. He explains that God-centered theory “maintains not just that the better one’s relationship with God, the more meaningful one’s life, but also that the existence of God is necessary for one’s life to be *at all* meaningful (or at least meaningful on balance).”¹⁰ Metz gives three main reasons for thinking that God-centered theory (as he construes it) is the right standard for judging purpose theory. First, the most historically prominent views of meaning in life in the Western religious traditions are “clear instances of God-centered theory.”¹¹ Second, the God-centered view coheres with religious theories of value and goodness. Meaning is closely connected with the notion of value and most religious thinkers agree that God is necessary for objective morality, human excellence, and wellbeing. Thus, a religious theory of meaning should also hold that God is necessary for a meaningful life.¹² Third, in order to make a real distinction between naturalist and supernaturalist theories of meaning, one must argue that God’s existence and a certain relationship with him is necessary for meaning rather than merely sufficient. A naturalist might agree that if God existed he would add the meaning of our lives, but she would deny that God is necessary for a life to be meaningful (p. 108). So for reasons of “tradition, coherence, and relevance” we should think that his version of God-centered theory is the correct standard for assessing purpose theory; a specific instance of God-centered theories.

I will state Metz’s argument and explain how he supports each premise. Metz’s argument, stated formally:

(1) The best argument for a God-centered theory includes the claim that God has certain properties such as simplicity, immutability, atemporality, infinitude/unlimitedness.

(2) These properties (simplicity, immutability, atemporality, infinitude) are incompatible with a purposive God.

So, (3) Purpose theory probably cannot be the correct version of God-centered theory.

¹⁰ Ibid., p. 107.

¹¹ Ibid.

¹² Ibid., p. 108.

2a. Metz's support for premise (1)

First, as motivation for premise (1) he argues that the six common arguments for purpose theory already in the literature fail because “*nature*, independently of God, could perform the function of which God alone has been thought capable.”¹³ The six arguments for purpose theory (very roughly sketched) claim that fulfilling God’s purposes is necessary and sufficient for meaning in life for the following reasons. First, only God can provide a reward for right choices in the afterlife. Second, only God could prevent our lives from being accidental. Third, only God could create an objective ethic, which constitutes his purpose. Fourth, only God could make our lives part of a grand scheme that encompasses the universe. Fifth, only God’s eternal love can ground a meaningful life. Sixth, only an infinite God can stop an infinite regress of finite meaningful conditions.¹⁴ In response to each of these arguments, Metz argues that nature *could* provide rewards, prevent contingency, provide objective moral standards, allow us to be part a grand plan, make loving relationships possible, and give us intrinsic meaning.¹⁵ So Metz has boxed the purpose theorist into a corner with only two ways out, reject purpose theory or accept his version of God-centered theory. Herein lies the motivation and force of premise (1); if nature can do all of these things, we must come up with a better reason to accept that God is necessary for meaning in life and this means looking for “something *utterly* supernatural, viz., something that nature simply could not (or cannot even be conceived to) exhibit.”¹⁶ So, what are these unique properties that Metz proposes?

Metz notes that a theist may want propose that God being all-good, all-powerful, or all-knowing would be sufficient for meaning in life. He thinks these properties are not sufficient because we find them to a lesser degree in the natural world. For God to be both necessary and sufficient for meaning his essence must be *completely unique* from anything in nature and have “the kind of final value towards which it would be worthwhile contouring one’s life.”¹⁷ So, he draws from the perfect being theology of Katherin Rogers (2000) to argue that the qualitative properties that meet these conditions are atemporality,

¹³ Ibid., p. 110.

¹⁴ Ibid., p. 109.

¹⁵ Ibid.

¹⁶ Ibid., p. 110.

¹⁷ Ibid.

immutability, simplicity, and infinitude/unlimitedness.¹⁸ He argues that these properties are distinct from nature, and that they could be thought to display final and superlative value.

First, to show how these properties are distinct from nature, he argues that human beings, angels and the natural world clearly could not display these properties because they are spatiotemporal, changeable, decomposable, and limited.¹⁹ If God displayed simplicity, which is a “condition of being unable even to be conceived as being composed of separate parts”, he would also be atemporal and immutable because, “a being without parts obviously cannot change, while a being in time implies that it has extension, viz., stretches over moments, and hence has parts.”²⁰ So, simplicity is a good candidate for being distinct and it implies two other unique qualitative properties, atemporality and immutability. He does not explain how simplicity might also imply unlimitedness, but I will assume that he thinks God’s unlimitedness somehow displays his distinctness from nature.

Next, he shows how the four properties display important sorts of final value. God’s simplicity would display final value when combined with the independent good of personhood. All four properties exhibit the values of unity and independence. First, independence is displayed by a perfectly simple being who does not depend on any parts for its existence and is thus completely self-sufficient (it does not need anything other than itself).²¹ A being free from the limits of space and time would not be subject to death or decay, nor would it be subject to a perspective restricted by space and time. An immutable being would also be completely self-determining and thus free from other influences except itself.²² An infinite being is “unlimited and all encompassing” and thus,

¹⁸ Ibid.

¹⁹ It is strange for Metz to include angels in this list as they are often supposed to be pure spirit and thus non-spatiotemporal and not made of parts.

