

Atheism, Christianity, and the Meaning of Life¹

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Abstract: The quest for the meaning, value, and purpose of life has been a long and arduous investigative program from ancient to contemporary philosophers. Few have codified precisely how Christianity can philosophically promote a robust answer to that quest. In this article, I address how atheistic existentialism fails to proffer a good solution to the meaning of life and how atheists themselves acknowledge the inadequacy of finding such meaning apart from the existence of God. I then argue how Christian theism offers a robust answer to the meaning of life by taking into account the inadequacy of mere happiness, pleasure, and relationships and by contrasting these to the significance of finding ultimate happiness that is only consonant with the significance of life grounded in God. That Christian theism explains a wide variety of facts about our universe makes such a hypothesis a tidier explanation than its atheistic detractors. As such, this explanation (apart from its warrant) should be the preferred one.

INTRODUCTION

Have you ever asked yourself “Why am I here?” or “Why do I exist?” We are thoughtful human creatures and we often engage in such self-reflective analysis – not only in terms of who we are with respect to others but who we are with respect to ourselves. Every day we are bombarded with death and the prospect that our lives are only but short stints against the backdrop of a universe that has existed for almost 14 billion years. Our contributions are local, limited, and temporal. We’re here today but gone tomorrow, as the saying goes. Physicists assure us that the universe will ultimately die out in a heat death inaugurated by a period called the “dark era” where all that will be left is a dilute gas of photons and leptons.² This is not very reassuring of a future! But the broader question here is *If the universe will ultimately die out, what is the meaning, purpose, and value of my life?* Indeed, this question reflects the great existential problem known as the *human predicament*. As members of the human race we are all thrust into an inquisitive culture seeking to find the meaning, purpose, and value of life against the possible backdrop of an overarching plan from a transcendent Designer. But this means that the existence of God has a direct bearing on how we answer those two fundamental questions about our own existence. Some will champion the cause, but others will scoff at the question – insisting that life has meaning regardless of whether or not God exists.

We are all a part of some sort of *worldview* that serves as a context or framework to how we interpret the world around us. In short, a worldview

constitutes an overall perspective on life that sums up what we know about the world, how we evaluate it emotionally, and how we respond to it volitionally.³

And hardly anything, in my estimation, is more impactful than the fundamental question of God’s existence. The eminent philosopher of existentialism Robert Solomon of the University of Texas at Austin explains:

In most people’s philosophies, the belief or nonbelief in God is one of the most important single concepts. It is God who ultimately makes sense of the universe, who gives life meaning. If we believe that life ought to be fair, for example, it is

important to believe that there is some powerful being who will make things come out in some fair way – if not in this life, then in another.⁴

The importance of worldview especially seems to take center stage when we consider the fact of human mortality. Professor Solomon thus comments:

A threat of imminent death - or even a passing thought of our own mortality - is sufficient to wrench us out of our current involvements, even if but for a moment, and force us to look at our lives.⁵

The great pragmatist-psychologist William James suggested that we are thrust into a universe that we perceive to be as a “Thou” instead of as an “It” which appears more consonant with theism.⁶ In other words, it’s as if the universe responds to our personal efforts as something bearing significance in the things that we do, viz., that life has meaning. He goes on to say

... theism always stands ready with the most practically rational solution it is possible to conceive. . . At a single stroke, it changes the dead blank *it* of the world into a living *thou*, with whom the whole man may have dealings.⁷

Indeed, the goal of this discussion will be to contrast two competing worldviews – atheism and theism (specifically, Christian theism) – and to show how these perspectives reflect on those fundamental existential questions about human meaning, value, and purpose.⁸ It will be shown that by the admission of atheists themselves atheism lacks a robust answer to these questions, and that Christian theism proffers a fulfilling and intuitive solution.⁹

