Religious Studies (2026), 1–12
doi:10.1017/S0034412526101826

CAMBRIDGE UNIVERSITY PRESS

ORIGINAL ARTICLE

Atheism, evolution, and meaning

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(Received 20 June 2026 UTC; revised 7 August 2026 UTC; accepted 10 August 2026 UTC)

Abstract

In this paper, I argue that meaning of the main kinds associated with human life can be described and illuminatingly discussed by atheists who reject all things religious and embrace evolution. Indeed, by considering the different forms evolution can take and with sensitivity to how distinctive meaning-related facts emerge at different stages of macroscale human development and also to the fact that meaning itself evolves, atheists are in a position to show that the evolutionary considerations available to them, rather than an obstacle to a robust and satisfying account of meaning, can be its source.

Keywords: meaning; atheists; evolution; development; macroscale

Opening moves

How can atheists talk about a meaning of life in the face of evolution? That is the question presented to me for discussion in the present symposium. Whether you are doubtful about the possibility of making such talk convincing or just curious as to how one might pull it off, what is suggested if you raise this question is that evolution poses a difficulty for any atheist hoping to provide an illuminating and positive theory of meaning. Here I hope to show that one should rather see it as an aid.

But many other questions immediately arise when one considers this one. In the next few paragraphs I will quickly dispatch those for which answers are needed if we are to find our way onto the straight and narrow road of my main contribution.

Shall we have in mind *global* atheism, which denies the existence of anything religiously transcendent of nature, or only the *local* atheism which denies no more than the existence of the God of traditional theism – a personal being possessed of all goodness, power, and knowledge – and thus leaves open the possibility of other religious sources of meaning? Though I myself am a local atheist of the sort just mentioned, to make my job harder and more interesting and my results more consequential, I shall here have in mind the global version of atheism.

Will this paper be focused specifically and solely on the (or a) meaning *of* life, or will meaning *in* life, commonly distinguished from the other, larger brand of meaning these days by those who address issues of meaning, come into the picture too? Both will make an appearance, since it seems to me that both are illuminated by the perspectives I shall introduce.

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What about evolution? Is it the usual biological understanding embedded in neo-Darwinism that I will be asking atheists to address, or rather something else, or something more? At bottom, evolution is actually something *less*: just change. But by augmenting this bare notion in various ways, one can generate a variety of specific forms of evolution, including ones amounting to development or improvement (this normative idea will be playing a role before long). In this paper the focus will often be on cultural evolution, which provides a mechanism for development, but biological evolution as usually understood will not be left out of the account. Indeed, since in some sense cultural evolution emerges from or grows atop biological evolution, the latter is really at the base of everything I shall say.

And then there are the various readings of 'meaning' and of 'life' – how shall we sort these out? Some sub-questions here are closely associated with the details of my main contribution and will receive answers soon enough, as we go along, in connection with some commonly utilized accounts in the literature. But one thing can be made clear right now. A recognized interpretation of 'life' in the context of 'meaning of life' discussion, to which many at work in it subscribe, points us to *human* life. And this is the starting point for my own contribution. I assume that if, without any harm from the facts about evolution and indeed with a great deal of help, we can give atheists something robust and illuminating and positive to say about the meanings associated with human life, as commonly discussed these days, the question I have been set will be well answered.

Atheism and the drama of development

Let us begin by refining a bit further the notion of meaning. Take meaning-of first. In his influential work, Tim Mawson discusses two main ways of interpreting talk of the (or a) meaning of human life: meaning-of in the sense of *explanation*, and meaning-of in the sense of *destiny* (see, e.g., Mawson 2019). The former arises from our use of the 'meaning-of' expression when we clearly are seeking an understanding of how something came to be (consider: 'What is the meaning of this mark on the femur?'). The latter is about how things will 'end up' for humans, but like Mawson, I will not assume that having a destiny entails that this ending for human life is preordained. What about meaning-in? The most popular account of this, as Mawson also notes, is Susan Wolf's partly normative account (Wolf 2012), according to which meaning in life arises from acting out of love for objects or projects rightly regarded as deserving love. When thinking about meaning-in as Wolf does, we have in mind something that is itself redolent of value – value that, so she argues, is distinct from the value of happiness or of moral living. A life in which her sort of meaning is found is to that extent a *good* life. But issues about value also make an appearance when we are thinking about meaning-of with Mawson. In particular, he makes clear that the destiny we humans are most preoccupied with when discussing meaning is a worthy or *positive* destiny. I shall assume, then, that value is at stake on both sides of the meaning discussion.

