Religious Studies **43**, 443–455 © 2007 Cambridge University Press
doi:10.1017/S0034412507009055 Printed in the United Kingdom

Human nature as God's purpose

JACOB AFFOLTER

Department of Philosophy, University of California at Riverside, Riverside, CA 92521

Abstract: **This article responds to one of Thaddeus Metz's criticisms of the theory that the meaning of life is to fulfil a purpose assigned by God. In particular, it addresses the argument that only an atemporal God could ground meaning but that an atemporal God could not assign a purpose. In order to do this, the article first argues that Metz's criticisms misread the relevant sense of purpose. It then argues that on a more plausible reading of 'purpose', we can see that it is in fact the kind of thing that an atemporal God could assign.**

Countless people in the history of our civilization have believed that the meaning of their lives stems from a purpose assigned by God. As important a figure as Tolstoy has famously reasoned that life without God would have no meaning, and therefore concluded that God must exist.[1] Given that this question affects issues that are of both rational and emotional interest to many people, any argument that raises difficulties for the claim that God could provide life with meaning by assigning a purpose cannot be lightly put aside. Yet in recent essays, Thaddeus Metz develops just such an argument. That is, he lays out what he believes to be some of the best reasons why God alone could assign meaning to a person's life. Metz then argues that these reasons entail that God has qualities that are incompatible with assigning purpose to a human life. In particular, he worries that these reasons entail that God is atemporal, and then argues that a God who is atemporal could not have a purpose. If so, then the meaning of life could not be God's purpose.

The aim of this paper is to argue that Metz may be correct to think that an atemporal God could not have a purpose, but his argument that this creates a problem for purpose theory is mistaken. His line of argument is mistaken because he bases it in a faulty understanding of the claim that God assigns a purpose to human life. More specifically, he misinterprets this claim because he misreads the relevant sense of the word 'purpose'. To that end, the aim of the paper is twofold. First, it will explore the sense of the word 'purpose' most relevant the relation between God and the meaning of life. Then, it will argue that once we get

https://doi.org/10.1017/S0034412507009055 Published online by Cambridge University Press

a clearer view of the kind of purpose in question, we can see that purpose may be the sort of thing that an atemporal God could not *have*, but it is the sort of thing that he could in fact *assign*.

Purpose in the work of Thaddeus Metz

As part of his careful and detailed work on the meaning of life, Metz has given close attention to the question of whether God could provide life with purpose. In his essay 'Could God's purpose be the source of life's meaning?', Metz outlines the view that he calls 'purpose theory'. This view holds that a life can only derive meaning from a purpose given by God.[2] As Metz explains, 'Purpose theory is the view that a life is meaningful insofar as one fulfils a purpose that God has assigned.'[3] Most versions of purpose theory will add to this that the person in question must freely choose to fulfil God's purpose.[4]

The bulk of Metz's paper discusses three objections to purpose theory. These objections contend that purpose theory conflicts with God's goodness, omnipotence, and eternality. Of these three objections, the third troubles Metz the most. He argues that there are good reasons to understand eternality in this context as atemporality, and that the atemporality of God is inconsistent with the belief that God could provide a purpose for a person's life.[5]

In support of this claim, he first explains that the qualities that make God uniquely capable of providing meaning for a person's life require independence from the physical world.[6] He then argues that these qualities are inconsistent with a God who has purposes.[7] In particular, he argues that having a purpose involves time and change. Furthermore, anyone who has purposes must also have limits.[8] According to Metz, a God who has these qualities could not also have the qualities that render Him uniquely able to provide meaning to a person's life. He therefore concludes, somewhat tentatively, '[T]he most plausible reason for holding a God-centred theory of life's meaning is not consistent with the traditional version of God-centred theory.'[9] That is, an atemporal God can give life meaning, but He cannot do so by having purposes.

