

On God and Our Ultimate Purpose

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When believers find out I'm an atheist, they occasionally ask me how I keep going if I don't think my life has any ultimate significance. I tell them I'm not alone. I don't think *their* lives have any ultimate significance either. Less facetiously, I admit that they've touched on an issue that's age-old and deeply felt. It seems many believers find themselves drawn to theism—especially its claim that a perfect God created them—because they think that only God could give their lives ultimate significance.

Some professional advocates of theism have given articulate voice to this kind of thinking, none more so than the high-profile Christian apologist and debater William Lane Craig. In his widely reprinted article "The Absurdity of Life without God,"* Craig argues that only an attitude of despair on our part makes sense if God didn't create us. Unless God exists, our lives are meaningless, trivial, "not fundamentally different from that of a dog." On the bright side, Craig says that God can give our lives the ultimate significance that many of us seek and that, he says, everyone *ought* to seek. He offers this line as a potent strategy for bringing people to God, and he recommends wider use of it by apologists and proselytizers.

But what does *ultimate* really mean? Craig uses the word sixteen times in his article without ever defining it. The dictionary tells us that *ultimate* means "final" or "last," but that doesn't seem to be Craig's point. One thing he seems to mean by it is "unending": our lives can have ultimate significance *only if they never end*. He goes further: our lives have significance at all only if they have ultimate significance, and they lack ultimate significance if they ever end. If we cease to exist when our bodies die, our lives mean nothing.

Why? Because apparently *nothing* that comes to an end is

*Reprinted as, for instance, Chapter 2 of William Lane Craig, *Reasonable Faith: Christian Truth and Apologetics* (Wheaton, Ill.: Crossway Books, 3rd ed., 2008).

ever significant, and all things that end are equally insignificant. Unless we are immortal, says Craig, "Mankind is . . . no more significant than a swarm of mosquitoes or a barnyard of pigs, for their end is all the same."

Craig never defends his claim that nothing temporary has significance or its implication that all temporary things are equally insignificant. He only repeats it, many times, as if it should be obvious. But is it true that nothing temporary has significance? Think about great music or drama. Does a world-class performance of *Tosca* or *King Lear* lack significance just because it lasts only a few hours? Would it have more significance if it never ended? Hardly. Its significance in fact depends on its having a finite arc; it would lose its significance and become unbearably tedious if it went on

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forever. Nor does its finite length make it just as insignificant as an equally long nap. Clearly, then, we need a better measure of significance than mere duration.

I think a less obviously flawed argument must lurk below the surface of Craig's article, one that interprets *ultimate* to mean something like "unquestionable." We know that people often try to make their lives significant by seeking purposes "greater than themselves." Consider any purpose that might lend significance to an atheist's life—maybe he or she devotes his or her life to feed-

ing starving children. What more noble or more significant purpose could one have, after all? Still, Craig might challenge the atheist on his or her own terms: How significant is it, really, to postpone for a relatively short time the deaths of particular members of one terrestrial species on a tiny planet orbiting an undistinguished star in a vast, uncaring universe? If humans aren't cosmically important, why spend limited resources temporarily saving a few specimens?

This version of the argument starts with the question "What's so great about feeding starving children?" An answer comes pretty easily: "It relieves suffering by innocents and gives them a chance to flourish." But notice that we can use our imagination

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to "step back" from that answer: imagine looking at Earth from a billion miles away or looking back from a billion years in the future. Having stepped back, we can ask: "What is (or was) so great about doing that?" Step back far enough and *any* purpose can begin to look small and trivial in the vastness of time and space. It's a familiar enough idea that you can make something look insignificant, or even reveal its true insignificance, by stepping back from it. Think of parents who try to convince their tearful child that an embarrassing incident at school isn't really a reason to stop living.

The argument exploits our ability to take the long view—to occupy a standpoint that makes any purpose questionable, no matter how significant it seems: Why bother pursuing that purpose? It's not hard to get going down this path, as we've seen, and soon we may find ourselves seeking a purpose that transcends the limits of our earthly existence. "Our lives can't have significance," we may conclude, "unless their significance goes beyond our time on Earth."

This version of the argument, then, encourages us to conclude that an ultimate purpose requires God's existence and is secured by God's existence, because only God's existence puts a stop to questions of the form "What's so great about that?" The atheistic worldview never puts a stop to them, and hence it sooner or later leads us into despair. Theism, on the other hand, gives us a

satisfying stopping point: God's purpose in creating us, or maybe God's purpose in creating the universe. When it comes to *God's* purpose, it no longer makes sense to ask "What's so great about that?" It's a purpose that can't be diminished no matter how far back from it you step. Or so the argument goes.

The Impossibility of Ultimate Purpose

Unfortunately for theism, however, the argument doesn't work. You can't put an end to those pesky questions, no matter what you do. Any purpose that we can begin to understand, we can step back from and question. Consider what theistic religions offer as God's actual purpose for our lives: glorifying him and enjoying his presence forever. Surely we can ask—I hereby *do* ask—"What's so great about that?" What is it about such an activity that automatically answers the question "Why is this ultimately worthwhile?" We're not asking a confused or senseless question like "What time is it on the Sun?" or "Why is here here?" It's the same question that Craig would aim at any life purpose an atheist might offer. We can sensibly question any possible answer to it in just the same way.