²⁰ The doctrine of divine simplicity has nothing to do with conceivability. Rather it is just the claim that God has no parts or distinct attributes. Ibid., p. 111

²¹ Metz, (2013a), p.111. Metz seems to be arguing that the doctrine of *divine aseity* is derived from God being free from dependence on parts (simplicity). But Katherine Rogers argues that it is the other way around. She writes: “For the medievals the doctrine of divine simplicity followed inevitably from the aseity of God and the incorruptibility of God. God exists a se, absolutely independently of all that is not Himself. In fact, whatever is not God is created by Him. It is certainly correct to characterize Him as wise, powerful, good, etc., but if wisdom, power, goodness and the rest are necessary to God’s nature, but not identical to it, then God depends for his existence on other things. But that is impossible. Therefore God does not possess these qualities. He simply is omniscience etc. For God essence and existence are the same” (1996) p. 167).

²² Ibid.

“free of any restrictions” (Metz borrows this notion from Nozick).²³ A being with these four properties perfectly displays the value of independence.

Second, a being with these properties would also display the final value of unity. A simple being is completely unified “in that it cannot even be conceived to dissolve.”²⁴ In reference to the other properties he writes, “A being beyond space and time would lack extension or the “feebleness of division (Plotinus).”²⁵ An immutable being cannot help but remain what it is. Lastly, “an unlimited being would be utterly whole.”²⁶ Metz points out that other theists such as Plotinus, Anselm, and Aquinas have argued that the values of unity and independence are constituted by the qualitative properties.²⁷ Metz is implicitly arguing that these values are what allow God to “confer significance on our existence when we orient ourselves towards it [his value].”²⁸ This provides us with the best reason for accepting a God-centered theory, given that the other six common arguments fail to show that God is necessary for meaning. The next step Metz takes is to show how these properties conflict with purpose theory in order to convince us of premise (2).

2b. Metz’s support for premise (2)

Recall that premise (2) is “the claim that God’s having such qualitative properties is incompatible with the central tenets of purpose theory.”²⁹ The first concern is that a being who does not exist in time and cannot change would not be able to adopt a plan for the following reasons. Adopting an end requires deliberation; deliberations are temporal events involving alteration. Even adopting an end without prior deliberation takes time and forms something new in God.³⁰ Further, the act of God creating the world according to a plan also requires temporal succession.³¹ In other words, creation is an activity that implies there was a moment in time T_1 when there is nothing and a later moment in time T_2 when something that previously did not exist, now exists. Thus,

²³ Ibid., p. 112.

²⁴ Ibid.

²⁵ Ibid.

²⁶ Ibid.

²⁷ Ibid., footnote 9, p. 111

²⁸ Ibid., p. 112.

²⁹ Ibid., p. 112.

³⁰ Ibid., p. 113.

³¹ Ibid.

creation requires time and change or alteration from non-being to being. Also, if purpose theorists think that God responds to our free decision of whether to fulfill his purpose or not, this response must occur in time. All of these activities are events, and events require change and take place in time, thus God could not be atemporal *and* capable of forming, adopting, acting, or responding to a purpose.³² Metz concludes that an atemporal being could not form intentions or engage in any activities at all (if we assume that all activities require time). Thus, an atemporal God could not be purposive.

Next, he explains the problem of a simple being having more than one purpose. He argues that we must assume that God would have a different purpose for humans and for animals in order to avoid the “counterintuitive implication that animal lives can be as meaningful as human lives.”³³ Even if God had one grand purpose that allowed human and animal purposes to be a part of the grand purpose, this would still conflict with simplicity because the plan would have parts. Although Metz does not spell this out here, he seems to be assuming that if God’s plan has parts, then God would also have to be composed of parts. In the same way, if God engaged in more than one activity then he would not be simple. Even if one tried to argue that God’s creation was a single grand act, Metz argues, “it is difficult to see how a single grand act ground purpose theory’s conception of what God does.”³⁴ It is unclear exactly why Metz thinks it is difficult to see this. It could be because he thinks that purpose theory requires God to form more than one intention or it could be that a single act does not seem adequate to provide a specific purpose for human beings.

Finally, drawing from Robert Nozick, Metz argues that the property of infinitude implies being unlimited. A being that has a purpose would be limited in virtue of being defined by *that* purpose and not another purpose. To reformulate this problem, a being that is defined by *anything* or *any way of being*, (having a purpose) would be limited by that way of being. He seems to be arguing that an unlimited being would have to encompass *every way of being*, or have all possible purposes at once. This shows us that if God is unlimited then, as Nozick argues, “no human terms can truly apply to it (God)” because to describe God in one way would imply that he was limited by that property.³⁵ If

³² Ibid.

³³ Ibid.

³⁴ Ibid.

³⁵ Ibid.

this is true then an unlimited purposive agent is self-contradictory. Metz concludes that a God who is simple, atemporal, immutable, and infinite could not be purposive, and thus could not assign us a purpose that gave us meaning in life and... “Shazaam!” the central tenet of purpose theory is defeated.