As far as it goes, I suspect that Metz's argument against purpose theory is correct. If it is true that the meaning of a life depends on God, the reason is not because God has a purpose for that life. At least, it is not because God has some goal that He tries to achieve with or for that person. However, it is not clear to me that this sort of goal is the kind of thing that people are talking about when they say that God assigns a purpose. In making this claim, I am following Metz's suggestion that one way to defend purpose theory against his objection would be to show that God could have a purpose. This could be accomplished most straightforwardly if we show either that an atemporal God could have a purpose or that a temporal God could be the unique source of meaningful purpose for a human life.[10] However, I wish to take a slightly different approach. Instead, I will

https://doi.org/10.1017/S0034412507009055 Published online by Cambridge University Press

argue that the problem Metz identifies can be solved if we distinguish between having a purpose and assigning a purpose. Moreover, I will argue that if we pay closer attention to what kind of purpose people think that God provides, it will become apparent that an atemporal God could assign this kind of purpose to human life. To that end, I will start by exploring what I think that purpose theorists mean by 'purpose'. Using that exploration, I will then argue that God can assign the relevant sense of purpose without Himself having a purpose.

The concept of purpose

In order to explore the concept of 'purpose', it helps to begin with the most obvious examples, that is, artifacts that people design for a purpose. For example, a knife has a purpose: to cut. A knife is being used for its purpose when it cuts something, and it is fitted for its purpose if it is well balanced and sharp. Of course, other things besides artifacts can have purposes. A large rock may have a purpose of serving as part of the wall of a house. And it can be well suited to its purpose just as much as a knife. This sense of the term 'purpose' seems to mean something like the intention that someone has for an object.

With respect to the question of the meaning of life, there are two main difficulties with this sense of the term 'purpose'. First, it seems that a thing cannot simply have an intended purpose; a thing can only have an intended purpose *for someone*. If a fork-shaped piece of metal had materialized from a freak accident before humans invented the fork, it does not seem that it would have had any purpose.[11] Second, and more importantly, this difficulty points to a certain amount of relativism about the intended purposes of objects. After all, someone might try to use a butter knife as an impromptu screwdriver, or a doorstop, or a decoration. It may be better suited for some of these than others, but there is no immediately obvious reason why one use should be privileged over another, except perhaps by convention. The purpose of an object would be relative to the user's intentions at the time of use, which may vary even for the same person. So, it would seem that intention could determine *a* purpose, but not *the* purpose, for an object.

This last point suggests a plausible reason why only God can give purpose to a life. Arguably, the purpose of a thing depends on the intention of its designer or maker. It is true that people make babies in the sense that they procreate. And, God forbid, it may soon become possible to actually design babies. Nevertheless, there is a sense in which only God can design a person, or at least He can do so far better than anyone else.

However, there is a difficulty with this argument. It is not immediately clear why we should privilege the designer of an object over anyone else who finds a better use for it. It may be the case that a person makes something as an engine that turns out to be a much more effective as a heater than as an engine.

https://doi.org/10.1017/S0034412507009055 Published online by Cambridge University Press

Similarly, a person may attempt to make a dogfood that turns out to be perfect as a catfood. It might even turn out to be mediocre as dogfood. Granted, that probably could not happen to an infallible God.[12] Nevertheless, these examples indicate that the fact that a person designs or makes some object with a certain purpose in mind does not entail that the designer's purpose is the object's unique purpose.

Of course, this difficulty does not imply that God could not give a life a purpose in the sense described. Rather, it seems to indicate that God can give something a purpose, just as we can give it a purpose. At least, this is the case if we leave aside Metz's objections. However, while this concession might be true, it is trivial. Nobody denies that a person can be given a purpose in this sense. Obviously, we can give ourselves a purpose and try to meet that purpose. What we want to know is whether God can give us a purpose in some unique way. That is, we want to know whether we must depend on God to assign us a purpose. If we reduce the sense of 'purpose' to any intended use for an object, then it would appear that God's ability to assign purpose is not unique.[13]

It seems, then, that we need to look for some stronger sense of the word purpose if we want to find something that only God can give. In order to consider what that sense may be, I will turn to a counter-example designed to show that God's purpose would not automatically constitute the meaning of a person's life. Robert Nozick asks us to consider what we would think if it turned out that human beings were designed to provide food for alien tourists.[14] Moreover, we can imagine that we were not just intended for this purpose, but particularly well suited to this purpose. We could even suppose that every feature of our existence, including and up to our aversion to being eaten, was perfectly tailored to make a better meal for alien gourmands. Nozick asserts that such a purpose would not give our lives meaning, even if we had been designed and designed perfectly for that end.[15]