THE ATHEISTIC PORTRAIT

Atheism denies that such a being as God exists.¹⁰ Consequently, there is no overarching plan orchestrated to guide human creatures toward any goal. Our arrival in this world is either accidental or somehow the product of blind natural laws (perhaps a combination of both in which case our arrival is still ultimately accidental). The prospect of a good argument for the necessary existence of some fundamental Laws of Nature looks quite bleak from the standpoint of astrophysics.¹¹ But never mind. Even if it could be shown that our existence is due to such necessity, it would offer nothing in terms of providing any meaning or purpose for life. Just because the universe might be governed in a certain fashion necessarily, it does not follow that evolved human life must behave in only one way. In fact human freedom seems to be *prima facie* grounds for thinking that it is *not* the case that life’s meaning or value have only one trajectory. For example, consider that the power or wattage of a circuit is determined by the circuit’s current multiplied by its voltage (or $P=IV$). This is based on Ohm’s Law which is a practical, fundamental law of electronics. But showing the necessary wattage of a circuit containing, say, 12 amps with a voltage of 120 to be 1,440 watts does nothing to show *existentially* why the circuit should be producing just that much power. In other words, if you wanted to know the *purpose* of producing just that much wattage, appeals to Ohm’s Law here would not serve that end. And given the freedom to have

manipulated the circuit's impedance, its power source, or the voltage levels to be any value you deemed fit secures this conclusion. Now it certainly might be the case that the universe itself simply has no purpose (and we ought not to think that this is not a viable option philosophically). But that would only serve to show that the universe in effect has no purpose, meaning, or value and offers no motivation for behaving appropriately (whatever that might mean) or possessing a foundation for any ultimate worth.

Now this is not merely the conclusion of theistic apologists seeking to undermine an atheistic worldview. Rather, this confession comes from no less than the prominent, intelligent atheists of the last century. In this section we'll briefly explore some of those confessions and see what sorts of solutions to the human predicament have been offered.

Jean-Paul Sartre (1905 – 1980), the French philosopher and playwright. On the heels of the renowned German philosopher Martin Heidegger, the French philosopher Jean-Paul Sartre came onto the scene with the suggestion that human beings must realize their point of view from the standpoint of human consciousness and that they are truly free. Consequently, each person is ultimately responsible for his or her own actions. Contrary to Sartre, Heidegger thought that we could not detach ourselves from the fact that we are all "Being-in-the-world" which is to say that one cannot think of consciousness apart from existing in the context of the external world in which we find ourselves ("facticity"). None of us, therefore, should think of ourselves as individual egos free to do or be anything whatsoever. However, the reality of death once again forces each person to identify with the "they" of the human community (or "Da-sein") instead of the individual ego. Why? Because reflecting on the fact that I in particular am going to die fills me with "Angst" or dread. But once I return to viewing *my* death as a detached "one dies" proposition, then I can estrange myself from this Angst. Heidegger writes:

The analysis of "one dies" reveals unambiguously the kind of being of everyday being toward death. In such talk, death is understood as an indeterminate something which first has to show up from somewhere, but which right now is *not yet objectively present* for oneself, and is thus no threat. "One dies" spreads the opinion that death, so to speak, strikes the they. The public interpretation of Da-sein says that "one dies" because in this way everybody can convince him/herself that in no case is it I myself, for this one is *no one*. ... Factually one's own Da-sein is always already dying, that is, it is in a being-toward-its-end. And it conceals this fact from itself by reinterpreting death as a case of death occurring every day with others, a case which always assures us still more clearly that "one oneself" is still "alive." But in the entangled flight *from* death, the everydayness of Da-sein bears witness to the fact that the they itself is always already determined as *being toward death*, even when it is not explicitly engaged in "thinking about death."¹²

In other words, by redirecting our attention away from the fact that *I am going to die to human beings will die* then we can treat the prospect of nonexistence and the psychological "Angst" baggage associated with it indifferently and tranquilly. It

objectifies the event and treats it dispassionately. It is a clever displacement of our individual focus; but, as Heidegger himself acknowledged, it is most assuredly to live an inauthentic existence.