3. Objections to premise (1)

In response to Metz’s argument against purpose theory I will begin with premise (1). He proposes that simplicity is only valuable when “conjoined with the independent good of personhood.”³⁶ Later in his explanation of premise (2), he sums up the unique features of God as “simple or infinite personhood.”³⁷ First of all, one could argue that the properties would have no value at all if it were not for the personhood of God. Metz admits that one could imagine a perfectly simple impersonal sub-atomic particle (Higgs Boson?) but we would not want to say that a particle has sufficient value to provide meaning in life just because it is simple. I point this out because I see two main problems with introducing personhood as the independent good that makes the other properties valuable.

First, it is unclear whether personhood should be understood as *just* an independent good or as a property that *displays a good*. If personhood were a property then it would not really be unique to God since human persons share the property of personhood and Metz would not employ a property found in the natural world for his argument.³⁸ Second, if it is only an independent good that gives the others their value, then it is unclear why God would need the other properties to prove his final value. Metz argues that we need the other qualities combined with personhood in order for God to be completely unique from nature. This is a strange move that presents a problem for the whole argument. If we know anything about personhood, it is probably from our own experience as persons. Typically we understand persons as rational agents capable of: determining their own ends, of exercising rights, awareness, intentional action and thinking (acting for a purpose or goal, thinking about something rather than mere sensation). We also assume that persons are beings distinct from *impersonal* entities or things and forces such as animals, rocks, trees, and gravity.

³⁶ Ibid., p. 111.

³⁷ Ibid., p. 112.

³⁸ Ibid., p. 110.

Theologians such as Wolfhart Pannenberg and philosophers such as Immanuel Kant, William Hasker, William Lane Craig, and Christine M. Korsgaard all regard persons as capable of at least some kind of activity.³⁹ Kant bases human value on personality which he defines as “freedom and independence from the mechanism of the whole of nature.”⁴⁰ Kant goes on to argue that human and divine personality have this same kind of freedom.⁴¹ For Kant, personality is fundamentally the capacity for free action and thought. Korsgaard agrees with Kant that what defines a person is their capacity for acting morally and rationally.⁴² If one accepts this conception of personhood, then by definition, a God who is personal would be capable of activity and change, thus undermining Metz’s argument for premise (2): Forming purposes take time and require the capacity to change both of which an atemporal and immutable God could not do. Presumably, Metz would not include this notion of personhood in his argument because it would undermine his argument, so we must assume that he is supposing some notion of personhood that does not imply the capacity for action, change or having purposes. Thus, for his argument for premise (1) to be non-contradictory, Metz needs to provide a plausible account of personhood that does not include being capable of action or change.

Further, Metz is too quick to assume that omniscience, omni-benevolence,

³⁹ There is also a large body of literature on human personhood and divine personhood that I will not address here. For clear and insightful work on human personhood see Christine Korsgaard’s piece on the origin of our legal concept of persons, “Personhood, Animals, and the Law”, (2013). She writes, “In ethics, a person is an object of respect, to be valued for her own sake, and never to be used as a mere means to an end, while a thing has only a derivative value, and may be used as a means to some person’s ends.” (p. 25).

For work on Divine Personhood see Wolfhart Pannenberg’s *Systematic Theology, 3 vols., trans. Geoffrey W. Bromiley* (1991–98). He argues that personhood is defined by activity. Theodore James Whapham writes about Pannenberg’s view, “Thus, at the very center of Pannenberg’s definition of divine personhood is the notion that the persons are distinct centers of activity. In this way they can be identified with the modern notion of subjects. This idea of three distinct centers of divine activity flows naturally from the idea that the Trinitarian persons receive their divinity from one another.” (2010: 376).

Also see William Hasker’s recent work *Metaphysics and the Tri-personal God* (2013). He explains the complex and long debate in theology and philosophy about the Trinity and divine personhood. He defends the view that “each of Father, Son, and Holy Spirit is a *person*, a “distinct center of knowledge, will, love, and action.”” (abstract for Chapter 24).

See also Craig’s paper “Divine Timelessness and Personhood.” (1998) pp. 109-124.

⁴⁰ Kant, *Critique of Practical Reason*, 5:87, p. 74.

⁴¹ Kant writes “We rightly attribute this condition even to the divine will with respect to the rational beings in the world as its creatures, inasmuch as it rests on their personality, by which alone they are ends in themselves.” (1997), 5:87, p. 74.

⁴² “To hold some one responsible is to regard her as a person—that is to say, as a free and equal person capable of acting both rationally and morally” Christine M. Korsgaard, (1992), p. 306.

and omnipotence could not be properties that make God qualitatively different and more valuable than nature, just because we find them to a lesser degree in the natural world (p. 110). Most theists argue that God has goodness, knowledge and power essentially, so nature would need to have these qualities essentially, not accidentally. But of course nature is not essentially good, powerful or knowing, neither does anything in nature have these properties essentially. If nature is not necessarily or essentially good, powerful, and knowing, then one could imagine a purely physical world that did not have these qualities. Even if we could find instances of goodness, knowledge and power in nature, this would not mean that nature is sufficient for meaning if meaning in life requires having these qualities *essentially*. So, possessing omnipotence, omnibenevolence, and omnipotence essentially could be properties that are necessary for ground meaning in life.