I am inclined to agree with Nozick. Such a purpose would not give our lives meaning.[16] However, I would further assert that it is not clear that this could possibly be our purpose in the relevant sense. It is true that we could be designed in such a way that we completely fulfil this goal, and it is even possible that every feature of our selves contributes to this fulfilment. Nevertheless, there would be many aspects of our selves that could not have alien food as their purpose. Consider, for example, our intelligence. We might imagine that intelligence produced chemicals that provided a wonderful taste, or that the recognition of our rich mental life added an extra aesthetic level to the aliens' meal. However, these are all incidental uses for human intelligence. As Nozick points out, even if it had been designed to achieve these ends, it is pretty clear that those ends are not what our intelligence is for.[17] Intelligence seems to have all kinds of other purposes that this example cannot quite account for. So, alien cuisine would be a purpose for human intelligence, but not its purpose in the relevant sense.

https://doi.org/10.1017/S0034412507009055 Published online by Cambridge University Press

Still, let us suppose that we can get around all of these objections. Let us suppose that every aspect of our selves could be folded into the purpose of providing alien cuisine. We can even imagine that all aspects of our lives would be more subjectively fulfilling if done for such a purpose. For example, once enlightened as to their true purpose, Nobel Prize winners would go about their work with both the joy of discovering truth and the pleasant anticipation of providing a notable meal. Even so, this elaboration still does not get us what we want, because the problem of relativism arises once again. Suppose we find that rival alien companies have been working on the development of the human race. With much bickering and compromise, they have come up with a race perfectly suited for both food *and* entertainment. Which of these two would we take to be our purpose?[18] We are back to the same sort of relativism that we were supposed to avoid by introducing a designer. What God is supposed to provide is not just a purpose, nor even a purpose for which the person is particularly well suited. Rather, He is supposed to provide us with something that is our purpose in an absolute sense. Given this requirement, it seems that the goal is to find something that not only could serve as the person's purpose, but actually is his purpose in a meaningful way.

If this conception of 'purpose' seems rather vague, that is because it is. Although human beings do seem to have an intuitive sense of what we are looking for, we are not yet at the point where we can give a good philosophical account of this kind of purpose. Still, we can get a better idea by looking at some related problems in other branches of philosophy. For example, consider the problem posed by Arthur Danto in his philosophy of history. He points out that a certain kind of relativism threatens when we attempt to provide a historical description of an event. Danto asks us to imagine a machine that perfectly records every event as it happens.[19] On a certain day, it would tell us that a baby was born to Frau Mozart. Looking back on things, we could describe the event by saying that the greatest student of Haydn was born on that day. The machine, however, could not record such a thing, because Mozart was not yet the greatest student of Haydn. The machine could record the event but could not get the significance of that event. So, it appears that the birth of Mozart receives its significance from things that happen later.[20]

Of course, an obvious response to this puzzle is that the significance of things is a relational property that supervenes on the facts of what happened. The events of that day in the Mozart household simply are what they are, and their significance is a relational property that depends on later events.[21] The significance of an event, then, is not part of the event itself, but rather supervenes on related sets of events. Two problems, however, arise from this claim. The first has to do with a problem about time. If the significance of event X depends on the significance of a later event Y, then it is reasonable to suppose that the significance of Y will depend on some later event Z. We would seem to be in a vicious regress. Either the

https://doi.org/10.1017/S0034412507009055 Published online by Cambridge University Press

significance of an event is always changing, or it can only be known to someone outside of time.[22] Second, even if we can get around this obstacle we still face the problem of relativism. If no event contains in itself its own significance, then it is not clear that any event can have an absolute significance. Rather, events could only have significance for someone, and they may not be able to have anything more than significance for someone in some respect.

This last point about relativism is not meant to imply that intrinsic significance is necessary for absolute significance. Quite the contrary. There could be some single event from which all other events derive a relational but absolute significance.[23] The point, rather, is that events tend to have effects on multiple things. Mozart's birth might also have been the cause of a nurse stepping on an ant which would have fed a rat whose descendants would have spread the plague to Florence. If the event has nothing intrinsic that determines which effects constitute its significance, then it can only have significance in relation to something else. However, since it has significance in relation to a myriad of things, it may seem that which one of the many effects constitutes the real significance is in the eye of the beholder.[24]