Contrary to Heidegger's "Da-sein," Sartre's attitude is that we embrace the reality of our individual selves. As such we become "Being-for-itself" which is to say that we are beings of consciousness. And such consciousness entails the freedom of intention (i.e., I am free to finish writing this paper). However, in agreement with Heidegger, one's ability to act will be limited by "facticity." But lest one falls into "bad faith" (e.g., to focus too much either on one's intentionality or "facticity"), one must understand the presence and role of both. Moreover, given that each person has such freedom of intention and, as he argues in his *Existentialism is a Naturalism*, that we ought not to view ourselves as pre-determined essences that are designed to conform to antecedently formulated concepts about what it means to live our individual lives. As such, Sartre was a committed atheist who viewed Christianity on the analogy of a "paper knife." He writes,

[T]he conception of man in the mind of God is comparable to that of the paper-knife in the mind of the artisan: God makes man according to a procedure and a conception, exactly as the artisan manufactures a paper-knife, following a definition and a formula. Thus each individual man is the realization of a certain conception which dwells in the divine understanding.¹³

The consequence, argues Sartre, is that mankind is truly not free but is a case of *essence preceding existence*. This is no doubt the partial meaning of the modern-day expression "freethought" which appears to signify those who are not "hindered" by the pre-set divine purpose and execution of life. Sartre's existentialism would thus come to define what it means to be an atheistic existentialist in denying the primacy of essence over existence:

Atheistic existentialism, of which I am a representative, declares with greater consistency that if God does not exist there is at least one being whose existence comes before its essence, a being which exists before it can be defined by any conception of it. That being is man or, as Heidegger has it, the human reality. What do we mean by saying that existence precedes essence? We mean that man first of all exists, encounters himself, surges up in the world—and defines himself afterwards.¹⁴

For Sartre, existence *precedes* essence so that "Man is nothing else but that which he makes of himself."¹⁵ Now, this sense of liberation may sound refreshing and eye-opening, but it engenders a sense of "anguish" when we realize that

[w]hen a man commits himself to anything, fully realizing that he is not only choosing what he will be, but is thereby at the same time a legislator deciding for the whole of mankind—in such a moment a man cannot escape from the sense of complete and profound responsibility. ... It is anguish pure and simple, of the kind well known to all those who have borne responsibilities.¹⁶

But why should the atheist think that such a life is one of anguish? After all, as we've been told, the atheist certainly recognizes that apart from God we must still be honest and humane with each other – and we get to lose God in the mix! So, what is the problem? Why the anguish? Sartre explains:

The existentialist ... finds it extremely embarrassing that God does not exist, for there disappears with Him all possibility of finding values in an intelligible heaven. There can no longer be any good *a priori*, since there is no infinite and perfect consciousness to think it. It is nowhere written that "the good" exists, that one must be honest or must not lie, since we are now upon the plane where there are only men. Dostoevsky once wrote "If God did not exist, everything would be permitted": and that, for existentialism, is the starting point. Everything is indeed permitted if God does not exist, and man is in consequence forlorn, for he cannot find anything to depend upon either within or outside himself. He discovers forthwith, that he is without excuse. ... Nor, on the other hand, if God does not exist, are we provided with any values or commands that could legitimize our behaviour. Thus we have neither behind us, nor before us in a luminous realm of values, any means of justification or excuse. We are left alone, without excuse. That is what I mean when I say that man is condemned to be free.¹⁷

Thus, if atheism is true, mankind should be in "anguish," "forlorn," and "alone" and these constitute what it means to be "condemned to be free" in a world where God does not exist. And ultimately atheistic existentialism becomes a plight to "save [man] from himself" and to salvage from life a "doctrine of action" so that we can, if possible, retain hope.¹⁸

Albert Camus (1913 – 1960), the Algerian-French novelist and philosopher. In his exploration of the human predicament he makes it patently clear that such a predicament is not only real but perhaps the most important question we can ever ask ourselves. In seeing that life tends to be filled with endless routines that are locked in vicious circles, he writes:

There is but one truly serious philosophical problem, and that is suicide. Judging whether life is or is not worth living amounts to answering the fundamental question of philosophy. ... I see many people die because they judge that life is not worth living. ... Dying voluntarily implies that you have recognized, even instinctively, the ridiculous character of that habit, the absence of any profound reason for living, the insane character of that daily agitation, and the uselessness of suffering.¹⁹

What is this "insane character of that daily agitation"? He continues:

It happens that the stage sets collapse. Rising, streetcar, four hours in the office or the factory, meal, streetcar, four hours of work, meal, sleep, and Monday Tuesday Wednesday Thursday Friday and Saturday according to the same

rhythm – this path is easily followed most of the time. But one day the ‘why’ arises and everything begins in that weariness tinged with amazement.²⁰

In what would become one of the most popular expressions of the human predicament, Camus declares that this situation means that “life is absurd” when we become aware of this endless routine. His argument is that human beings tend to be entrenched in these vicious cycles of working to live so that we can live to work so that we can work another day to live another day, and so on. This pattern, perhaps even taking on a certain amount of suffering within the routine, is “insane” and “ridiculous” and forces us to consider why we just don’t commit suicide!²¹

Bertrand Russell (1872 – 1970), the British philosopher and mathematician. Professor Russell is quite known as a critic of theism. He himself had participated in a famous debate on the existence of God with the eminent philosopher of history Father F.C. Copleston on a BBC radio broadcast. Russell, in his reflection as to how science speaks to the human predicament, confesses the following:

... Man is the product of causes which had no prevision of the end they were achieving; that his origin, his growth, his hopes and fears, his loves and his beliefs, are but the outcome of accidental collocations of atoms; that no fire, no heroism, no intensity of thought and feeling, can preserve an individual life beyond the grave; that all the labours of the ages, all the devotion, all the inspiration, all the noonday brightness of human genius, are destined to extinction in the vast death of the solar system, and that the whole temple of Man's achievement trust inevitably be buried beneath the debris of a universe in ruins – all these things, if not quite beyond dispute, are yet so nearly certain, that no philosophy which rejects them can hope to stand. Only within the scaffolding of these truths, only on the firm foundation of unyielding despair, can the soul's habitation henceforth be safely built.²²

For Russell, we have to *begin* by knowing that the universe will ultimately die out, that “Man’s achievement” will be “buried beneath the debris of a universe in ruins”, and that this is “beyond dispute”. As a result, we must build “on the firm foundation of unyielding despair” if we’re going to find a “habitation” for the soul. He would go on to say that love, knowledge, and the unbearable pity for the suffering of mankind would serve his life’s purpose. But one can rightly be forced to ask, *What difference would these things make if the universe is destined to extinction?*²³ That Russell enjoyed his life is without doubt, but the level of enjoyment does not suggest that life has *ultimate* meaning, purpose, or value – something Russell himself acknowledges.

Friedrich Nietzsche (1844-1900), the famous German philosopher who proclaimed nihilism. Nietzsche is well-known in philosophical circles for his reduction of human ethical decision-making to a fight over the will to power. But he is also known for making a bold (and sometimes misunderstood) statement declaring, “God is dead!” In fact we wish to unpack that very line and its context since it has direct bearing on his philosophical nihilism (literally “nothing-ism”) and how he perceives this great existential quest we’ve been discussing. Nietzsche tells a fictional story about a madman who runs out into the marketplace amongst atheists yelling, “I seek God! I seek God!”

When he draws the attention of the surrounding people, he proceeds to explain what happened to God:

God is dead ... and we have killed him, you and I! We are all his murderers!
"But how have we done it? How were we able to drink up the sea? Who gave us the sponge to wipe away the whole horizon? What did we do when we loosened this earth from its sun? Whither does it now move? Whither do we move? Away from all suns? Do we not dash on unceasingly? Backwards, sideways, forwards, in all directions? Is there still an above and below? Do we not stray, as through infinite nothingness? Does not empty space breathe upon us? Has it not become colder? Does not night come on continually, darker and darker? Shall we not have to light lanterns in the morning? God is dead! And we have killed him!²⁴

As a result, the churches have now become the "tombs and monuments of God".²⁵ The impact Nietzsche wishes to make here is one of morbidity. Without God we appear to have no comforting foundation for our existence and values. The world around us collapses in darkness. And we, figuratively speaking, will have to "light [our own] lanterns in the morning." With the death of God comes the death of a foundation, and with the death of a foundation we are left with a new ethic – one that is merely a drive for power over others:

What is good? – All that enhances the feeling of power, the Will to Power, and all the power itself in man. What is bad? – All that proceeds from weakness. What is happiness? – The feeling that power is increasing – that resistance has been overcome.²⁶

Once God is removed from being the foundation of moral value, human purpose, and meaning to life, we are then left with a Hobbesian portrait of mankind that makes it "poor, nasty, brutish, and short".²⁷ The only solution is to take control and acquire the power over others so that we can resist pity and heighten our vitality.