4. My objections to premise (2)

4a. Atemporality vs. purpose

In response to Metz's argument, the purpose theorist could accept that Metz has indeed pointed how God's being an immutable, atemporal, simple, and infinite would make God completely distinct from nature and have final value, but try to undermine premise (2) by arguing that these properties do not conflict with a purposive God. I will offer some good reasons to think that the properties Metz considers do not conflict with the notion of a purposive God. First, in response to Metz's first argument about the conflict between atemporality and purposiveness, one could argue that God could have a plan that exists eternally within his mind and thus God never *adopts* a plan because he always has it, thus avoiding the claim that God's deliberation involves change. There is also a large body of literature on God's relation to time that Metz utterly fails to engage. In this literature, there are numerous accounts of how an atemporal God could relate to a temporal world. So for Metz's objection to succeed, he would need to show that these explanations are implausible, which he does not do. Further, Metz's view of God as atemporal not only bars God from forming intentions, but also implies that God could not create the world or engage in any activity at

all.⁴³ Thus, his view of God contradicts most, if not all, theistic notions of God's atemporality. There are many theists who think that God is atemporal and still think that God can create. One could turn to Augustine for a suggestion about how an atemporal God could create. He writes in his *Confessions*, an answer to those who ask,

How did it occur to God to create something, when he had never created something before? ...Grant them, O Lord, to think well what they say and to recognize that 'never' has no meaning when there is no time. ...Let them see, then that there cannot possibly be time without creation. ...Let them understand that before all time began you are the eternal Creator of all time, and that no time and no created thing is co-eternal with you⁴⁴

If God created time then it would not make sense to say that God's decision to create took time. Metz assumes that time would have to exist before God created and that creation implies temporality, but these assumptions are not adequately supported. One could also turn to Aquinas who argues that God created time along with the heavens and the earth.⁴⁵ Anselm (who also views God as atemporal) presents a view of God's creation as God expressing his eternal thought.⁴⁶ For a modern formulation of how it is possible for an atemporal God to create we can look to Kretzmann and Eleonore Stump (1992, 1985)⁴⁷ and Brian Leftow (1991).⁴⁸ Stump and Kretzmann argue that God is one timeless act identical to his will, which has multiple effects.⁴⁹ In order for Metz to provide adequate support for this apparent inconsistency between God being atemporal and purposive he would need to engage with this literature and give good arguments for why they fail to show that God can be atemporal and

⁴³ Metz writes "How could a person who is beyond time, create a spatio-temporal world, when doing so, would appear to require time?" (2013a), p. 115.

⁴⁴ St. Augustine, (1961), Book XI Chapter 30, p. 279.

⁴⁵ Aquinas writes in *The Summa Theologica*, "Things are said to be created in the beginning of time, not as if the beginning of time were a measure of creation, but because together with time the heavens and earth were created" (1948) Q. 46 Article 3. p. 258.

⁴⁶ Anselm writes in *Monologium* "Hence, although it is clear that the beings that were created were nothing before their creation, ...yet they were not nothing so far as the creator's thought is concerned, through which, and according to which, they were created" (1962), Chapter IX.

⁴⁷ Eleonore Stump and Norman Kretzmann, "Eternity, Awareness, and Action," (1992), pp. 477-8.

⁴⁸ Brian Leftow, "Eternity and Simultaneity," (1991), pp. 148-79.

⁴⁹ See note 56 for more details of their argument. Also see Barry Miller's (1996) account of divine causation for a better explanation of how a simple God can create.

purposive. To be fair, Metz does acknowledge that these responses are out there, but he does not engage with them.⁵⁰

4b. Are atemporality and immutability necessary?

A purpose theorist could also accept that God is simple and infinite while denying that God is essentially atemporal and immutable. Metz has not done enough work to show that theists must believe that God is atemporal or immutable. In his argument he assumes that time exists absolutely before God creates the world. William Lane Craig argues that if God is the creator of the temporal world then he is temporal.⁵¹ The upshot of his argument is that before God created the world He was timeless and then “undergoes an extrinsic change at the moment of creation which draws Him into time in virtue of His real relation to the world.”⁵² Taking this view would allow one to reject Metz’s argument that “since the universe is spatio-temporal, God must be an atemporal being to have been its creator.”⁵³ Craig’s view allows for God to undergo extrinsic change from atemporality to temporality while avoiding intrinsic or essential change in his nature. Nicholas Wolterstorff also proposes a view of God as everlasting rather than atemporal which allows God to create and act in time.⁵⁴ Metz at least needs engage with arguments like this to show that God must be and remain atemporal to create a spatio-temporal world. Metz might respond by arguing that if God were atemporal and ‘subsequently’ became temporal then he could not be immutable. In response, one would either need to accept that God is not immutable or give some explanation (as Craig does above) about how it is possible for God to undergo extrinsic change without undergoing intrinsic change.

⁵⁰ Metz, (2013a), p. 115.

⁵¹ Craig writes, “The argument can be summarized as follows:

22. God is creatively active in the temporal world.

23. If God is creatively active in the temporal world, God is really related to the temporal world.

24. If God is really related to the temporal world, God is temporal.

25. Therefore, God is temporal.

This argument, if successful, does not prove that God is essentially temporal, but that if He is a Creator of a temporal world—as He in fact is—, then He is temporal.” (2009), p. 160.