The reason to stress this problem of multiple effects is not that denying significance leads to a regress or relativism. Rather, the problem is worth emphasizing because denying intrinsic significance leads to an unending regress or relativism, *unless* something has a special status that can stop it. For example, if some single event has a kind of finality such that it absolutely sets the significance of some set of previous events, then it would stop the regress in historical meaning. Similarly, if an event were so central that all events ultimately derive their significance from it, then it would stop the relativism. That is the kind of thing that we are looking for when we talk about the kind of purpose that only God could provide. We are looking for a quality that gives one purpose a status that makes it different from all the other purposes that the thing might have.[25]

This problem with historical significance has many parallels in other branches of philosophy. Consider, for example, Nietzsche's conclusion that a thing just is the sum of its effects.[26] As Alexander Nehamas explains, one of Nietzsche's more challenging and disconcerting ideas is that the nature of any one thing cannot be understood except in terms of its relationship to other things. This upsets any attempt to understand things as 'things-in-themselves', that is, as having a character of their own out of which their relations with other things flow. It suggests instead that every aspect of what a thing is derives partly from its relations with other things.[27]

A similar problem appears in Nagel's exploration of the relationship between subjective and objective understanding of the world. In *The View from Nowhere*, he describes what he regards as an exaggerated impulse to search for a comprehensive objective view of the world. As he explains, 'That is the impulse to find a way of thinking about the world as it is, so that everything in it, not just atoms and

https://doi.org/10.1017/S0034412507009055 Published online by Cambridge University Press

planets, can be regarded as real in the same way: not just as an aspect of the world as it appears to us, but as something that is *really there*.'[28] According to Nagel, this attempt to explain all of human experience from an objective viewpoint is simply doomed to failure.[29]

Without going any further into the details of these examples, they have one important feature in common. They produce in many people a sense of loss or even despair, much like the loss of purpose some people would feel if they decided that God did not exist.[30] It is questionable whether something really has been lost and, if so, whether its loss is important. Either way, the key question for this paper is not whether they have lost something, but what precisely they think that they have lost. More specifically, the question is what kind of purpose people might be denied if God did not exist.

In order to explain the kind of purpose that people seem to think that they would lose, I will borrow an example from Orson Scott Card's 'Unaccompanied Sonata'.[31] In this story, Card describes a young man in a Utopian society who commits a crime involving music. The judge sentences him never to play music again.[32] He is given a series of jobs that make him reasonably content, but he cannot keep himself from playing music. His failures and frustrations through the years that follow all seem traceable to his inability to express himself in music.[33] It may also be that the spectacular achievements that he eventually makes outside the field of music are directly linked to the fact that he is by nature a musician. In such a case, we would say that the person's purpose was not fulfilled. He may be doing something that is more valuable, or even something that is higher or nobler. Nevertheless, such an accomplishment only comes by letting his purpose go unfulfilled.[34]

In some ways, this understanding of purpose is like the account of *telos* presented by Philippa Foot. In her book *Natural Goodness*, she points out that an oak tree fails if it sends out shallow, spreading roots. Such things may be useful, but they mean that an oak tree fails to become what an oak tree is supposed to be. In a sense, an oak tree without deep roots is failing in its purpose, even if it manages to survive as long as most other trees. It is not that the oak tree intends to have deep roots and fails; it is just that having deep roots is part of a purpose that is built into the nature of an oak tree.[35]

The relevant sense of purpose, then, seems to be more than just a use for which the thing is fitted. It seems to be something like a role that the thing is not only fitted for, but that is somehow contained in the thing itself. In other words, the purpose is so much a part of the thing that you do not really understand the thing unless you understand its purpose. As an illustration of this distinction, consider how it affects Nozick's alien-food example. It may be that aliens have designed us for food, or for entertainment, or for some other purpose. This knowledge, however, would not seem to add anything to an understanding of what we are. It might explain how we got to be that way, in that many aspects of our lives

https://doi.org/10.1017/S0034412507009055 Published online by Cambridge University Press

would be a causal result of alien design. However, this knowledge would not add anything to how we understand our nature. The kind of purpose that gives meaning to life is supposed to provide more than a goal it can fulfil; it is supposed to somehow make sense of the thing itself.[36] In that respect, the alien-food explanation would fail because it explains us by means of a good that is accidentally related to the thing itself. What we are looking for is a kind of purpose that flows necessarily from the nature of the person.

