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The human project or what difference would God make?

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Abstract

Many people believe that, without any God or something similarly 'transcendent', human life would be meaningless. I oppose this position. In its most popular form, it supposes that meaning accrues because our mundane life is merely a prelude – a time of trial, to decide the character of our life in the hereafter. When probed, this approach involves a number of implausible corollaries. More abstract approaches suggest that meaningfulness results from human contributions to a larger project, the fulfilment of some divine (or transcendent) scheme for the universe. That idea is more promising, but it fails to recognize the possibility of a larger – 'human' – project to which our lives may also contribute, and that from such contributions can arise significance. This possibility is suggested by John Dewey, and traces of it can be found in a number of insightful poets, Herbert, Wordsworth, and Whitman. Finally, I rebut the thought that, without something transcendent, there can be no values.

Keywords: Secular humanism; meaning of life; Augustine; John Dewey; ethics; objectivity of ethical judgments

Many people, especially those who are religious, believe that without a deity human life would be meaningless. My aim in what follows is to disabuse them. I shall try to show how our existence can have point and purpose even in a world bereft of anything divine, or anything that transcends the natural order of things. My strategy will be to ask how the existence of a God, conceived as the world's major religions think of their major deity, could bestow significance on lives that would otherwise be pointless. I shall begin with the most widely accepted version of the popular thesis, before proceeding to more refined proposals. Having exposed the difficulties in each of these, I will offer a thoroughly secular account. My positive story will pick up on a genuine insight in religious views: they see us as contributing to something larger than our individual selves. As I shall explain, that 'larger something' does not have to be a cosmic enterprise. It is sufficient for people to live meaningful lives if they advance what I shall call 'the human project'. I will conclude by resisting the broadsides of more militant atheists who want to consign the world's religions to the dustbin of history. My purely secular vision appreciates the valuable things that have sometimes emerged from religious communities – my hope is to encourage the world's religions to deliver them more consistently.

One of the most brilliant minds of the ancient world, a man known to us as Augustine, bequeathed to the Christian community an influential view of human life and its fulfilment. From the early fifth century, when *City of God* was published, to the Enlightenment of the late

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eighteenth century, reflections on the oldest problem of philosophy – 'How to live?' – were dominated by the vision displayed in the closing pages of Augustine's theological masterpiece. Insofar as the ideas descending from Greek investigations of the issue survived, they did so through their appearance in a picture painted by *City of God*.

Augustine sees a human life as a journey. The phase of that journey about which the Ancients posed their fundamental question, the segment of it discussed by people living in Fifth Century Athens or twenty-first century Aix-en-Provence, turns out to be preparatory. Only after that kind of existence ends does the real action start. The character of the future mode of living will, however, be determined by the preliminary bit. Lives that go well earn the traveller a place in the City of God, a destination where eternal bliss awaits. Various alternatives are suggested for the also-rans. The most dramatic, and perhaps the most popular option condemns these unlucky folk – apparently the majority of human beings – to an eternity of indescribable torment.

Augustine's influence on Catholic theology is well-known. Its conception of life influenced one of the greatest poetical works ever written, Dante's *Commedia*. In Protestant England it also shaped a prose masterpiece, a work written for the common people that proved enormously popular with them. John Bunyan's *Pilgrim's Progress* was read out loud, in the evenings in thousands of cramped cottages, by the few among Britain's poor who could read, to audiences of many others who could not. That book is written as a guide for those who seek 'the everlasting prize', concentrating on the many perils of the journey to the 'Celestial City'. Its aim is explicitly stated in the introductory poem, Bunyan's 'Apology' for his book:

> This book will make a traveller of thee,
> If by its counsel thou wilt ruled be;
> It will direct thee to the Holy Land,
> If thou wilt its directions understand:

Although Bunyan is far more inclined to wave a stick than offer a carrot, Book I of *The Pilgrim's Progress* closes with a description of the joy awaiting the resolute pilgrim. The vision is pervaded by Augustinian conceptions of the rewards: the temptation to sin is washed away, the redeemed delight in the celebration of God and in expressing gratitude for the redemptive sacrifice offered by Jesus, and they are blessed by a union with God.

Besides Christianity, Catholic or Protestant, other religions present similar accounts. Islam promises life in Paradise to the faithful (and, in some versions, with advertisements of obviously enticing activities). Judaism sometimes embraces the idea of a *post mortem* union with God, although it typically connects this to a continuation of life on Earth. Eastern religions tend to substitute reincarnation on Earth for an afterlife in some especially attractive other-worldly resort. They retain, however, the thought of mundane existence as a trial period: the character of your reincarnation (sage human or loathsome insect) is determined by your conduct during your pilgrimage.