Against this backdrop, we can already sketch what is perhaps the most obvious way of insisting that talk of evolution can help atheism with issues about meaning rather than hindering it. This approach is available even to someone who wishes to make do with talk of biological evolution alone. Such a restriction may at first seem quite limiting – after all, the 'purpose' of biological evolution, insofar as we can say that there is one, and so the meaning-as-destiny that biological evolution alone might supply for Earth's life, including human life, appears to be nothing more than ceaseless reproduction! But let this purpose play itself out for a few billion years, and a context is supplied in which nature's human denizens may experience a distinctive sort of meaning in life. David Attenborough might be considered a model for evolutionary meaning as we see it here. The great British broadcaster, natural historian, and writer, through film series such as *Our Planet*, has inspired many to explore and exult in – and also to engage in various preservative efforts in relation to – the enormously

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rich fact of biodiversity on our evolving planet. In the last paragraph of his *Origin of Species*, as everyone knows, Attenborough's hero, Charles Darwin, says there is 'grandeur' in a 'view of life' hammered out in connection with 'endless forms, most beautiful and most wonderful' that 'have been, and are being, evolved'. Reflection on Attenborough's life and work might lead us to suggest that Darwin could just as well have spoken of meaning. If there is grandeur in the evolutionary world, then it is worthy of love, and anyone lovingly engaged in reading the book of nature, following Attenborough's example, and perhaps also seeking to help ensure that future readers will encounter something no less fascinating, is finding meaning.

But notice that this account is restricted to meaning *in* life, as Wolf construes it. Having recognized its availability, one might still wonder whether atheism is not left with less than a full and robust account of meaning. In particular, one might still think it challenging for atheism to speak of 'a meaning of life in the face of evolution'. Of course, after thinking with Mawson, we will see that atheists can say *something* about this larger sort of meaning – the or a meaning *of* life – by reference to evolution, for they can employ evolutionary talk to help formulate an explanation of human life. But persuasive ways of speaking about destiny, and certainly about a positive destiny, will seem elusive. Indeed, they may seem precluded by evolution, which, on an atheistic view, is undirected – unguided by Providence. Given atheism, a positive outcome for the human story is not a foregone conclusion. It is not guaranteed.

But here some imagination is needed. For it is still *possible*. We are all familiar with the religious accounts, incompatible with atheism and evolution (given how I am construing the former), according to which God will wipe away all tears and ensure, in the end, a vastly improved condition of life for human beings. Their cultural influence is such that we easily suppose that a non-atheistic and non-evolutionary mechanism is required for a positive destiny, turning a sufficient condition into a necessary one. But this is an error. If we put our shoulders to the wheel, we may be able to reach such an end ourselves, by directing biological and also cultural evolution in appropriate ways. There is no guarantee, of course. And the apparent failure of certain secular attempts to reach it that we have already seen, such as Marxist attempts, may lead us to feel disillusioned. But that only increases the drama. We find ourselves part of a *large-scale* drama, potentially played out across huge quantities of time and space. Stated tersely but also clearly, the drama involves seeing whether we can turn the first two forms of change or evolution – biological and cultural – into a finally estimable version of a third, which I call *development*. If we can, a positive destiny for our species will be realized. Notice that when thinking about how, suddenly or gradually or in both ways, humans might over time realize significant development at the macro level of the species, we are still thinking about change and so about evolution. For development, as I understand it, it is a positive or *improving* change.[1]

Perhaps I will be censured for speaking about macroscale human development. It may be supposed that such a developmentalist picture went out with the macroscale progressivist views of certain nineteenth-century thinkers, whose ideas are today widely regarded as discredited. I have in mind the relevant work of Hegel, Comte, Spencer and like-minded others, who employed and defended the notion of inexorable and already far advanced evolutionary human progress. But I suggest that it is precisely by denying *these* ways of elaborating the notion and emphasizing alternatives that talk of developmental stages can reasonably be resurrected in our own time. Mobilizing everything available to the twenty-first century inquirer, what one needs to do is to imagine various improvements to the human condition that the species could attain through further biological and cultural evolution. And then one needs to ask how much of this development has already been undergone. It is not hard