The question of dependence

This exploration of the relevant type of purpose – call it purpose$_1$ – leads us back to the original question; whether we must depend on God to provide our lives with meaning. At first glance, this hypothesis seems plausible. Any person that could give a life purpose$_1$ would need to work with an incredible level of detail, one that is well beyond at least conscious human effort. However, this is insufficient for the kind of dependence that many theists would require. The goal is to show not only that God possesses some quality to a degree that we do not have, but that he differs in kind in such a way that only he could provide a life with purpose$_1$.[37] Unfortunately, this goal is well beyond the scope of this paper. However, I will try to at least gesture towards the kind of quality that might uniquely enable God to provide our lives with purpose$_1$. I do not know what quality is needed to provide something with a purpose$_1$, but I hope to at least indicate some reasons why we would think that it could only be given by God.

The aspect of God that best encapsulates the reason that God alone could give purpose$_1$ to our lives is that He is our creator.[38] This may seem to contradict what I said earlier, since I argued at length that the intention of a thing's maker is not automatically its purpose$_1$. However, there is a difference between making a thing and creating it. A creator not only fashions the thing, but fashions the material out of which it was made, as well the things with which it interacts. Consequently, he is limited only by whatever metaphysical laws limit creation. That is, he is utterly free in his creation.[39]

This, however, is not quite enough to show that we would need God to give our lives purpose. As far as I know, there is no philosophical reason why God could not allow a demiurge or an angel to create a world.[40] So, if creation were the only criterion, then it would seem that an angel or a demiurge could give purpose$_1$ to a life. Still, it is not clear that they would suffice in that they are fully free with respect to their creation, but they are still dependent on God. In addition, if they are finite beings, then they must be in some way limited and dependent on other things even in their act of creation.[41] Most importantly, they are not wholly free in the goals that they choose to pursue, including the decision to create or not create. Arguably, only God is completely free and non-contingent, and therefore only God is capable of giving purpose$_1$ to a life.[42]

https://doi.org/10.1017/S0034412507009055 Published online by Cambridge University Press

While these may be good reasons, I do not think that they quite get at the reasons why God has a unique ability to give purpose$_1$ to a life. A better place to begin is with the kind of understanding that God has, but finite creatures cannot share. Earlier, we showed that human purposes for objects seem to be partial and contingent. Similarly, when we looked at understandings of history, we ran into the same obstacle. Presumably, God has a kind of understanding that is not conditioned in this way. God can understand things fully, not simply from a historically conditioned, contingent point of view. This may in turn relate to His ability to create unconditionally. Only God can understand what He is creating fully, not just relative to some perspective or purpose. Consequently, God could create something that has a structure that is not just its structure as seen from a point of view, but the true structure$_1$ of the thing. And he can make the structure$_1$ so that it includes a purpose$_1$.[43] Since He is the only wholly non-contingent, non-dependent being, this may be the reason that no-one else could provide a person's life with purpose$_1$.

Significantly for the goals of this paper, this point about historical conditioning implies that one reason why human beings can not provide each other with meaning is that we are temporal. Since human beings are in time, we experience events serially. Consequently, what we know is conditioned both by past events and by where we stand at any moment with respect to those events. In this way, our temporality makes our understanding inherently perspectival. Moreover, if God were temporal, then His understanding would be perspectival. Consequently, if a being with perspectival understanding can not provide a life with purpose$_1$, then a God who provides life with a meaningful purpose$_1$ must be atemporal.[44]

This point alone would not get us to the claim that God alone could provide life with meaning. Angels or demiurges might be atemporal. However, the point about God's understanding involves more then a claim about temporality. The larger point is that only a wholly unconditioned being could provide a life with meaningful purpose$_1$. Since angels and demiurges would depend on God for their existence, then they (and everything else) would be unable to provide a life with meaningful purpose$_1$.