Kai Nielsen (b. 1926), the eminent Canadian political and ethical philosopher of the contemporary age. Nielsen's portrait of the human condition is not as bleak as Nietzsche's in that Nielsen's analysis of the human predicament through the eyes of a secularist does not lead one to total nihilism or an absence of values. But we'll address Nielsen's proposed solution to the predicament in a moment. Here, our interest is (once again) to show an atheistic confession that in the absence of God there simply is no objective meaning, value, or purpose to life. Nielsen makes this clear pronouncement:

... without God there can be no overarching purpose, no one basic scheme of human existence, in virtue in which we could find a meaning for our grubby lives. It is this overall sense of meaning that man so ardently strives for, but it is not to be found in a purely secular worldview.²⁸

For Nielsen, the problem is rather perspicacious. But in his assessment of this problem as it relates to Christianity vs. atheism, he seems to shift his unit of analysis. Though the problem is properly understood in terms of atheism's lack of an "overarching

purpose” to life, he has the theistic indictment of atheism here “that no purely human purposes are ultimately worth striving for.”²⁹ Thus, his goal in this evaluation of the problem for secularists is to “try to make evident [some] reasons for believing that we do not need God or any religious conception to support our moral convictions.”³⁰ The original problem here is that on atheism one does not have a *foundation* for such value and purpose – something Nielsen adamantly agrees with – but in his assessment he shifts his evaluation toward responding to whether secularists have *motivation* for living out godless lives. Thus he mistakenly confesses, “I do not see why purposes of purely human devising are not ultimately worth striving for.”³¹ It must be emphasized that we are *not* interested in whether or not atheists can live what they consider to be meaningful lives. I think anyone can find reasons to live and enjoy rich, fulfilling lives. But in terms of establishing that atheism *lacks* any objective grounding for objective meaning, purpose, or value in life is certainly upheld by Nielsen’s initial confession.

SOME PROPOSED ATHEISTIC SOLUTIONS TO THE HUMAN PREDICAMENT

In this section we’ll explore some of the proposed solutions offered by those who seek to supplant the traditional theistic portrait of an objectively grounded value system in a world planned by a divine creator. Since the non-theist does not embrace the existence of God and, more abstractly, a transcendent ground for such existential values then we must assess whether there are any competing reasons that are firmly grounded.

1. *Standing in the face of the problem brings victory.* Recall that, for Camus, life is absurd because we tend to live our lives in vicious cycles of repetition – lives that tend to continue toward no ultimate end through self-made means. It’s our awareness of this predicament that results in the absurdity of life. But Camus’ story does not end there. He does want to emphasize that our awareness of this vicious cycle in itself prompts victory:

Being aware of one’s life, one’s revolt, one’s freedom, and to the maximum, is living, and to the maximum.³²

But why would this awareness be living “to the maximum”? Because in this awareness each man “knows himself to be the master of his days” and since God does not play a role in the life of mankind, “[t]his universe henceforth without a master seems to him neither sterile nor futile.”³³ But what exactly is Camus trying to tell us? This solution may in effect “[drive] out of this world a god who had come into it with dissatisfaction and a preference for futile sufferings”³⁴, but it does nothing to solve the crisis exemplified by the human predicament. Camus’ solution is really no solution at all other than that one “always finds one’s burden again” and that the “struggle itself toward the heights is enough to fill a man’s heart” toward happiness of some sort.³⁵ There is a sense that mankind must resign itself to understand that the absurd and personal happiness are both somehow necessary parts of human fulfillment. It is to say, as he writes, that there “is no sun without a shadow, and it is essential to know the night.”³⁶ It appears that Camus wants to convey that one finds happiness or fulfillment through personal struggles because through these struggles we achieve the victories in our lives that bring about happiness.