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to see that the proper answer is 'relatively little'. At this point in the story of human development we are still undeveloped in a variety of entangled ways: emotional, social, moral, and intellectual ways prominent among them. And thus talk of developmental stages is rationalized within the context of developmental humility: what I have called 'this point in the story of human development' is the present early stage or developmental location, and stages still earlier, marking noticeably different and less advanced developmental locations, and also others much more advanced – and sufficiently advanced to represent a positive destiny – can easily be identified or imagined. The developmental drama I have spoken of is therefore quite real, and the atheist wishing to use evolution in a discussion of meaning is free to appeal to it.

What stage sensitivity adds

From what has been said so far, we can already see that by manoeuvring with evolutionary ideas in the right way, atheists gain permission to speak not just about meaning in life but also about meaning-of, both as explanation and as destiny – and, what is more, as positive destiny. And by going deeper into my talk of development, and in particular my talk of our early developmental stage, a more precise and, in one respect, more practicable version of these ideas about a meaning of life, along with a new version of meaning *in* life, will be seen to emerge.

This move involves deliberately employing what I call *stage sensitivity*: intentionally accommodating in our intellectual work the fact that, at the macroscale, we exist at an early location or stage of human development amid other stages, both past and, one hopes, future. It is worth noting that one can think of macroscale stages either *punctually* (a stage as a point or location reached within a process) or *extensionally* (a stage as a temporally extended part or phase of some process with defined parameters). Here, the former notion will dominate. With this in mind, notice that although an interpretation of 'life' in terms of human life of the sort we have been working with so far is already operating at the macroscale and inclusive of developmental considerations, stage sensitivity invites us to take things further: to retain this focus on species-level human facts including the property of developability but while recognizing that, given developability, human life and its meanings need not be the same at all stages of human development, and so may have quite distinctive meaning-related features at *our* stage. Indeed, it would be rather surprising if this were not so for a stage as early as our own.

If one applies stage sensitivity when thinking about issues of meaning, one will thus be ready to take a step beyond the notion of the meaning(s) of human life or of meaning in human life as usually deployed, in a rather general way, to the more specific idea of the meaning(s) of human life *at the present developmental stage* and of meaning in human life *at the present developmental stage*. And such talk is inherently evolutionary. It appears to divide into two forms, for we may speak both of a *local-complete* conception of meaning and of a *global-contributory* conception. The former identifies the meaning belonging to a stage considered in itself, as a whole in itself; the latter asks what meaning belongs to it in virtue of how it fits into the larger whole of human life entirely unfurled.

Take meaning-of first. Consider in particular meaning-of as explanation. To provide a local-complete account of this involves explaining human life as it exists at a certain developmental stage, illuminating the distinctive features of life at that stage, and this will obviously mean taking into account the extent to which and the ways in which development has occurred or failed to do so. Now, so fine-grained a result cannot be produced without reference to the effects of cultural evolution coming up to us from the recent past, delivering stultification or progress. Thus by offering an account of the meaning

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of life at our stage, understood as the local-complete explanation thereof, scholars (historians, social scientists, and others) may without any reference to religion and quite compatibly with atheism, purport to go deeper into matters of meaning precisely by paying closer attention to facts about evolution. Indeed, evolutionary considerations here make an appearance twice over: once in my talk of cultural evolutionary factors, and then also in the more general notion of a developmental stage, which is an evolutionary stage of a particular kind.

Global-contributory explanatory meaning is quite different, though still restricted to some stage, with its discovery requiring stage-sensitivity. When I speak of its discovery, I mean only the discovery of the *conception* of such a meaning – to discover what this meaning *is* would require seeing how (if at all) events at our stage contribute, explanatorily, to the larger reality of human life, and that is not something that could be done, unless one possessed omniscience, until that larger reality has come into being. Nonetheless, there is still a fact of the matter here, or at any rate there will be, and it is a fact about how (if at all) some stage, such as our stage, contributes explanatorily to an evolutionary process. So once again the idea of evolution is shown to be intimately bound up with that of meaning.