The foregoing arguments indicate why no agent but God could provide a life with purpose$_1$. Of course, this leaves open the important question of whether a purpose$_1$ has to be given by an agent. At first glance, it might seem that it does not. As I said before, the purpose$_1$ belongs to the recipient and not to the giver. Consequently, it seems possible that it was not given by anything. That is, it seems possible that it is just part of the thing itself, and not the result of any agent. This is a serious possibility and I can not offer any real disproof. Instead, I will briefly examine two possible non-agental sources of purpose$_1$ and suggest reasons why they could not provide life with purpose$_1$.

https://doi.org/10.1017/S0034412507009055 Published online by Cambridge University Press

The first alternative source is the possibility that a person could attain a purpose$_1$ by mere chance. Granted, this is highly unlikely, but its unlikelihood does not entail that it is impossible. Still, this alternative would bring back all the problems that purpose$_1$ is supposed to solve. If something could have a purpose by chance, then there is no reason for it not to have two, three, or four purposes.[45] It does not appear that chance itself could provide us with a reason for believing that a specific goal was not just a purpose but the absolute purpose$_1$ of a person's life.[46]

The other alternative source is the possibility that some natural force could provide an intrinsic purpose$_1$ for a person's life. For example, consider Foot's idea that membership in a species entails certain goals that are constitutive of an organism. For example, it is the inborn purpose of an oak tree to grow into a strong tree with deep roots and a certain type of bark.[47] While this explanation may seem promising because it involves something analogous to design, it faces certain limitations as an account of purpose$_1$. One problem is that it only provides a purpose for a thing as a member of a species, not as an individual. Granted, this might be sufficient, especially if the mere fact of variation was part of the purpose.[48] For example, it might be part of the meaning of human life that each person has eye colour, but not any particular eye colour. Still, a person might want more. That is, he might think that for life to have meaning, it must have some specific purpose$_1$ of its own, not just an instance of a purpose conferred on every member of its species. If so, then natural forces would not suffice as a source of meaning.

None of the foregoing arguments are anything close to conclusive. However, they do point in the general direction of some reasons why it would be reasonable to think that only God could provide a life with purpose$_1$. Purpose$_1$ seems to require a kind of specificity and absoluteness that points towards a conscious agent. Moreover, it seems to require these qualities to such a degree that it is reasonable to suspect that God alone could provide a human life with purpose$_1$.

Purpose and purpose theory

The foregoing arguments do not conclusively show that purpose$_1$ must be assigned by God. Nor do they directly address the question of whether there could be a purpose$_1$, and if so whether God is capable of assigning it. After all, an argument that nobody except God could assign a purpose$_1$ does not entail that He can do so. Nevertheless, this analysis of purpose$_1$ does suggest a defence against Metz's objections. That is, it suggests that we can understand purpose$_1$ in a way that gets around the objection that an atemporal God could not have a purpose$_1$.

The trouble with Metz's objection to purpose theory is that it misinterprets what is meant by the claim that the meaning of life is God's purpose. On one

https://doi.org/10.1017/S0034412507009055 Published online by Cambridge University Press

plausible reading, this could be understood to say that God has some goal that the person is designed to accomplish.[49] If this is how we understand purpose theory, then it seems plausible to say that the meaning of life could not be an atemporal God's purpose. After all, purpose in this sense seems to assume a 'before' in which the fulfilment of the purpose is in question and an 'after' in which it is not. However, this reading misses the point that purpose$_1$ belongs in a strong sense to the object as much or more than to the person who confers it. In other words, what people think that God alone can assign is not something that is a purpose *for Him* that we adopt. Rather, what God assigns to people is something that is a purpose *for them*. That is, He assigns a purpose$_1$ that, if a person accepts it and carries it out, fulfils his nature in a unique sort of way. On this alternative reading of the type of purpose in question, it is not necessary that God have a purpose. Rather, it is only necessary that He be able to assign a purpose$_1$. Consequently, the meaning of life could stem from a purpose$_1$ that has its source in an atemporal God. In fact, it may stem from a purpose$_1$ that can be given by and only by an atemporal God.

Implications

The objection given by Metz to purpose theory, then, is mistaken because it misunderstands what is going on when the purpose theorist says the meaning of life is a purpose that God assigns. The idea is not that God decides on some goal that He wants to fulfil and then chooses or even designs a person to fulfil that goal. The idea is that God designs a person in such a way that the need to fulfil some purpose is built into the person's very nature, such that his life makes no sense apart from that goal. This is not just to say that He makes the person in a way such that the person is suited to that goal, but also to say that having this purpose is somehow constitutive of the person. I would assert that this alternative interpretation provides a better way to read the central claim of purpose theory.