We can abstract from the details that distinguish the accounts offered by different religions and, within religions, by different theologians. Human life, as we live it here on this planet, is meaningful because it has implications for something that lies beyond it, an afterlife in which there will be good things for some and less good things for others. There is a selection process. How it turns out for you matters. A lot.

How widespread is the acceptance of some such idea? I do not know, and, as far as I can tell, no survey has gathered data. But Nietzsche and Dostoyevsky were probably right in thinking that *subtracting* this standard religious perspective would make it far harder for

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individuals to discern meaning in their lives, possibly even generating crises of meaninglessness. If so, then it is easy to conclude that, with respect to the question 'Do human lives have meaning?', God makes a difference. If you do not believe in something transcending the physical world, something that directs a process of selection with respect to how we live, then, it seems, you cannot sustain the idea that your life has any meaning.

I believe this is completely wrong. God makes no difference. Atheistic secular humanists can make sense of human lives as meaningful. Lives are meaningful in light of the valuable contributions they make to something larger than themselves. This larger something I will call 'the Human Project'. What confers meaning and worth on a life are the values that life delivers. For all his intellectual brilliance, Augustine tells us a story like the ones parents sometimes use in getting children to behave: be a good person, and you will gain a wonderful reward and avoid a terrible punishment. But an ethical life does not arise out of fear and bribery. To become an ethical agent requires going beyond stories about potential rewards and punishments. What comes to matter to you is not whether or not you are burning in eternal fire or strumming your harp for the almighty. It is whether you have caused harm or contributed something good.

That is just a sketch of the tale I want to tell. To elaborate on it, I will start with a closer look at the Augustinian narrative. On closer inspection, it will become clear that it could only answer the question about meaningfulness if we divested it of some theological baggage.

Augustine, Dante and Bunyan all regard human lives as undergoing a selection process. Suppose that were not so: there is no distinction between the *post mortem* fates of any two people. Then our actions would only have significance in the finite material world. Whatever meaning they would have must be explicable in terms of their intrinsic features or in terms of the impacts they have on that world. If value can be understood independently of any transcendent being or transcendent condition, then it will be possible to provide a secular account of the meaning of life.

Central to the Augustinian picture is the idea of a selection process, where the process has consequences for something beyond the physical world and mundane human existence. Many religious people, of course, have no problem accepting this. They posit a distinction between the saved and the damned, between those reincarnated as distinguished forms of humanity and those who come back as earthworms (or worse). They are also untroubled by any concerns about the justice of this distinction. Although they *should* be disturbed by thoughts about the fairness of the whole setup.

For the distinction is made according to a set of divine rules. Whatever you think about these rules, one point ought to be apparent: access to them is remarkably uneven. Whether anyone has been vouchsafed understanding of the complete collection is an interesting question. Even without an answer to that, however, it is very clear – on anyone's view – that masses of human beings have been left thoroughly in the dark. They have died too young, lived in the wrong place or at the wrong time, been brought up in some foul travesty of the correct rules, and so forth. Nevertheless, these people are doomed to suffer in the hereafter. In the full-dress, no-holds-barred version, they are going to experience indescribable agonies through eternity. That looks like a sentence orders of magnitude more unjust, more cruel, more savage, and more capricious than the actions of the vilest autocrats whose actions people agree in condemning. Could any selection process resulting in that kind of outcome lend meaning to human life? Would union with a deity prepared to consign unbelievers to this kind of hell be in any way redemptive? Would we think of the possibility of spending eternity in a Mafia boss's elegant holiday resort as an unmatched blessing, a wondrous reward for having spent our lives advancing his cruel schemes?

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The Augustinian account should disavow the technicolour sadism. One way to do that would be to grant a free pass to anyone who has not had the chance to appreciate what the selection process demands. Unfortunately, that modification would introduce a compensatory injustice. Those who have had the opportunity to receive the divine message are now placed in jeopardy: they will undergo a trial that others are spared. This is surely one instance in which ignorance is bliss (or, at least, the key to bliss).

A better approach would borrow from Dante's version – not the circles of the *Inferno*, but the differential climbs up Mount Purgatory. And amend the story. Everybody will ultimately win entrance to grace (should it be Graceland?), but candidates achieve the prize at different rates, depending on how well their earthly pilgrimage has gone. Allowances are made for your limited access to God's message: you are given credit for good deeds and demerits for breaking the rules. Depending on your total score, your starting point on the Purgatorial hill is fixed, and the features of your route onward are likewise determined.

Is it possible to arrange this in a way that is fair to everybody? I am not sure. Perhaps those who have witnessed miracles or who have been visited by divine messengers should still feel aggrieved – they have to start at the base of the mountain. But let us waive such concerns, and suppose a scheme for organizing Purgatory that is completely just. Does that resolve all the problems?