What about meaning-of understood as destiny? This too will be either local-complete or global-contributory. Here I begin with the latter. The meaning-as-destiny of any stage, such as our stage, is naturally construed as being at least in part contributory – as consisting in its role, if any, in the fashioning of the final condition of humanity, whether good or bad. The point is that events at our developmental stage may make some contribution, however small, to how things end up, developmentally, for the species – that is, to the condition of beings at our species' final developmental stage, whatever that may be. A description of these events and of this contribution, if we could have it, would tell us how our stage fits into the larger developmental story of human life.

And local-complete meaning as destiny at our stage? This might seem straightforward. The destiny of human life at our stage understood in this sense, someone may say, is to evolve into the next stage. But since we are talking about developmental stages, not just points in time, things are not so straightforward. Even given our punctual conception of stages, movement from one macroscale developmental stage to the next may take a considerable amount of time: since it is a developmental point or location rather than a temporal location that is relevant here, and developmental conditions may long remain in all significant respects unchanged, a macroscale developmental stage may long remain unchanged – or at any rate may remain unchanged over what, at the ordinary microscale level of human doings, would count as a long period. So there is no guarantee of evolution into the next developmental stage.[2] (Of course, what we say in elaborating such ideas will depend on how human beings agree to talk about them, if and when macroscale developmental issues are discussed more fully, but my general point about the significance of the difference between the temporal and the developmental will hold regardless of what transpires.)

However, as before, after noting the absence of a guarantee, we should certainly also take note of the potential for further development. And since it is evolutionary *development* that may be realized, a positive quality, it is at the same time a potentially *positive* destiny for human life at our stage that we are talking about. Evidently, there has been macroscale development in the past (however haphazard, occasional, or punctuated by regression); we at our stage are at a certain point, an early point, in the process featuring it; and further development is possible. It is largely up to us, as we embody cultural evolution at this present stage, the atheist can say, to determine whether development beyond our current stage will occur. A local-complete meaning as positive destiny – a positive destiny for

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human life at the present stage – is, we may say, offered to us and potentially realizable even if not guaranteed.

Clearly it is our destiny to have *some* sort of impact on how things evolve from here – even if we have to leave open the possibility that development will not result and that where our stage begins is also where things 'end up' or indeed from which things will regress. Best make our impact conscious, deliberate, and admirable! Development to this point in the human story is not such as to engender confidence about the easiness of the task – for example, we still have a long way to go when it comes to effectively organized collective effort in which most of us are joined – but clearly the good in question here is one that it is open to us to pursue through our group efforts, even assuming atheism, and to the extent that it is realized we are realizing a meaning of life – meaning-of as positive destiny – at our stage. (It has often been recognized that we can give meaning to our own lives in the Wolfian sense. Here we see that the same is true of the meaning *of* life, in the destiny-related sense, when the latter is given a local-complete stage-sensitive reading.)[3]

And now I need to comment on a qualification present in what I had to say about global-contributory meaning in both the explanatory and the destiny-related senses and on the light it casts as to the significance of the corresponding local-complete meanings. Both when talking about explanation and when talking about destiny at the global-contributory level of stage-focused meaning, we can say only that events at our stage *may* make a contribution. Here again we have the drama of development. It belongs to the drama that what happens at our stage could, as it were, be damped out in the context of the larger process, both in respect of the larger explanation of human life in general and in respect of how things end up for humans. It could be, for example, that some large step forward at our stage is erased by subsequent regression, and that things take a very different direction from there, so that the 'large step' ultimately plays no role, explanatorily or in relation to human destiny. (One qualification must be made to this qualification, since what I will later call 'maximal explanation' requires all causal facts to be included, but this still allows the present point to apply to an explanation of human life in general in the perhaps more ordinary sense that I will there distinguish from maximal explanation.) What this means is that the local-complete accounts of meaning at our stage gain a significance they would not otherwise possess: not only are humans more likely to be able to *give* such accounts at some point, should the meaning in question be realized, but we are also able to be more confident that this meaning will to some extent be realized, as humans at our stage rise to the meaning-infused challenge of playing their part in the drama well, whatever others later may add or subtract.