The professor of philosophy at New York University, Thomas Nagel, makes the following observation about Camus' presentation:

This seems to me romantic and slightly self-pitying. ... Such dramatics, even if carried on in private, betray a failure to appreciate the cosmic unimportance of the situation.³⁷

Why? Because when we consider this from the aspect of eternity, "[if] there is no reason to believe that anything matters, then that does not matter either, and we can approach our absurd lives with irony instead of heroism or despair."³⁸ At the end of the day, no objective reason exists for why one ought to rise up and be victorious in the wake of our absurd lives. It may sound noble and dignifying to shake our fists in the face of the human predicament, but at the end of the day Camus never settles that "urgent" problem he first posed: suicide. That one would freely rise up and press on in the face of adversity is every bit a personal choice as the decision to end one's life. Why should anyone prefer one option over the other? In fact what we may have here are equal grounds for *ending* our absurd lives rather than *preserving* them. The famous author of *War and Peace*, Leo Tolstoy, reflects on this possibility and writes:

People ... know that death is better than life, but not having the strength to act rationally – to end the deception quickly and kill themselves – they seem to wait for something. This is the escape of weakness, for if I know what is best and it is within my power; why not yield to what is best?³⁹

What would Camus say to someone who opposes "the escape of weakness" and opts to "end the deception quickly" through suicide? Camus offers no solution and warrants us to conclude, with Nagel, that he fails to appreciate "the cosmic unimportance of the situation."

2. *Love of others and relationship-building bring fulfillment.* Many, like Bertrand Russell, have sought to intimate love into the dynamic of how life engenders meaning, value, and purpose. For Russell, his love took on a sense of sympathy for the less fortunate and a passion for a world of peace. Love, being at the very heart of many people's motivation for action, is certainly in synch with our human *emotional* apparatus. Human beings have a need to love and be loved and this other-directed love pursued in Russell's own life brought him personal joy and fulfillment. But here again we need to draw a distinction between our *motivation* for living versus life's *purpose* or *meaning*. There is no doubt that people will be motivated to oppose injustices and to promote compassion for the less fortunate, but this still is not an objective foundation for life's meaning, purpose, and value.

One response to this comes from no less an atheist than the late egoist Ayn Rand who argued vociferously against any ethic promoting self-sacrifice. She scathingly writes,

Under a morality of sacrifice, the first value you sacrifice is morality; the next is self-esteem. When need is the standard, every man is both victim and parasite. As a victim, he must labor to fill the needs of others, leaving himself in the

position of a parasite whose needs must be filled by others. He cannot approach his fellow men except in one of two disgraceful roles: he is both a beggar and a sucker. ... [T]his same morality demands that you surrender your soul to promiscuous love for all comers.⁴⁰

What is interesting in Rand's response is that she sees no good reason to think that one ought to be motivated by love to help others, much less be grounded in it! In fact she seems to find that an ethic of self-sacrifice/love seems to betray our very nature and relegates us to being "disgraceful." Whether one takes the extreme position of Rand or not in a non-theistic world isn't the point, the point here is that one is not driven to think of love as a foundation for the existential values of the human condition. One could rightly ask of these two competing views which one we ought to exemplify. But neither position is demanded of us through any objective foundation or rationale. It all seems to be predicated on personal choice and motivation.

Secondly, the late Christian philosopher Francis Schaeffer once pointed out that this scenario is a desperate attempt to borrow from a theistic worldview. A drive to help others and to perform certain sacrifices is a feature of the theistic worldview, not an atheistic one. So in an attempt to use love as a basis for life's meaning and purpose, it's stolen from a theistic worldview and intimidated into the non-theist's framework. What this apparently shows is that the non-theist cannot live *consistently*.⁴¹ From the level of the non-theist, why should someone bother to care for the needs of others if it does not promote one's own well-being? Perhaps the non-theist here can regroup and suggest that the reason why we should promote love in our lives is because that route ultimately brings about the most happiness. If every person sought only their individual desires then we would not live in a world ultimately conducive to our personal happiness. Thus we must live in a sort of social contract and give up some of our desires to follow an unbounded egoism in order to bring about the most happiness to the most people. Kai Nielsen explains:

Man, as we know him, is an animal with a culture; he is part of a community, and the very *concept* of community implies binding principles and regulations – duties, obligations and rights. ... Given that [people] all start from scratch and have roughly equal abilities, it seems to me that it would be most reasonable, even for rational egoists, to band together into a community where each man's interests were given consideration, where each person was treated as deserving of respect.⁴²

Thus we curtail some of our desires and passions and opt for sacrifice and love in order to foster a community that will eventually maximize every person's ability to pursue happiness. This Hobbesian portrait becomes a necessary staple for society so that each person will enjoy the most out of their lives. But once again I cannot help but ask, *Why should I bother helping and loving others in order to maximize happiness for everyone when I can maximize my own happiness to the fullest?* This portrait may work as a general rule to make happiness an egalitarian benefit for all who participate, but why should I care whether others benefit at all unless it serves to underscore my own happiness? Maybe I might just leave the "social contract" for everyone *else* to follow

while secretly maximizing my own personal happiness. Would I be doing anything wrong here? Or more to the point, are there any objective grounds to conclude that I ought to participate in a social contract with anyone? Again the answer seems to be No. It's purely an option in order to blindly afford everyone the same opportunity I might have. But why should I care? What makes a pure egoism wrong in a Russell-Nielsen world other than the arbitrary desire to promote a level playing field for all? Once again such existential decision-making for the non-theist reduces to personal preference – just what exactly do you want to do? What motivates you?

Finally, if we define the love of fellow human beings as encompassing a sort of altruism in the sense that we ought to *help* others, then we end up with a rather peculiar definition for the meaning of life – one that requires there to be people perpetually in need. The moment all needs are taken care of, the purpose of life loses its teeth and we're back to square one. But if we insist that there will *always* be people in need – or, more peculiarly, that there *ought* to be – then we end up with a sort of uncomfortable definition for the meaning of life that requires a sort of co-dependency. The meaning of life becomes a sort of contingent definition that could conceivably expire or else consistently be other-driven in some never-ending pursuit to fulfill an unquenchable need. Such an enterprise would make the meaning of life similar to being a personal injury attorney whose career *requires* that there exist car accidents and such. But it seems rather unconscionable to define life's *purpose* or *fulfillment* on the backs of the suffering. Would a utopian sort of society therefore *lack* any meaning for life? If so, it would seem that the very thing that satisfies the meaning of life for us now is to advance one step closer to *removing* it from the clutches of yet-to-be-born human progeny.

3. *Happiness and success are meaningful goals (or telos*⁴³*).* Epicurus was perhaps one of the first philosophers to overtly declare that life's end engenders personal happiness in the sense defined by avoiding pain and preferring pleasure. By this he means to emphasize one's aversion from pain and the promotion of pleasure. But it is a mistake to think of this early pronouncement as a license to engage in unrestrained animal behavior.⁴⁴ Indeed, when consequentialist theories of ethics rooted in hedonism were being groomed by European philosophers (i.e., Jeremy Bentham and John Stuart Mill), it was a common charge against the utility of such theories that they were masked promotions of unyielding Epicurean pleasure. Mill vociferously objects to this characterization when he complains,

The comparison of the Epicurean life to that of beasts is felt as degrading, precisely because a beast's pleasures do not satisfy a human being's conceptions of happiness. Human beings have faculties more elevated than the animal appetites, and when once made conscious of them, do not regard anything as happiness which does not include their gratification.⁴⁵

Epicurus himself lays the groundwork for what constitutes the proper attitude toward pleasure when he ponders life's ultimate fear – death:

Become accustomed to the belief that death is nothing to us. For all good and evil consists in sensation, but death is deprivation of sensation. And therefore a right understanding that death is nothing to us makes the mortality of life

enjoyable, not because it adds to it an infinite span of time, but because it takes away the craving for immortality. ... [W]hen death comes, then we do not exist. It does not then concern either the living or the dead, since the former it is not, and the latter are no more. ... [S]o he seeks to enjoy not the longest period of time, but the most pleasant.