No. At least not if you assume that God is omniscient. For, in that instance, he can recognize in advance that some are going to waltz into heaven, while others have a long hard slog in the afterlife, before they arrive. This problem was one with which Augustine wrestled: on the face of it, if there are different trajectories to the union with God, it seems that the ease or difficulty of the total journey – mundane life plus Purgatorial progress – will vary, and that some have been condemned in advance to a harder route than others.

The idea, common to Augustine, Dante and Bunyan, that life in heaven consists in continuous celebration of the glory and majesty of the deity, intensifies this type of concern. The divine obsession with being worshipped and adored appears to be one of the least savoury aspects of the divine rulebook. Should devout people pander to the narcissism of a jealous God? Or treat the two New Testament commandments as on a par? Apparently, signing on to regular expressions of gratitude and adoration is part of the programme – ignore that part, and you are downgraded.[1] If that is so, consider the likely fate of a person I will call the Complete Altruist (CA, for short). CA is the Good Samaritan on steroids, bent on helping others at every opportunity. From dawn to midnight, every day, CA gives and gives. When Christians urge CA to spend time attending church services, the response is always the same:

> God, if he exists and is worth our worship, cares about us, knows that we suffer, and wants us to relieve one another's pains and contribute to their happiness; I should devote all my time to that; any God deserving our gratitude and respect would want that kind of service rather than all the unnecessary accolades I might offer.

Not only do I view CA as fully admirable, but I also applaud the judgement about scheduling. If CA is wrong about that, so much the worse for the selection process. It picks out people for the wrong things. We continue to struggle to find a version of the story in which the selection will proceed in a manner suited to provide meaning for our this-worldly human lives.

But maybe God and I agree in admiring CA. Despite the Biblical demands for worship and periodic adoration, he is willing to relax the rules and open the paradisial gates to those with an impressive record of Samaritan service. That enables CA's life on Earth to count as meaningful after all. Yet, surely the meaningfulness of CA's life does not turn on an (omniscient??) being's decision to do some rethinking about the whole setup. CA's life

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has point and purpose not because of the extrinsic reward, but because of its intrinsic value: for all the good CA does.

I shall expand on this theme below.

Enough! It would be entirely reasonable to accuse me of having offered only caricatures, variant ways of mocking the brainchild of a serious and sensitive thinker (or trio of thinkers). In response, I can only plead that I have begun with an examination of ways in which some divine presence, or more generally some religious framework, might provide a basis for identifying meaningful human lives, *in the forms in which that project is most frequently conceived*. Too many religious believers maintain some picture of the kinds I have painted, without ever pondering the ethical details. CA may be impossible, but realistic imitations that go in the direction of CA actually exist. I have been fortunate to know some of them. Any selection project that penalizes the best people anyone is ever likely to come across is not one that can lend meaning to human life. If your life counts as meaningful, it cannot be because any such mode of picking paradigms of humanity would select you.

We do best to back away from the gaudy details. Let us set on one side the problematic idea of an afterlife, not venturing any thoughts about its existence, its nature or its duration. Instead, let us differentiate lives according to some standard or another. The more a human life accords with the standard, the more meaningful it is. The popular thesis whose credentials concern me then comes to contend that any such standard must require something transcending the mundane world that non-religious people acknowledge. It needs something an atheist cannot accept.

What could this something be? The most plausible candidate would appear to be a plan for the universe, designed by its Creator. We human beings are limited in our understanding of the cosmos, but we have been created with a purpose. Our task is to serve in bringing about the divine scheme. Human lives are meaningful insofar as they do that.

It would be possible to make a further abstraction, abandoning the idea of a personal deity. A religion could remain content with the idea of a transcendent purpose, something glimpsed in moments of religious elevation and recorded in the documents central to the pertinent religion. Theologians who prefer a minimal metaphysics can even opt for some basic purposiveness in the universe without introducing some being whose aims are to be achieved, and who set up the whole show with this in mind. The obvious disadvantage of stripping the story in this fashion lies in raising issues about its coherence: can you have purpose without an intelligent being who identifies particular purposes? On the other hand, minimalist theologians manage to sidestep a host of difficulties stemming from the fact that the Creator seems to have been less than fully clear in providing instructions for our proper employment. Various directives have been recorded at different times in different places. They are often vague or ambiguous, and they are hard to weld together into any harmonious whole. Problems of inconsistency have inspired millennia-long disputes about which of the directives record the Creator's commands and exhortations and which should be dismissed as spurious. If the meaningfulness of our lives depends on our service to the divine plan, then it appears reasonable to complain about the quality of the recruitment materials on offer.