⁵² Craig, (2009), pp. 145-66.

⁵³ Metz, (2013a), p. 115.

⁵⁴ “It is not because he is outside of time – eternal, immutable, impassive – that we are to worship and obey God. It is because of what he can and does bring about within time that we mortals are to render him praise and obedience” Wolterstorff, “God Everlasting” (1975), p. 98.

4c. Simplicity vs. purpose

In response to the Metz's charge that purpose theory is not cohesive with simplicity, consider an analogy. Just as an architect designing a school could have the single purpose of increasing learning while assigning people various roles in contributing to that purpose, so God could have one purpose of glorifying himself and give animals and humans distinct ways of accomplishing that purpose. Metz objects to this answer because even if "human and animal purposes were components of a single plan for the universe, the fact of their being components would seem to imply a lack of simplicity. The same goes for different acts mentioned above."⁵⁵ At issue here is whether God would have to be composed of parts in order to perform more than one act, or provide a multifaceted plan. Metz thinks that a being with a single plan that has components could not be simple.

I respond to this worry by comparing Gods purpose or actions with single human acts that have many effects. A single spoken phrase, handshake, or signing of one's signature in the right context can have multiple effects, such as the starting of a war, the beginning of a long period of peace, the formation of a lifelong friendship.⁵⁶ Metz does not do enough to show that theists must accept that simplicity implies that God's plan could not have parts, or that God could not perform more than one act. Metz does admit that the purpose theorist could appeal to Aquinas by arguing that, "willing and knowing are not really distinct in God, and that having a purpose is part of the concept of willing."⁵⁷

Instead of engaging with these long-standing debates, Metz responds to Jacob Affolter's argument that God could assign various specific purposes without having multiple purposes in himself.⁵⁸ I think Metz needs to engage

⁵⁵ Metz, (2013a), p. 113.

⁵⁶ Stump and Kretzmann have a similar analogy in their paper "Absolute Simplicity" (1985) they write, "Everyone recognizes analogous characterizations of ordinary human actions: the man who flips the switch on the wall may be correctly described as doing just one thing or he may, equally correctly, be said to do many things in doing that one thing (turning on the light, waking the dog, frightening the prowler, etc.) – a case of one action with many correct descriptions or many consequences of one action in the strict sense and many actions in a broader sense." they go on to argue that, "there is no special difficulty in understanding goodness to be manifested differently to different persons on different occasions [...] in ways that must be counted among the extrinsic accidental properties of the goodness manifested" p. 356.

⁵⁷ Metz, (2013a), p. 115.

⁵⁸ Ibid., p. 117.

directly with the literature on divine simplicity in order to sufficiently motivate the claim that God's simplicity prevents him from being purposive.⁵⁹ Metz might accept that there are good answers to his objections, but he would still argue that it is difficult to see how a single act could ground purpose theory's conception of what God does."⁶⁰ So the problem might still be that purpose theory requires that God perform more than a single act in order to have a purpose, create the world, reveal his purpose to human beings and then respond to our attempts to fulfill that purpose. But, this would only be a problem if God's single act could not have multiple, complex, and powerful effects that could ground meaning in life. A minor engagement with Kretzmann and Stump gives us a potentially viable option for how God's single act of will could be his willing "both goodness and the manifestation of goodness" manifested in different ways by him creating the world, revealing his purpose to human beings, and responding to our attempts to fulfill that purpose.⁶¹ Surely an all-powerful God manifesting his goodness in different ways would be sufficient to ground purpose theory. Thus, the claim that simplicity precludes the possibility of a plan or action having components or multiple effects is not sufficiently motivated. One could also simply reject simplicity as a property that God must have and thus avoid any apparent inconsistency between simplicity and purposiveness.

4d. Infinitude vs. purpose

Third, in response to the notion that infinitude implies being unlimited which conflicts with the notion of having one purpose, we need to clarify Metz's notion of being unlimited. Metz seems to imply that a being that is defined by *anything* or *any way of being*, (having one purpose) would be limited by that way of being. So he seems to be saying that an unlimited being would have to encompass *every way of being*, or have all possible purposes at once. If Metz thinks that God should have unlimited purposes, this implies that at least some of his purposes would conflict. However, (as other theologians have argued) God's omnipotence does not imply that God could do what is logically impossible.⁶²

⁵⁹ Metz mentions Katherin Rogers (1996), Kretzmann and Stump (1985), and Lodzinski (1998) as further reading on how to develop this line of thought.

⁶⁰ Metz, (2013a), p. 113.

⁶¹ Kretzmann and Stump, (1985) p. 356.

⁶² Metz, (2000), cited in Seachris, (2013a), p. 208.