And now some connections to meaning in life – meaning in life *at our stage* – can swiftly and neatly be made. At our stage we are, collectively and also individually (and thus in a manner clearly relevant to meaning in life), able to strain towards future development. The Wolfian notion, as we saw before, has it that meaning in life is realized by anyone lovingly engaged in a project worthy of love. One of the things obviously worthy of love is development. Thus any atheist committed to it has a way of realizing meaning in life that goes beyond what is supplied by the David Attenborough model. I note that Philip Kitcher comes very close to this idea of meaning in life in his recent book on education, in which he says that 'according to my Deweyan perspective, the fulfilled life is one in which a person freely chooses and pursues a project, a life plan, intended to contribute to other human lives, one that succeeds in adding its own increment of value to the vast human project' (Kitcher 2021, 83). And again: 'Our plans of life aim to contribute to the human project' (98).

Furthermore, reaching back in thought to what was said earlier about meaning-of as local-complete explanation, we can say that given stage sensitivity a link may be forged between meaning-in and that sort of meaning-of, since our own meaning-generating work

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on behalf of development at our stage can eventually becomes a part, however small, of the explanation through cultural evolution of what transpires in the *subsequent* stage of human development. What we see here, in this link between meaning-in and meaning-of, is an interesting and apparently unique feature of the stage-sensitive approach to meaning, to which the atheist now has access.

The evolution of meaning

The meanings of human life can, I think, be further illuminated by the atheist when they note that such meanings may themselves be seen to be subject to evolution – an interesting fact we will discern only if sensitive to evolutionary considerations. Instead of just emerging *through* evolution, meaning itself evolves. Let us consider now how this might be. To do so, we will in some cases need to stretch or add to the conceptions of meaning we have been working with so far. But so long as such moves can be made plausible, additional insights about how ideas concerning atheism, evolution, and meaning may be brought into mutually beneficial interaction will be achieved.

The evolution of meaning-as-explanation

Let us begin again with meaning-of as explanation. Human life is always changing, in developmental and other ways, as it is extended in time. Many of us seem inclined rather to think of human life in a timeless way or to think of it as complete now that it has reached our time, and our thinking about 'the meaning of human life' may be correspondingly skewed. An emphasis on evolution will serve to correct this tendency, where it exists and is properly applied. It will in particular help us see that there is a sense in which we can speak of the explanation of human life to some point – and for consistency with previous discussion we may regard this as a developmental point – as being different from its explanation to previous or subsequent points. The meaning of human life in this explanatory sense, in other words, is itself an evolutionary phenomenon. Because we evolve, the explanation evolves.

Here we should take care to notice the difference between an explanation of human life *at* our stage, which is what we were talking about before, and an explanation of human life *up to* some stage, such as our stage. To see what I have in mind when I speak of meaning-as-explanation evolving, we must be thinking of the latter, which takes much more into account. (Of course, if we had a completed explanation of the latter sort up to our stage and then added the former, we would be *displaying* this sort of meaning evolution.)

What I have in mind here takes much more into account in another way as well. For I am thinking about a fine-grained account of how everything belonging to human life comes to be, with all causes – whether ultimate or proximate – included. As I have said, this is an explanation in a certain sense; we might call it a *maximal* explanation. If we were not thinking about a maximal explanation, then we would have to concede that the explanation of human life need *not* change as life advances through time. The explanation we would have in mind in that case would involve something quite general, such as that God intentionally brings things human into being or that a combination of biological and cultural evolutionary factors does so (or that something equally general has been at work), and this would apply in precisely the same way at subsequent stages of human development as at ours. But the meaning-as-explanation that I have in mind here, represented by a maximal explanation, is a much fuller and richer meaning, which evolves as we do. To make this concrete, consider how the explanation of human life in this sense up to, say, the developmental stage of a thousand years ago will feature many fewer and quite different aspects of cultural evolution than the explanation that reaches the present stage. And similar disparities must be

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expected between the meaning-as-maximal explanation of human life up to the present stage and the meaning in this sense of human life up to any future developmental stage.

Now explanations so detailed, like stage-sensitive contributory meanings-of, may be impossible for any human to fully articulate, but that does not prevent them from being *true* explanations or from representing the true meaning of human life to this or that point, in the richest explanatory sense of the word. And this meaning is – in the most basic sense of the word that was supposed to represent a threat to atheistic talk of meaning – evolving.