I shall leave to religious believers the choice between the personified version of the transcendent and its more abstract counterpart. For, on either version, I shall argue, the project of anchoring the meaningfulness of our lives in advancing a divine plan will only succeed if meaningfulness could also be secured through our contributions to a thoroughly secular *human* plan. Atheistic humanism can do at least as well as its allegedly superior theological rivals.

The first point to note is that actions achieving goals can only lend meaning to our lives if those goals can be recognized as worthwhile. Imagine a polytheistic possibility. The

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cosmos was created by a syndicate of thugs: magnified versions of the current occupant of the White House and his minions. These beings appear periodically to people all over the globe. The messages they deliver urge human beings to behave in ways that advance thuggish purposes. Some people acquiesce – they are counterparts of the minions who deny aid to poor nations, who side with ruthless invaders, who round up innocent people (including young children) and send them to unpleasant places. Others resist: think of the Minneapolis protesters. Which ones are leading meaningful lives?

Another scenario: the Creator is a narcissist with a passion for some utterly trivial pursuit. The scheme for the Cosmos aims at doing two things: first, there must be frequent, extensive, massively costly, universally attended festivals at which the most popular performers lead the vast assemblies in months-long celebrations of the wisdom, greatness, power, magnificence, and benevolence of the Creator; second, there must be records of the number of blades of grass at each place on the Earth's surface, at all times. A single protester, CA, opts out, devoting time to ministering to the sick and providing small pleasures for young children.

Advancing the purposes of a personal deity does not render your life meaningful – or good or valuable or worthwhile – if those purposes are downright evil or if they are trivial. A similar point holds if we subtract the deity, and talk of purposiveness in the universe. Meaningfulness requires the purposiveness to be rightly directed: towards ends that are valuable and good.

Religious programmes for understanding how human lives become meaningful presuppose, of course, that the plan for the cosmos is directed towards goals of this kind. From Augustine on, the advocates of these programmes have had an important insight. An individual human life is finite. Indeed, the lifetime of our species is finite. Our decisions and actions can become meaningful because they can contribute to something much larger than ourselves. Some human lives forfeit this potential. Children who are born with severe neurological deficits may be unable, for the entire duration of their brief lives, ever to participate in this larger project. Perhaps there are others, even many others, who deliberately decide on courses of action that either serve only insignificant ends or else spread only pain and suffering. Yet we should not suppose that meaningful lives are confined to those whose achievements are hailed by millions. Lives that promote the good, consisting in many deeds that bring joy and relief to those around them, may be rich bearers of meaning.

A deeply humanistic thinker, the poet, George Herbert, appreciates the point:

> A servant with this clause
> Makes drudgery divine:
> Who sweeps a room, as for thy laws,
> Makes that and th' action fine.

From a different religious perspective, Wordsworth concurs in his description of

> ... that best portion of a good man's life;
> His little, nameless, unremembered acts
> Of kindness and of love.

Herbert retains the idea of a personal deity (the Christian God), whereas Wordsworth offers something more abstract as the transcendent source of the cosmic plan. Both appreciate the possibility that value and meaning may be found – sometimes in abundance – in the lives of ordinary people.

As I have said, this is insightful. Lives can obtain meaning from the contributions they make to something much larger than themselves. What is less clear, though, is why this has

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to involve the entire cosmos and some plan for it. Secular humanism, as I conceive it, finds meaning in our lives by developing the insight differently, building on the appreciation of the everyday that Herbert and Wordsworth both share.

One source for that different development can be found in the writings of a philosopher who is typically orders of magnitude less eloquent than Augustine or Dante or Bunyan or Herbert or Wordsworth. In the closing sentences of his discussion of religion, John Dewey, whose turgid prose typically seems to me to have the smell of wet wool, is uncharacteristically inspiring.

> We who now live are parts of a humanity that extends into the remote past, a humanity that has interacted with nature. The things in civilization we most prize are not of ourselves. They exist by grace of the doings and sufferings of the continuous human community in which we are a link. Ours is the responsibility of conserving, transmitting, rectifying and expanding the heritage of values we have received that those who come after us may receive it more solid and secure, more widely accessible and more generously shared than we have received it. Here are all the elements for a religious faith that shall not be confined to sect, class, or race. Such a faith has always been implicitly the common faith of mankind. It remains to make it explicit and militant. [Dewey 1934/2008, 57–8]

Dewey is pointing to something I call 'the Human Project'. The goal of this project is to discover things that are valuable – 'values' as he calls them – and to make them accessible and enduringly stable where they will do most good.[2] Through membership in our species, we are bound together as partners in this project. We have gained from the efforts of those who came before us, insofar as they have found valuable things and helped others enjoy them, insofar also as they have worked against the forces that confine and diminish our existence.