As Metz explains, purpose theory argues that only a purpose assigned by God can give life meaning. On one plausible reading of this claim, it would mean that God has a goal and chooses a person to fulfil it. However, on my reading of this claim, it really means that only God could make a person in such a way that the person has a goal that is, for that person, truly a purpose$_1$. On this latter reading of purpose theory, the theory is not vulnerable to Metz's objection that an atemporal God could not have a purpose. God would not need to have one. Rather, He would only have to be able to create a person in such a way that that person has the kind of purpose$_1$ that can truly be the source of life's meaning. So, Metz's objection fails. If we assume that God is atemporal, His atemporality does not necessarily prevent Him from providing a person with a purpose that gives that person's life meaning.[50]

https://doi.org/10.1017/S0034412507009055 Published online by Cambridge University Press

Notes

1. Thaddeus Metz 'Could God's purpose be the source of life's meaning?', *Religious Studies* **36** (2000), 293–313, 305. I am not sure whether Tolstoy held purpose theory or some other God-centred theory. Craig also suggests some version of this argument, although again he does not base it in purpose theory. Craig also does not claim to be able to prove that life has meaning; William Lane Craig 'The absurdity of life without God', in E. D. Klemke (ed.) *The Meaning of Life* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000), 53–54.
2. Metz 'Could God's purpose be the source of life's meaning?', 295–296, 305–306.
3. *Ibid*., 295.
4. *Ibid*., 296–297. Also, Robert Nozick *Philosophical Explanations* (Cambridge MA: Belknap Press, 1981), 587.
5. Metz 'Could God's purpose be the source of life's meaning?', 303–304.
6. *Ibid*., 308–309.
7. *Ibid*., 309–310.
8. *Ibid*., 310.
9. *Ibid*.
10. *Ibid*., 304, 311. Thanks to an anonymous reviewer for *Religious Studies* for calling my attention to this point.
11. At least, it would not have any purpose when it was formed. After humans invented the fork, they would have found a purpose for it.
12. It might be that the best possible dogfood happened to be even better as a catfood. I will avoid this kind of complication for now.
13. It might seem that I beg the question here. After all, it has not been established that we need God in order for our lives to have purpose. In the course of investigating this problem, it is not fair to rule out an answer just because it implies that we do not need God. While it is true that a negative answer alone is insufficient to rule out a meaning of 'purpose', we should rule out any conception that makes the answer trivial. The principle of charity requires us to look for a sense of the term 'purpose' under which the claim in question could be seen as plausible and interesting, even if it can be disproved.
14. Nozick *Philosophical Explanations*, 586–587.
15. *Ibid*., 587.
16. I suppose it may be possible that there are intelligent creatures who had this as their life's meaning. But I would think that their intelligence would have to be different from ours in ways I cannot imagine. I should also add that whether God could assign this role to us as a duty is a question that I cannot answer.
17. Nozick *Philosophical Explanations*, 586–587.
18. I do not mean to rule out competing or optional purposes here. God might assign us one of several purposes, any one of which we could fulfil. Alternatively, His purpose might be that we fail at a certain purpose in order to find a deeper one. The point here is that being both designed and perfectly fit for a certain end is not enough to entail that that end would be our purpose. We are looking for some kind of closer fit between an object and its end that gives one or more purposes a status higher than those of other purposes.
19. Arthur Danto *Narrative and Knowledge* (New York NY: Columbia University Press), 149–150.
20. *Ibid*., 116–117, 151–153, 157–158.
21. *Ibid*., 116–117.
22. *Ibid*., 143–148; Arthur Prior 'Changes in events and changes in things', in R. Le Poidevin (ed.) *The Philosophy of Time* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1993), 35–40.
23. Thanks to an anonymous reviewer for this journal and to Juliana Bibas for pointing this out. See also Juliana (Vossen) Bibas's unpublished 'The Orthodox clock and the map of the world: Hagia Sophia in the 6th and 7th centuries'.
24. Danto *Narrative and Knowledge*, 142, 146–147; Nozick *Philosophical Explanations*, 575.
25. For this point, I am indebted to St Pavel Florenskii, Heidegger, C. S. Lewis, and Spinoza: St Pavel Florenskii *The Pillar and Ground of the Truth*, tr. Boris Jakim (Princeton NJ: Princeton University Press, 1997), 14–38, 106–110, 114–23; Martin Heidegger *Being and Time*, tr. John Macquarrie & Edward Robinson (New York NY: Harper, 1962), H 66–72; C. S. Lewis *Perelandra: A Novel* (New York NY: Macmillan, 1944), 229–234; Baruch Spinoza *The Ethics*, tr. Samuel Shirley (Indianapolis IA: Hackett, 1992), E1P25–28.