But why should we be interested in this detailed, evolving maximal explanation, when thinking about meaning, especially given its elusiveness? Why not stick to the more general sort of account, which may be accessible to our cognition and may also be enough to scratch the itch that gets discussions about explanatory meaning going? Notice, first, that the impossibility of full articulation is compatible with full*er* accounts being continually achieved by our scientists, historians, and other scholars. Especially if we are still at an early stage of development in various respects that bear on this issue, as we are, we may realistically look forward to such improvement. In just the last 150 years, we have become acquainted with an important piece of the puzzle: natural selection as a mechanism of biological evolution. Other revelations may be around the corner.

Second, as the biological example just mentioned already suggests, we *welcome* details when they become available, and regard ourselves as getting more from them than we would otherwise possess in the way of explanatory meaning. For another example of this, consider those who think a theistic account is the right one. Should they learn more about the detailed intentions of the deity – as indeed Christians, Muslims, and Jews regularly take themselves to have done – they will regard themselves as knowing more of the meaning of human life, and the kind of meaning involved here is clearly explanatory.

Third, by thinking for a moment at the smaller scale of ordinary human affairs we may note that if the devil is in the details, so is meaning – and moreover that we recognize and accept that the deeper meaning we seek may be so deep that it will not be found, at any rate by us. Consider someone's search for the meaning (in the relevant explanatory sense) of a personal romantic rejection, or of a child's descent into drug addiction, or consider an historian's search for the meaning of a strange new willingness on the part of one side to negotiate in the context of a war. We recognize that there are details which, if only we could identify them, would tell the tale. And we care about them! In these examples we can see the larger point disputed by the objection in microcosm.

Fourth, if developmental considerations loom as large at the human macroscale as I have suggested, then any explanatory account that does not seek to illuminate how various developmental points were reached – something that naturally requires a keen interest in details of the relevant kind – will be quite superficial and properly unsatisfying. At any location along the way, such as our own location, historians of the human will want to do their best to understand how things have got to that point, handing this information along to thinkers who come after them, who may themselves both tell the same story more fully and use it as a base from which to explore subsequent shifts and turnings in our developmental life.

The evolution of meaning-as-destiny

Let us move now to consider the destiny-related sort of meaning. We have seen how connections to much of what one might wish to say about this can be forged by the atheist in terms of macroscale human development, which is by definition a positively evaluable form of evolution and so must in some measure also deliver a positive destiny for humans at any stage, whenever some level of it is attained at that stage through other processes of evolution. And zooming out from stage-specific considerations, much as we did when thinking

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about maximal explanation, we can see that development is in the very nature of the case a changing and (potentially) growing phenomenon. Can we say, then, that when any *new* level of development is attained, the destiny of humanity and so the corresponding sort of meaning shifts slightly – has evolved?

It may seem not. At each stage, someone might say, what we literally have for the developmental process as a whole (as distinct from development at that stage) is only a *potential* destiny for humankind – a potential way for things to 'end up'. For so long as development continues, we do not actually reach our destiny. But atheists working with what evolution allows might also choose to generate another and different conception of meaning-as-destiny, which does allow this sort of meaning to evolve. Let us see how.

Begin by noticing that, however we conceive of human destiny in the non-stage-specific sense, it will consist in a condition of human life. Our destiny must be *lived out*. Now we tend to think synchronically here: our destiny will be realized at some particular moment of human history (even if it persists ever after). And so if we are also thinking evolutionarily and developmentally, we will tend to have in mind humanity's final developmental stage, however advanced it may be, as we did above when thinking about the drama of development. Whatever the developmental condition of humans *then*, that is human destiny.

But why care so much about how *they* will live, a condition in which we who talk about the meaning of life today can never share? Or, at any rate, why think only of this? Here, evolutionary thought itself may suggest an alternative: let's make our focus human destiny read diachronically instead of synchronically. Now we are thinking about human destiny in terms of all that will have been achieved *by* the end of (human) days rather than in terms of the specific achievements those who exist *at* the end enjoy. The total developmental life of humanity, from beginning to end, with all its peaks and valleys, becomes the 'condition of human life' that matters for us. If we knew this story, we would know what the meaning of life is, in the new, destiny-related sense. We would know it in knowing that the destiny of humanity is to have *this* story be true of us rather than some other one. Notice that in this story and in this meaning we share, for we are characters in one of the story's chapters.