There are no recruitment offices dedicated to signing up volunteers for the project. Nevertheless, at various times in many people's lives, they are reminded to think about what their choices, habits and patterns of conduct deliver to enhance the well-being of others. Later, as they reflect on the way in which they live, or when they look back on the course of their lives, they may ask themselves what they have accomplished to make a difference – a positive difference – to other human beings (or, perhaps, also to sentient nonhuman animals). To hail us as having a responsibility – a duty – to spread 'values' envisages the complex and messy history of our species as permeated by innumerable lines of progress, the vast majority of them small-scale, in which human actions make life better for later generations. The aggregate of those channels along which improvements travel is The Human Project.

In seeing dedication to this project as a religion – 'the common faith of mankind' – Dewey is recognizing the kinship between the human project and traditional religions *with respect to the issue that concerns me here*. If you think religion can make sense of the meaning of human lives, the best articulation of that thought is to suppose meaningfulness to arise from participation in some larger enterprise: it does not matter if that enterprise expresses the designs of a Creator-Deity, whether it responds to a purposiveness in the cosmos, or whether it is a pan-human project of amelioration and progress. What matters is the promotion of something good, the discovery and spread and stabilization of what Dewey calls 'values'. Whether or not this stems from divine wisdom or a fortuitously well-oriented cosmic purpose or simply the decisions and actions of human beings is irrelevant.

Very few people have followed Dewey in thinking of the Human Project as a kind of religion. That has seemed a mistaken assimilation. He is plainly advocating humanism. It could

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take a secular form (no deities, no transcendence), or it could become religious humanism by adding those elements back in. A Christian version of religious humanism might advocate the Gospel of love, stepping back from any great emphasis on worship and giving star billing to Jesus' Second Commandment. Although secular humanists might find that form of religion far more congenial than most, they would still have good reason to view it as taking one step too many.

The poets I have quoted, Herbert and Wordsworth, seem prepared to take that kind of step, viewing the Human Project as exemplifying some grander cosmic purpose. A later poet is reluctant to add anything beyond the human. In reviewing his life, Walt Whitman asks himself what it amounts to – and finds an answer:

> The question, O me! so sad, recurring—What good among these, O me, O life?
> Answer
> That you are here—that life exists and identity,
> That the powerful play goes on, and you may contribute a verse.

I take my concept of The Human Project to condense an idea that Dewey and Whitman share. Without frills.

I have claimed that participation in the Human Project can lend meaning to human lives comparable to the meaning religious people find in our participation in a divine project or in cosmic purposiveness. But we should investigate more closely. Does the invocation of religious elements add anything that thoroughly secular counterparts omit?

Here, it appears that the invocation of a personal deity has an advantage over the more abstract appeal to purposiveness in the universe. The Human Project takes meaningfulness to arise from actions that make the world a better place. If we think the cosmos has some intrinsic purpose, we might understand this in terms of approaching the state recommended in the Grand Scheme of Things. It is not obvious what, if anything, is added by viewing things in this way. A more traditional religious believer, on the other hand, might claim that something extra does accrue from conceiving the plan as having a divine author (or authors). For the deity (or the ensemble of deities) is the source of whatever is good.

I shall argue shortly that this supposed advantage is illusory. First, however, it is important to scrutinize one potential superiority enjoyed by both religious alternatives. They are fully cosmic. The Human Project, by contrast, is plainly subcosmic. It concerns the advancement of a species that (as I have conceded) will exist for only a finite period. Why should that matter *sub specie aeternitatis*?

We have no reason to think that it does. Comforting tales are easily invented. Human existence and human progress make a large difference in the subsequent history of the universe. Just as successive generations play a role in the progress of the Human Project, so too do manifestations of intelligent life play a role in the progress of the cosmos. Our collective work survives our extinction, contributing at a higher scale. Well, maybe. But vast numbers of unanswerable questions are involved here. No reasonable person should bet on this conclusion.

So what? Why should the meaningfulness of our lives hang on whether they are indefinitely – or permanently – consequential? It is enough that we make the small and local changes of which we are capable, even if the effects of our actions dwindle and finally disappear altogether. Herbert's servant cleans the room today; tomorrow it will need cleaning again. That does not matter. A good deed has been done, and others have benefitted from it. Wordsworth's 'nameless, unremembered acts' have a similarly short shelf life. Nevertheless, the kindness and the love were real – and valuable.

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The poets' celebration of the everyday was correct. The things that matter, that give life meaning, do not have to 'disturb the universe'. Once we see this, we can reject the idea that the Human Project is inferior because it does not offer purpose on a cosmic scale or achieve the grandeur of a divine plan. If there is a difficulty in the Deweyan position I have presented, it must come from the idea of a special source for value, the invocation of a deity as the personification of goodness.