https://doi.org/10.1017/S0034412507009055 Published online by Cambridge University Press

26. Alexander Nehamas *Nietzsche: Life as Literature* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard, 1985), 74–105.
27. *Ibid.*, 80–81. See also Heidegger *Being and Time*, H 66–72, 75–76.
28. Thomas Nagel *The View from Nowhere* (New York NY: Oxford University Press, 1986), 16.
29. *Ibid.*, 3–12.
30. Hence Nagel anticipates that he will encounter serious resistance from those who want an objective account that covers everything; *ibid.*, 7–8, 13–16.
31. Orson Scott Card 'Unaccompanied Sonata', in *idem* (ed.) *Maps in a Mirror: The Short Fiction of Orson Scott Card* (New York NY: T. Doherty Associates, 1990), 277–289.
32. *Ibid.*, 278–281.
33. *Ibid.*, 281–287.
34. *Ibid.*, 288–289.
35. Philippa Foot *Natural Goodness* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 2001), 46.
36. Something very similar to this is described in Nozick *Philosophical Explanations*, 588–589. He talks of a task that might seem to be the fulfilment of every aspect of a person's life. I would alter that claim to say that the task really does make sense of everything in the person's life. Or more to the point, the task or goal would be such that, once it was discovered, it would be inconceivable that someone would try to account for the different aspects of the person's life without making reference to that goal.
37. Metz 'Could God's purpose be the source of life's meaning?', 304–306; *idem* 'Recent work on the meaning of life', *Ethics*, **112** (2002), 786–787.
38. Metz suggests this possibility in 'Recent work on the meaning of life', 787.
39. *Idem* 'Could God's purpose be the source of life's meaning?', 308–309.
40. Nozick *The Examined Life*, 590–591.
41. Granted, creation would not involve tools and materials, if it is understood as making something out of nothing. So, an angel or demiurge would in one sense be utterly free with respect to what it creates. Still, as I say in what follows, creation would seem to call on at least mental resources, which in a finite creature would be dependent on other things. Most importantly, what he would choose to create would be conditioned by the effects that other things have on him. See Spinoza *Ethics*, E1D2, E1P28, E2D5, E2P21.
42. Nozick raises the point negatively by asking whether we would have to ask whether God's plan must be checked against a God who created God, and a God who created him, and so forth; *idem Philosophical Explanations*, 590–591. See also his discussion of 'unboundedness' in *ibid.*, 601–610.
43. John Martin Fischer has pointed out to me that purpose$_1$ and structure$_1$ look identical. I agree, and I suspect that they are very similar, and it may be the case that neither concept is intelligible without the other. The main difference that I would point out is that the structure$_1$ can be in place without actually achieving the purpose$_1$.
44. Thanks to Thaddeus Metz for encouraging me to develop this point. See also Spinoza *Ethics*, E1P25–28.
45. On the other hand, see Metz 'Could God's purpose be the source of life's meaning?', 296, for a brief discussion of whether God could assign a life multiple purposes. See also n. 18.
46. An alternative would say that the meaning is a property that necessarily supervenes on the structure of anything as complex as a human life. But again the reason we were forced into the purpose$_1$ account in the first place was because a mere examination of the structure of the thing seemed to lead us into perspectivalism.
47. Foot *Natural Goodness*, 46.
48. An anonymous reviewer for *Religious Studies* was again very helpful in directing me to this point.
49. This seems at certain points to be what Metz has in mind. This comes out especially in his discussion of whether it is moral for God to assign a purpose; Metz 'Could God's purpose be the source of life's meaning?', 297–302. There, he repeatedly uses terms like 'God's purpose' (298), 'His aim' (299), and 'something [He] would like you to do with your life' (300). See also Nozick *Philosophical Explanations*, 586–588.
50. Thanks to John Martin Fischer, Thaddeus Metz, John McAteer, Fr Patrick Henry Reardon, and an anonymous reviewer for this journal for their valuable suggestions. Thanks also to Juliana Bibas for helpful comments on the significance of events.

https://doi.org/10.1017/S0034412507009055 Published online by Cambridge University Press