And now all we have to add to see how, when understood in this way, meaning-as-destiny evolves is that the developmental story is constantly being altered as it unfolds across time. Sure, there is a truth of the matter to which only what is seen at the end testifies: that the total developmental story has reached *that* point rather than some other. But what the story describes, and so the meaning it embodies, cannot exist all at once – at the end or at any other particular time. It exists *across* time. It is an evolutionary phenomenon, and the human condition instantiating it is not the condition of those who exist at the end, who are able to see the conclusion, but rather the developmental condition of humanity viewed diachronically. Likewise, there is, assuming determinism (as many atheists do), a truth of the matter even now – that is, a truth about what the contours of the story will be. Perhaps this is a truth we could only hope to *know* at the end, but what it is *about* is more than just how things are going to be, developmentally speaking, at the end. It is about how things unfolded, developmentally, over the life of the species – and this meaning of life is an evolutionary phenomenon which changes and grows rather than something for whose full realization we must wait until the end of days, as in the other conception of meaning-as-destiny.

I should note that nothing said here ensures that the evolving destiny we have identified will be positive – or at any rate positive *all things considered* as opposed to at this or that stage. Criteria might be advanced for determining when such a judgement, closer to our concern in previous sections of this paper, would be appropriate. But I will have no more to say about

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this here, since my point in this section is just that meaning evolves, and this is going to be true for meaning-as-destiny whatever such criteria might be used to show.

The evolution of meaning in *life*

We have seen that there are ways of conceiving meaning-as-explanation and meaning-as-destiny that, at once, bring to the fore attractive understandings of the meaning of life and entail that such meaning evolves. What about meaning *in* life? This, so I shall argue, can also be seen to evolve when viewed from a stage-neutral or – perhaps better – multi-stage perspective.

Now it may seem that meaning in life and how it changes is not the sort of thing that *could* be viewed when zooming out to such a perspective. Instead, it may be said, one must zoom *in* to consider the goings-on in individual human lives, which of course inevitably unfold in ways marked by some particular stage. Here there is evolution of a relevant kind, for what brings meaning to an individual life may change over time. In fact, we might further promote the general goal of my paper by lingering over this a while, and expanding on it in connection with what was said above about the David Attenborough model of meaning in life. For how one imbibes the inspiration provided by biological evolution alone in this regard may differ from time to time and place to place in one's life. For example, over time one might come to better understand the evolutionary world; to experience in new ways what strikes one as its beauty; to more adequately negotiate one's way through it, forming peace-enhancing relationships with every part of nature one encounters, including, of course, other people. One need not claim that these are evolution's goals to realize that as, progressively, *we* include them among *our* goals, we can gain meaning in life in connection with evolution, and moreover evolve in our ways of doing so.

All of this is true. I have no reason to deny it, and indeed gladly embrace it as a way of speaking about the evolution of meaning in life. But there is also a larger point to be made. By zooming out to a perspective that enables us to view *many* stages, we can, among other things, see something of how meaning in life was able to be achieved at much earlier times, say 50,000 years ago, and recognize that this is different from how it is able to be achieved today. Likewise, we will imagine future ways of achieving it as in many ways different from our own. It may be added that at earlier times there were not just different but fewer ways of experiencing meaning in life, and now – assuming the old ways are somewhere still in place – there are more. There may be more still in the future. In this way, meaning as meaning in life evolves. Perhaps there will be regression as well at some stage. It is even conceivable that regression, narrowing our options, takes over at some point and dominates the human story from then on in ever more debilitating ways. Still, this would be evolution and the evolution of meaning, for it is change.

Here cultural evolution once more enters the picture, and in a big way. Cultural evolution, though no doubt entwined with biological evolution in many ways – ways that contemporary thinkers are seeking to unravel (see, e.g., Boyd and Richerson 2005; Henrich 2015; Laland 2017) – brings with it new, distinctive niches for human activity and so for meaning-making. For example, many today are lovingly engaged in the productive construction and application of large language AI systems, when nothing like this was possible for humans only a short time ago. Culture, more specifically our technology, is ever evolving in meaning-related ways.