Here we enter familiar philosophical territory, explored long ago by Plato in the *Euthyphro*. Many religious believers are tempted to suppose that acting to promote a divine plan is especially significant because the plan comes from a deity vastly superior to any human being. God selects what is good, and demands of us that we promote those things. We were created by him, and our task during our earthly life is to do his bidding – to produce the good wherever we can.

The first thing to notice is that this sounds very much like what Dewey was recommending: is not promoting the good a matter of 'conserving, transmitting, rectifying and expanding the heritage of values we have received that those who come after us may receive it more solid and secure, more widely accessible and more generously shared than we have received it'? The second thing is that it seems to make CA the ideal fulfilment of the divine will: for CA spends every waking minute working to make the world a better place, without taking time off to sing hymns of praise no reasonable deity would need or want. How, then, does adding God to the Deweyan story make a difference?

It is tempting to say what Euthyphro wants to say until Socrates works him over: God is the source of what is good – the things that are good are good because God approves them. Should our task be understood as one of producing the kind of world God wants? We can consider two versions of the servants of the almighty: one does the actions God commands because they are good; the other does them because God commands them. Is one of these servants better than the other? If so, which one is it?

The second servant is obedient and trusting. These might be taken to be virtuous character traits. Yet, as we know all too well, blind obedience can be appalling. Functionaries who have supervised atrocities, or who have committed them, have sometimes tried to defend themselves by pointing out that they were only following orders. The defence is rightly rejected. 'You ought to have known', we say; 'Couldn't you recognize that the actions you were commanded to perform were hideously wrong?'. Nor will it do for the offenders to tell us that the commanders were very powerful, and that they had a wider vision of the circumstances than those who were asked to do the dirty work. The character of the tasks should have triggered a question, trust should not have been blind.

A religious person will surely deny the comparison. God is perfect. He will never issue an order to perform a wrong action, let alone crime on a massive scale. If we knew that to be so, if we could be certain that God is ultra-reliable in ethical matters, we could plead that complete trust is justified. Yet, is not divine reliability challenged by the nature of some divine commands? The God of the Old Testament goes in for a fair bit of smiting, is keen on rounding up the nubile women associated with the smitten menfolk, and has an odd propensity to collect foreskins. In general, the New Testament does better, but the attractive idea of loving our enemies is sometimes recommended for a shocking reason: by doing so, we heap coals of fire on their heads.

The scriptures of any of the major religions offer sufficient grounds for wondering about the ethical character of some of the commands the deity is supposed to have issued. There are two possibilities: if the canonical texts accurately represent the tastes and attitudes of the divine commander, the instructions are sometimes ethically wrong (even appalling), and the commander is far from reliable; if they do not match with what the deity wants,

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the collection of writings cannot be used as a trustworthy guide to divine intentions: we do not know how ethically reliable the deity is, and blind trust is unwarranted.

Immanuel Kant, an even more insightful figure than Augustine, saw the point clearly. He tells his readers that they need to check credentials:

> Every example of morality that is presented to me must itself first be judged according to principles of morality, whether it is actually worthy to serve as an original example, i.e. as a model; but by no means can it furnish the concept of it at the outset. Even the Holy One of the Gospel must first be compared with our ideal of moral perfection before he is recognized as one.

Kant's insight expresses a strong preference for the first type of servant, the one who acts to promote the good *because it is good*. Under some circumstances, the servant may have grounds for thinking that some particular figure can be trusted on a particular issue, but the possibility of checking always remains.

Servants of the two types may have identical records, each of them performing good actions throughout their lives. There is, however, a difference between them, one captured by words T.S. Eliot gives to his dramatization of the martyred Archbishop, Thomas a Becket:

> The last temptation is the greatest treason:
> To do the right deed for the wrong reason.

People who contribute to the Human Project often strive to do good, and to bring about what is good *because it is good*. In such actions, they do the right deed for the right reason. Those who think their deeds are hallowed by the will of the deity, and thus somehow more meaningful, are, at best, introducing an irrelevancy – or, if not, succumbing to a temptation.

Yet, constant self-conscious dedication to The Human Project, even if it exists, is rare. As I have noted, it may occur when we are instructed to consider others, or when we reflect on how we should live, or in thoughts of regret when we recall some parts of our lives. Even the most saintly people perform deeds that have no lasting value, and sometimes act to the detriment of others. Human lives are flawed. As the Book of Common Prayer eloquently confesses:

> We have left undone those things which we ought to have done, And we have done those things which we ought not to have done, ...