If God had conflicting purposes he would be internally inconsistent and contradictory, so a God having all possible purposes is inconceivable. God's unlimitedness need not imply that he has all possible purposes; rather, it could imply that he is not subject to *external* constraints or limits. In other words, God is only bound by the properties of his own nature. Let us assume for the sake of the argument that this means the following: God cannot do evil because he is essentially good. God cannot make a rock bigger than he can lift because that would entail that his creative ability could conflict with his physical strength. God cannot make a round square or make $2+2=5$ (*pace* Descartes) because the laws of math, geometry, and logic are an expression of his nature, so it makes no sense to ask if he can contradict his own perfect nature. God is perfectly internally consistent with his own nature so we cannot pit his capacities or expressions of his character against each other.

Nozick argues that if God is unlimited, then “no human terms can truly apply to it (God)” because to describe God in one way would imply that he was limited by that property.⁶³ Nozick might be right in saying that human terms do not fully capture or define God's essence, but most theists would agree with him on this. John Scotus Eriugena argues that God reveals himself in such a way that we can talk about God by affirming certain names but remembering that God transcends the meaning of those words without saying that human terms can fully capture the essence of God.⁶⁴ Just as we can know something about the pattern of some particular numbers in an infinite set without fully grasping infinity, we could also know enough about God to distinguish between God and not God. Metz gives no argument for his conclusion that a purposive infinite God is not “theoretically comprehensible.”⁶⁵ He has also not done enough to show that God being infinite means that he is unlimited in Nozick's sense of the word and he does not give enough clarification on what it would even mean for God to not “be one way”. I argue that Nozick's notion of unlimitedness is

⁶³ Metz, (2013a), p. 113.

⁶⁴ Katherine Rogers explains Eriugena's way of talking about God. “When we try to think about God, Eriugena holds, we are pushing the limits of human capacities. We cannot possibly wrap our minds around God just as He is. The closest we can come to understanding God is to affirm all those names which Scripture applies to Him, never forgetting that, because He is unity, God transcends any meaning we give these terms. Thus God is Good and Not Good, Wise and Not-Wise, Being and (yes!) Not-Being. And it is up to the human knower to keep both sides of the equation in mind at once. We do this by, in a way, transcending both *via affirmativa* and *via negativa* and opting the *via superlativa*, God is Super-Good, Super-Wise, etc. This is a sort of synthesis, says Eriugena, because although the terms are positive grammatically, they are negative in meaning” (1996), p. 169.

⁶⁵ Metz, (2013a), p. 113.

theoretically incomprehensible and thus could never be properly applied to God.

Further, Metz seems to be implying that no human terms can apply to God, and yet he is describing God as having these four properties. If no human terms can apply to God because he is unlimited, then Metz's explanation of the most promising God-centered view is self-contradictory since, one of the properties he includes makes it impossible to use the other properties to describe God. If this is true, then Metz has built a straw man (that he calls the most promising God-centered theory), and then attacked it by showing that it is incoherent, even though he explicitly states that his "position does not threaten God-centered theory as such."⁶⁶ Thus, his version of the most promising God-centered theory might not be the most promising God-centered theory after all. In fact it might be a really *bad* God-centered theory because it leads to internal incoherence and contradiction and it conflicts with most theists who believe that an atemporal or temporal God created the world.

5. A new argument for purpose theory

What else does this craving, and this helplessness proclaim but that there was once in man a true happiness, of which all that now remains is the empty print and trace? This he tries in vain to fill with everything around him, seeking in things that are not there the help he cannot find in those that are, though none can help, since this infinite abyss can be filled only with an infinite and immutable object; in other words by God himself.

Penseés, #148, Blaise Pascal

Metz asks if there are any other properties that God might have that would be necessary to ground meaning in life. To begin to develop a new argument for purpose theory, consider the view that objective meaning in life requires fulfilling a purpose given to us by God and the overarching purpose God gives us is to live in personal loving relationship with him. Further, suppose that a necessary element of meaning in life were relating in love to an essentially personal being. If this were the case, then God would have to be essentially multi-personal in order to already possess the quality of loving relational activity

⁶⁶ Metz, (2013a), p. 114.

and be able to invite others into that activity.⁶⁷ Lets call this PT4: a person's life is objectively meaningful if and only if:

- (i) One is intentionally created by an essentially and necessarily multi-personal, purposive, relational, omnibenevolent, omniscient, and omnipotent God.
- (ii) God provides one with a good, significant, and rational purpose that provides lasting psychological/existential satisfaction: living in a loving relationship with God.
- (iii) One fulfills that purpose by means of a free choice

Thus, God must exist, be essentially multipersonal and give one a purpose of living in loving relationship with him in order for one to have objective meaning in life, contra Metz's claim that God is not necessary for objective meaning in life and that even if God exists he could not give us a purpose. I argue, that one must fulfill this purpose freely because a good God values the free will of persons so much that he will not coerce anyone to live in relationship with him.

One possible worry about this argument is that if meaning were about being in relationship with someone else, there could be an infinite regress of relations because one could always ask: what makes the being one is related to meaningful? Only a being that is intrinsically meaningful could stop this regress. Thus, I argue that only a multi-personal God/supernatural being that exists necessarily and essentially in perfect relation with the persons within him/herself could ground this kind of meaning. It is important to note that a monistic or unitarian God could not relate with itself in any meaningful way and thus could not stop the regress. Borrowing from Augustine's view of the Trinity, I propose that if God exists, he is essentially or necessarily personal, relational, and purposive because the three persons of the trinity perfectly relate with each other in free, purposive, loving, activity.⁶⁸ On this view God need not be a temporal, immutable, or perfectly simple in every respect. God's good, loving, all knowing character is immutable, while each person in the Godhead need not be immutable in that they are constantly active toward the other persons and

⁶⁷ Part of my motivation for responding to this argument was stimulated by Tim Mawson's suggestion: "Further work on how certain properties uniquely had by God would ground meaningfulness would be helpful". Mawson (2013), p. 1142.