Granted, in the midst of an ecstatic post-mortem encounter with God it might not occur to you to ask, "Why is *this* ultimate?" But the question would persist even so. By the same token, you can avoid considering a question by getting stoned out of your mind or by committing suicide in the face of it, but you don't thereby answer the question, much less make it disappear.

Following St. Paul, theists may reply, "In this life you see through a glass, darkly. You can't fathom how the state of contemplating God could answer every genuine question, but trust us: it does, as you'll see when you get there." The trouble with this reply is that it's just a promissory note. The same promise can be offered on behalf of anything someone might declare to be our ultimate purpose.

Suppose I said, "Our ultimate purpose in life is to make CO₂ for God's plants and trees, something we're clearly good at. You can't fathom how such a purpose makes our lives ultimately significant, but trust me: it does, as you may someday see." Believers would reject my proposal out of hand. Those seeking ultimate purpose wouldn't be satisfied to learn that they're just CO₂ factories, not even if they learned that God had given them that job and would keep them at it forever. For one thing, such a view makes no sense of the fact that humans possess far higher capacities than the power to exhale.

Nor would my hearers be content with the promise that *someday* they'll see how that purpose counts as ultimately satisfying. Such a promise merely appeals to mystery. If appealing to mystery worked, then atheists could help themselves to it: "Our finite

human existence is ultimately significant, even if none of us can see how it could be." Once you resort to mystery to defend your assertions from criticism, you offer your opponents the same weapon.

"Wait," a believer might object. "Playing a part in God's purposes is *by definition* ultimate. The buck stops with God, the perfect and ontologically ultimate creator of the universe. Because God is who he is, his purpose for us automatically counts as ultimate." No, it doesn't—not in the sense of *ultimate* that launches the argument I'm criticizing.

A purpose ordained by a god who's ultimate in one sense—in the sense that no greater being could exist—needn't be a purpose that's ultimate in the sense required by the argument. In fact, it *can't* be, as we saw: any purpose at all can be sensibly questioned, stepped back from, wondered about, doubted. Again, suppose we learned that we're made by God to produce CO₂—everything else we produce, good or bad, is extraneous to God's plan. No sane person would find that purpose satisfying, regardless of its divine source. Anyone the least bit inclined to question purposes would question that one.

Now, my opponent might offer this proposal: "Sure, we'd be disappointed to discover that we're mere CO₂ factories, so *that* can't be our ultimate purpose. But if God *had* made us merely to produce CO₂, then we'd find that purpose satisfying and would feel no inclination to question it. God adjusts our intellects and aspirations to fit the purpose he gives us." But this reply is just speculation and still only a promissory note: whatever God's purpose for you, we promise you'll find it unquestionable. It's also incompatible with the appeal to mystery that I criticized before: if it really might be mysterious to us how our ultimate purpose counts as satisfying, then for all we know God did make us just to produce CO₂.

This proposal also invites the worry that whatever purpose we end up regarding as ultimate is a purpose we'd find depressingly lowly—like CO₂ production—if only we were smarter and could take a longer view of things. If we take this proposal seriously, the worry that God made us too dumb to see the triviality of our purpose becomes *itself* a cause of dissatisfaction.

You might ask why we have to find a purpose unquestionable in order to find it fully, or ultimately, satisfying. Why can't we find a purpose fully satisfying even *if* we can sensibly ask what's so great about it? But notice that if we take this attitude—"Go ahead and be satisfied with whatever you find satisfying"—then the argument I've been criticizing never gets off the ground. That argument depends on *challenging* any purpose that atheists find satisfying and inviting them to become dissatisfied with that pur-


pose once they step back far enough from it. Notice, too, that we don't actually take an anything-goes attitude toward life purposes: an otherwise normal person who devotes his life to collecting string is, as we say, *wasting* his life.

Theists in the mold of Craig assert, "No purpose can be ultimate unless it comes from God, the ultimate being." I reply that no purpose can be ultimate *even if* it comes from the ultimate being. "All right," they may concede, "but in any case it's enough if we

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play our part in the biggest possible project, God's plan for the universe." At that point, I remind them of what we saw before: not just any part will suffice. Not being a CO₂ factory, for instance.

If, like Craig, we think that "Why bother?" requires an answer going beyond our earthly existence, we should admit that there's no nonarbitrary answer at all, not even the goal of glorifying and enjoying God forever. The same question that made us seek transcendence in the first place—"Why does *that* matter?"—can be asked about glorifying and enjoying God. If we seek an absolute stopping point in our quest for purpose and significance, we'll inevitably come up empty. Ultimate purpose can't exist even if God does; it's a fantasy that shouldn't draw anyone to theism.

Atheists lead lives that lack ultimate significance. So do theists. It's unavoidable. And it doesn't matter which side is right about the existence of God. 

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