... But the verdict that follows seems too harsh; to declare that 'there is no health in us' is an overreaction. An imperfect life, whose pattern descended from a grievous ethical lapse, may nevertheless be meaningful. Paul Gauguin[3] was wrong to desert his wife and children for a life devoted to art. Yet his life was surely meaningful – his contributions to the larger Human Project made up for the personal defects and the misery they caused. All of us blunder and detract from the Human Project. What matters is that our contributions compensate for our derelictions.

There is a last challenge to be met. In my presentation of the Human Project, I have followed Dewey in taking for granted the thought that actions can be classified as right or wrong, and that states of affairs can be seen as good or bad, valuable or worthless, without any commitment to something transcendent. Some ethical theorists have held that judgements employing these concepts are true or false according to their correspondence with an independent order, what we might think of as a 'realm of values'. Frequently, this idea is accompanied by the claim that the realm of values cannot be part of the physical world.

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Someone who accepts both views may take the further step of identifying the non-natural realm of values with the transcendent, as that notion is understood by religious thinkers.[4] Finally, talk of a personal deity might be understood as referring to this realm: either God just is the order of values, or that is part of God's nature.

I shall not consider the various ways in which positions of this kind can be elaborated, nor the various metaphysical challenges that might arise for them. Conceding the possibility of conceiving religion in these terms, I will pose the obvious objection to the approach to meaningfulness I have tried to defend here. Dewey and I intend to provide an account that sees the meaning of human lives as arising from the individual projects we adopt and the contributions they make to a trans-generational progressive enterprise. Our account presupposes the possibility of talking objectively about values. If the only way of understanding such talk involves invoking some non-natural realm, something that could play the role religions ascribe to the transcendent, then the account has smuggled in what it advertised itself as avoiding. A religious commitment was there from the start.

Some people might quibble about the demarcation of religion the challenge relies on. Can the non-natural realm of a prominent style of ethical realism be identified with the transcendent invoked by theologians and the religious people who follow them? I do not want to quibble. Instead, I shall question the claim that the *only* way to explain the objectivity of value judgements is to invoke an independent, non-natural realm of values. There is a far better explanation at hand.

Ethical practice has a long history. It must have emerged more than 50,000 years before the present. That is not only because of the complexity of the rules found in the oldest surviving documents (4000 YBP), nor because of the need for regulation of life in the first cities (8000 YBP), but because trade among human groups has been going on for at least 25,000 years. When groups of human beings who had previously treated one another with suspicion and downright hostility were able to undertake transactions with one another, they must already have had experience in regulating conduct within the individual bands. Much of what happened in the Palaeolithic will probably always remain beyond our understanding. But a plausible conjecture is that ethical life emerged between 100,000 and 50,000 years ago, as our ancestors acquired the full resource of language.

Before that, human societies most likely resembled the groups formed by our evolutionary cousins, the chimpanzees and the bonobos. The sizes seem to have been roughly the same: most fell into the range of 40 to 70 individuals mixed by age and sex. Societies of this kind are rare in the evolutionary record, and studies of chimps and bonobos suggest why. Although these animals have a useful psychological capacity, that of identifying the wishes, plans and intentions of their fellows and of responding so as to facilitate what another animal is recognized as wanting, this capacity – *responsiveness*, I will call it – is limited. A pair of animals may activate it one day, and fail to do so the next time they meet. That leads to social trouble. Disputes flare and have to be settled by long bouts of peace-making (typically through mutual grooming). Cooperation does occur sporadically in chimpanzee and bonobo societies. But its scope is restricted because of the vagaries of the psychological capacity that underlies it. Consequently, a chimpanzee or bonobo society may stagger on for a while, even quite a long while, experiencing many conflicts and resolving them through time-consuming activities that re-knit the social fabric, but it will eventually reach a point of fragmentation when intra-band tensions have become too great.

Our species worked our way out of this *cul-de-sac*. We did so through the invention of ethical life. Perhaps some of that could be achieved pre-linguistically. It seems most probable, though, that, as we learned to speak to one another, one of the functions of the conversation was to specify rules for conduct. From then on, to be a member of the band was to structure behaviour (at least when conduct could be observed) in specific ways.

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Those ways were geared to amplifying our responsiveness to one another. Natural selection equipped our ancestors, including our last common ancestor with the chimpanzees and the bonobos, with a psychological capacity. We have made our societies more stable, and enabled them to become *vastly* bigger, through requiring intra-society (and sometimes inter-society) behaviour that responds to the emotions, desires, and aims of those around us. The ethical advances we have made introduce rules, roles and institutions that make for increased responsiveness to one another.

Ethical life grows out of a fundamental problem: our responsiveness to others is limited. Ethical precepts commend actions and attitudes and arrangements that help with special cases of that fundamental problem. They have the kind of objectivity exemplified by keys and locks. An ethical judgement fits a particular way in which the fundamental problem arises. The solution it endorses opens a door, and, in doing so, expands human possibilities. That relationship, of key to lock, of solution to problem, yields a kind of objectivity.