⁶⁸ See St. Augustine, (1958), Book XI, Chap 24, p. 233.

towards creation. God is still one God, qua God, and thus simple but God exists as three persons (Father, Son, and Holy Spirit) within the Godhead and in this respect is not simple. Further, God does not *need* to create creatures in order to be purposive or relational with other persons because each person of the trinity already has the eternal purpose of living in relationship and glorifying the other two persons through free loving activity within the Godhead. So God is relationally self-sufficient (*a se*) and thus creates out of an overflow and not a lack. When God created human beings as ontologically distinct from himself, he created them for *his* ultimate purpose of glorifying himself, and further, he designed human beings in such a way that their greatest joy, highest good, and most meaningful activity is to glorify God through freely chosen acts of love, first towards God and then other human beings, thereby giving human beings a purpose that they can freely choose to fulfill.⁶⁹

This account blocks Metz's novel argument against purpose theory in three ways. First, if one accepts that meaning in life is relational, nature could not ground meaning in life because it is not essentially personal, relational, or purposive. Second, the qualities of a multi-personal God do not conflict with purposiveness, so a multi-personal God *could* provide a purpose and create beings for a non-arbitrary reason. And third, *only* a multi-personal God could ground meaning as purpose in life because only a multi-personal God could be essentially purposive and relational. A supernatural being that was not multi-personal would lack relationship and would lack an intentional object for purposive activity before it created and thus could not ground meaning as purpose.

One might accuse me of proposing this account of purpose theory ad hoc. Metz might say, "Ok you have created an elaborate conception of God that

⁶⁹ This argument is not really brand new, it is adapted from Tim Keller who quotes C.S. Lewis, in his book *King's Cross: The Story of the World in the Life of Jesus* (2011). Keller writes "Each person of the Trinity glorifies the other. In the words of my favorite author, C.S. Lewis, "In Christianity God is not a static thing ... but a dynamic, pulsating activity, a life, almost a kind of drama. Almost if you will not think me irreverent, a kind of dance." Theologian Cornelius Plantinga develops this further, noting that the Bible says the Father, the Son, and the Spirit glorify one another: "The persons within God exalt each other, commune with each other, and defer to one another. ...Each divine person harbors the others at the center of his being. In constant movement of overture and acceptance, each person envelops and encircles the others. ...God's interior life [therefore] overflows with regard for others." (p. 6). "What does it all matter?" Lewis writes. "It matters more than anything else in the world. The whole dance, or drama, or pattern of this three-Personal life is to be played out in each one of us ...[Joy, power, peace, eternal life] are a great fountain of energy and beauty spurting up at the very center of reality" (p. 8). Keller quotes Lewis from *Mere Christianity* (1977), p.151, and Plantinga from *Engaging God's World: A Christian Vision of Faith, Learning and Living* (2002), pp. 20-23.

meets my demands by adding a bunch of qualities to God, but do any theists actually endorse this view?" To which I would respond, yes, many Christian theists throughout the ages have accepted a Trinitarian conception of God. One only needs to read William Hasker's new book *Metaphysics and the Tri-Personal God* (2013) to see the history of Trinitarian theology beginning in the fourth century with Gregory of Nyssa and Augustine, to Karl Barth, Karl Rahner, Jürgen Moltmann, John Zizioulas, Bryan Leftow, Peter van Inwagen, Jeffrey Brower, Michael Rea, William Lane Craig, Richard Swinburne, Keith Yandell and William Hasker. These thinkers along with St. Anselm, St. Thomas Aquinas, Jean Calvin, Jonathan Edwards, Charles Wesley and countless other theologians and philosophers are committed to Trinitarian doctrine and most deem it as a central and vital tenet of orthodox Christianity. Metz still might argue that I am appealing to authority. I grant that this is an appeal to the historical doctrines of Christianity. However, we are trying to figure out the strongest version of God-centered theories and not necessarily to give an argument to prove they are true. Metz also appeals to the historical doctrines to develop his version of God-centered theory.⁷⁰ Still, there is evidence in the Christian Bible that points to God being tri-personal, including the accounts in Matthew, Mark, and Luke where Jesus is baptized and the Spirit of God descends on him like a dove and the Father speaks from Heaven.⁷¹ Further, there are a-priori and a-posteriori arguments for the doctrine of the trinity that Richard Swinburne has developed. The a-priori argument is roughly, "from the need for any divine being to have another divine being to love sufficiently to provide for him a third divine being whom to love and by whom to be loved."⁷² In other words, perfect unselfish love requires at least three persons. His a-posteriori argument is:

Most people who have believed the doctrine of the Trinity have believed it on the basis of the teaching of Jesus as interpreted by the church. The only reason for believing this teaching would be if Jesus led the kind of life which a priori we would expect an incarnate God to live in order to identify with our suffering, make atonement for our sins, and to reveal

⁷⁰ "First, the most influential statements on the meaning of life in the Western religious tradition are clear instances of God-centered theory". Metz, (2013a), p. 107.