And with the positive changes that, as we saw before, we may hope through guided cultural evolution to make the developmental destiny of human life at our stage, will come yet other ways of being lovingly engaged in activities worthy of love and so the further evolution, in the new and larger sense I have sought to explain, of meaning in life.

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A future meaning?

In connection with the future, a final main point beckons. One of the great challenges to the experience of meaning in an atheistic life is the fact of death, conceived as the absolute cessation of one's life. And here a lively sense of one's connection to other things in a process of ongoing evolution can help. Some ways of expressing this will be familiar. As is often said, beginnings and endings, often with pain, are part of this evolutionary world, and they belong also to its peculiar beauty. Acceptance of our own pain and our own end, not in a sense entailing approval but productive of serenity, may sometimes be achieved by 'rising above' through contemplation of larger evolutionary realities and our place in them.

But here is another way, a more particular way, of expressing this point. Imagine a practice – perhaps one partially descended from traditional religious practices aimed at managing the ego – of identifying more and more with humanity in general, so that when you die, what is *most* important to your identity, as you can see and feel, will live on indefinitely. (Notice that here the species becomes a 'larger reality' functionally not unlike God.) We have spent so much time competing with each other, but perhaps it is only when members of the species learn more fully to identify with others that our age-old problems will be solved and the deepest development enabled. There is always someone somewhere who is enjoying experience, including versions of the greatest experiences of our own lives. How lovely, indeed magnificent, it would be if humanity in the future were to evolve to the point where, when suffering or fear of death intrudes, humans were able to respond through an imaginative identification, made psychologically effective and deeply meaningful, with others who live and flourish. Such there will always be, 'endless forms, most beautiful and most wonderful', until the species too passes away and is replaced in the ongoing evolution of our planet.

Coda

Atheism, as I have sought to show, has much it can say about meaning from an unremittingly evolutionary perspective. I offer a coda specifically for those who are *not* atheists, who are inclined to interpret meaning in the light of what they regard as religious truth. Even such as these might imbibe much from the approach I have outlined, seeing it as sufficient for a satisfying account of meaning at the extreme presented by a globally atheistic view – as sufficient *should that turn out to be the truth of things*. And then, secure in this knowledge, they might return to exploring religious possibilities and participating, in one way or another, in the religious life. There is a connection here to a famous passage from the early work of Bertrand Russell, which sets out the atheistic view starkly and unflinchingly and ends with the following words: 'Only within the scaffolding of these truths, only on the firm foundation of unyielding despair, can the soul's habitation henceforth be safely built' (Russell 1951, 48). Russell's view and a religious orientation are generally regarded as being sharply opposed. But as I have indicated, the safety he describes – an assurance of meaning, come what may – might be found desirable by the religious too. Just this, I suggest, the evolutionary views developed herein may afford.

Acknowledgements. I would like to thank two anonymous referees for their helpful comments.

Notes

1. Development can be understood in at least three ways: in terms of mere change; as a teleological idea, with the assumption of – perhaps haphazard and certainly evitable – movement towards a goal, whether specifiable or not; and in terms of amelioration or improvement (Godlovitch 1998; Albersmeier 2022). Teleology and improvement are, as indicated, conceptually distinct, but they often appear together, and they generally will here.

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2. I note that this next stage might itself be an early stage should the comparative magnitude of development still required be the same – that is, if it remains the case that more developmental change will be required to complete the process than has already been undergone.
3. It is natural to connect meaning as positive destiny, as discussed here, to both past and future: to the future because, as we have seen, we are promoting a certain kind of movement towards subsequent stages, but also to the past because, in part, we wish to make good use of what comes to us from previous stages. This raises an interesting question about the sort of movement towards the future that the past may support. It might seem natural to assume that this will be gentle, gradual, incremental movement. But that is not necessarily the case. It depends on how much of the past one makes use of and also on the nature of the immediate past – perhaps we have just reached a special tipping point that only some revolutionary response will turn into development. Of course, at a stage featuring no more than early macroscale human development, it would be right to be very cautious when making judgements about the appropriateness of revolutionary action.

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Cite this article: Schellenberg JL (2026) Atheism, evolution, and meaning. *Religious Studies*, 1–12. https://doi.org/10.1017/S0034412526101826

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