The approach to ethics I have just sketched does not only rest on an account that explains how ethical life could have emerged in our species (Kitcher 2011). It is also supported by an attempt to understand some principal historical occasions on which we have made moral progress. In Kitcher (2021), I consider the abolition of chattel slavery in the New World, the expansion of opportunities for women from the late eighteenth century to the present, and the increasing acceptance of same-sex love (a process I have observed in my lifetime). In all these instances, I have argued, moral advances are made when people enter into the lives of others, searching for a way to assuage fears and promote aspirations for all. Moral progress occurs when responsiveness becomes greater, moral regress happens when responsiveness is diminished.

The Human Project writ large is structured by the manifold ways in which people have recognized solutions to instances of the fundamental problem. Yet it is not only advanced by those who fashion a new part of the ethical structure we try to exhibit in our lives. It comes in those everyday events in which we express our responsiveness to one another, especially in those that go beyond what is expected of us, those that might inspire crafting a new judgement, a new rule, a new institution. They can be there in the care with which someone sweeps a room – and they *are* there in an enormous number of

> ... little, nameless, unremembered acts, of kindness and of love.

There is no need to invoke a non-natural 'realm of values'. What the Human Project requires is a record of advancing values, where values are understood as themselves created in the course of the project itself, in a thoroughly secular process that has made us the beings we are.

In these remarks, I may seem to have been hostile to religion, but that is an illusion. My hostility is directed only at the suggestion, often made by well-intentioned religious people, that meaning in human life can only be delivered by religion. Although I count as an atheist – with respect to all the religions I know, I believe some of their central factual doctrines to be false – I oppose the indictments issued by the New Atheists, when they campaign to sweep religion from the face of the Earth. To be sure, in human history, great harm has sometimes been done in the name of religion. Yet religious movements have also made large positive social contributions. Anyone of my age should immediately recall the leadership of the American Civil Rights Movement.

The major religions of the world have progressed when they have withdrawn from emphasizing the factual claims (centrally, the existence of a deity or of deities) and when they have focused on an ethical message. If, as I claim, our ethical progress consists in amplifying our responsiveness to others, we should welcome as allies those who proclaim the

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importance of loving our neighbours, as the major religions have done: often loudly. Their support of this theme is only sporadic, though: in the United States, allegedly Christian spokesmen preach a hatred that should be denounced as a vile travesty of the Gospel they claim to follow. Despite such deviations, there have been religious movements, within all the major faiths, that have concentrated on amplifying responsiveness.

Indeed, organized religion continues to serve as a sphere in which people find community with one another. Whatever is factually incorrect in what is said or sung in religious services and festivals can be forgiven: for these rituals have a power to bring people together and to promote broader human understanding that is unmatched in anything the secular world can offer. The ceremonies have evolved over millennia, the stories and the art and the music inspire. Whether or not one accepts religious doctrines as literally true, they can be part of something valuable. Religious lives can be truly meaningful ... through the contributions they can make to the Human Project.

I hope that religions will continue to progress, that they will gradually shed their false metaphysics. Even if they do not, their ability to open people up to ethical advances, honed over centuries of experimentation is to be welcomed. Many religious lives are meaningful, because of what those who live them have given to the world around them. The only error that concerns me here is to mislocate the source of the meaning. It lies in the thoroughly secular Human Project.

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Notes

1. The film, *Bedazzled*, a modern comic take on the Faust story, brought this point out brilliantly. At one point, the devil (played by Peter Cook) seats himself on a British postbox (an old-fashioned pillar box). He commands Faust (Dudley Moore) to dance around him, expressing his adulation. After agreeing, and prancing about exclaiming 'You're wonderful, you're marvelous!' (and similar things), Faust becomes tired of the ritual, and suggests that they could change places. At which point, the devil tells him 'Now you know how I felt'.
2. In our attempts to do this, we do not start from scratch. Dewey sees us as extending what our predecessors have already done. We are part of a long chain – a tradition. This aspect of the position (which I have sometimes failed to recognize explicitly) is explored by Irene Liu (2025). I have learned from that book and from a helpful conversation in Aix.
3. The example was introduced by Bernard Williams (1981) to make a point akin to the one I suggest here.
4. A comment by an anonymous referee for an earlier version of this essay has made me aware of potential unclarities in the notion of the transcendent. As I read (or possibly misinterpret) the referee's comment, thoughts and other mental states already count as transcendent. Physicalists like me deny this. Mental states are states of the body-plus-brain. The serious question is whether our moral and ethical judgements make reference to a non-natural realm of values.

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