⁷¹ Matthew 3:16-17, Mark 1:11, Luke 3:22 (ESV).

⁷² Swinburne, Richard (2013) pp. 13-27.

truth to us; culminated by a miracle which God alone could do and which would also authenticate the teaching. Given good a posteriori evidence for the existence of God, there is enough historical evidence to make it probable that Jesus did live that sort of life, and so to believe the doctrine of the Trinity (2013: 13).

In order to refute this version of purpose theory Metz would need to engage with arguments like these to show that God could not be a trinity. On the Trinitarian view God's primary activity amongst the three persons is relating in love, thus it seems that the highest purpose he could give his creation is to lovingly relate with him. I have provided at least a few historical and philosophical reasons to believe that if God exists he is tri-personal and therefore there is good reason to think that God *could and would* provide us with a purpose of living in loving relationship with him.

Finally, I argue that God is *necessary* for objective meaning in life because, contra Metz, nature cannot provide us with a purpose, nor can it lovingly relate with us, which I have posited is a necessary element of objective meaning in life. Metz could still argue that living in a loving relationship with God is not necessary for objective meaning in life. My brief reply is to say that loving relationships seem essential to what Metz calls "the fundamental conditions of human existence" which include the good, the true and the beautiful.⁷³ In agreement with Metz I think that we must orient our rationality towards these fundamental conditions. I diverge from Metz where he argues that these fundamental conditions do not require the existence of and a relationship with God. I argue that it is only God that gives the other fundamental objects that we pursue their final value. The good, true, and beautiful do not have the kind of final value that Metz argues they do, if they are grounded in nature. Value requires a value giver and nature cannot give objective value. Humans are the only beings in nature that we know of that can give things *subjective* value by valuing things and pursuing them as having value, but humans cannot maintain or sustain the objective value of anything because they are contingent, finite, mutable beings. For example, if all the humans on earth suddenly died, and then aliens came to earth and discovered banks full of cash, the cash would have no value to the aliens because they would not recognize it as valuable.

⁷³ Metz, (2013a), p. 222.

I have not come across another convincing naturalist theory of value that provides a sufficient ground for objective value that is not subject to the same problems of mutability, subjectivity, and contingency. Thus, I argue that God is the only being that can give things objective value. God is eternal, and his character is immutable so his values do not change, and he has inherent value within himself because each person of the trinity eternally values the other as they relate to each other in love. This means that God is essentially valuable, purposive, and relational and thus is the only sufficient source of meaning in life. Thus, if God did not exist, and did not give one a purpose, anything else that one directed one's life toward would not have final or objective value and thus one's life would be meaningless. This of course, is a brief response in need of development but, I hope it stimulates discussion on this incredibly important topic.

6. Conclusion

I conclude that Metz's master argument against purpose theory fails in two main ways. First, he fails to show that God *must* be immutable, infinite, simple, and atemporal in order to be necessary and sufficient for grounding meaning in life. The reasons he does give have been shown to be faulty or not sufficiently supported. Second, even if one accepts that God must have the qualitative properties above, I have shown that there are plausible ways that the purpose theorist can respond to avoid the conclusion that a God with those properties could not be purposive.

Metz presents his readers with a false dilemma. In effect, Metz claims that either one must accept that nature is sufficient for meaning or accept that the most promising account of God-centered theory is that God must be a temporal, immutable, simple, and infinite. If one accepts that nature is sufficient, he thinks, one must admit that God is not necessary and abandon the God-centered view. If, on the other hand, one accepts the most promising account of God-centered theory, Metz' thinks that one should abandon purpose theory.

I have argued that accepting his God-centered view does not imply that God could not be purposive. I have also argued that we do not need to accept that God having the qualities of a temporality, immutability, simplicity, and infinitude is the best God-centered view of meaning. Finally, I have proposed a new argument for purpose theory that addresses Metz's arguments and blocks

two main objections one could make against it. PT4 includes the claim that God being necessarily multi-personal, purposive, and relational is the best reason to think that God is necessary and sufficient for meaning in life. I have given a few reasons to accept purpose theory as the correct theory of meaning in life. I conclude that purpose theory is neither incoherent nor inconsistent with God-centered views and thus has not been defeated by Metz's objections. I also conclude that God must both exist and one must freely fulfill the purpose of living in relationship with God in order to obtain objective meaning in life.

Acknowledgements

I am deeply indebted and grateful for the immense amount of editing, advice, help with clarifying my ideas, patience, wisdom, support, inspiration, encouragement, mentoring, meaningful interaction and insight I received from my professors, Klaas Kraay (MA Supervisor) and David Hunter (MA Second Reader) at Ryerson University. I am also indebted to all my classmates at Ryerson who prodded me with questions and suggestions for this paper. Finally, I want to thank my wife for her sacrifice and love that empowered and inspired me to write this paper.

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