The aforementioned philosopher Ayn Rand proffered an ethic that sought to promote happiness for each individual.⁴⁶ She makes it very clear that the “purpose of morality is to teach you, not to suffer and die, but to enjoy yourself and live.”⁴⁷ However, she is also careful to temper this selfish behavior when she writes:

Man's life, as required by nature, is not the life of a mindless brute, of a looting thug or a mooching mystic, but the life of a thinking being – not life by means of force or fraud, but life by means of achievement – not survival at any price, since there's only one price that pays for man's survival: reason. ... Accept the fact that the achievement of your happiness is the only *moral* purpose of your life, and that *happiness* – not pain or mindless self-indulgence – is the proof of your moral integrity, since it is the proof and the result of your loyalty to the achievement of your values.⁴⁸

Her discussion centers around the idea that living organisms in nature tend toward self-survival and a pleasurable quality of life. Human beings being endowed with volitional consciousness must *choose* his or her course of action when prompted by a moral dilemma. But since the pattern of nature is just to seek self-survival and happiness, we would only be fulfilling our nature by acting in such a way as to promote those ideas in our lives. Since reason sets us apart from other living organisms, we must calculate our egoism so that we do not sacrifice reason at the doorstep of hedonism. This would, consequentially, take away our privileged status as rational animals. Thus it would be incorrect to portray the ethical theories of hedonism, utilitarianism, and egoism as expressions of bald, animal indulgences. Instead, they are thought-out avenues of commonsense, personal pleasure.

It must also be noted that an alternative to the definition of happiness also presents itself. Aristotle once defined happiness in a more sophisticated manner – one that did not consider pleasure as its defining feature. Instead, happiness (Greek: *eudemonia*) is best understood as the ultimate fulfilling of our function as human beings. It ought to be construed as a matter of human success rather than as a trivial state of physical sensation; though such external pleasures are needed in moderation to maximally promote the internal goods each person is capable of producing. It will be the harmonization of all of the goods that a person can engage in – goods for both the body and soul. Aristotle writes:

[H]uman good turns out to be activity of soul exhibiting excellence, and if there are more than one excellence, in accordance with the best and most complete. But we must add ‘in a complete life.’ For one swallow does not make a summer, nor does one day; and so too one day, or a short time, does not make a man blessed and happy. ... Happiness, then, is something final and self-sufficient,

and is the end of action. ... Happiness is the best, noblest, and most pleasant thing in the world, and these attributes are not severed as in the description at Delos—

Most noble is that which is justest, and best is health; But most pleasant it is to win what we love.

For all these properties belong to the best activities; and these, for one – the best – of these, we identify with happiness. Yet evidently, as we said, it needs the external goods as well; for it is impossible, or not easy, to do noble acts without the proper equipment. ... [H]appiness seems to need this sort of prosperity in addition; for which reason some identify happiness with good fortune, though others identify it with virtue. ... [Happiness] has been said to be a virtuous activity of soul, of a certain kind.⁴⁹

The virtuous person then, says Aristotle, will seek to imitate the virtuous⁵⁰ behavior of those worthy of emulation and in so doing each person will take steps toward achieving one's full potential:

Now such a thing happiness, above all else, is held to be; for this we choose always for itself and never for the sake of something else, but honour, pleasure, reason, and every virtue we choose indeed for themselves ... we choose them for the sake of happiness, judging that through them we shall be happy.⁵¹

And

the virtues are implanted in us neither by nature nor contrary to nature: we are by nature equipped with the ability to receive them, and habit brings this ability to completion and fulfillment. ... Hence it is no small matter whether one habit or another is inculcated in us from early childhood; on the contrary, it makes a considerable difference, or, rather, all the difference.⁵²

This understanding of happiness, to which the vehicle of the virtues takes us, is clearly more consonant with the New Testament attitude of “blessedness” espoused in Jesus’ famous Sermon on the Mount than Epicurus’ hedonistic aversion from pain.

But whether happiness ought to be defined as either Epicurean or Aristotelian, some problems remain for suggesting that happiness is the *telos* of life. First, there is no criterion for determining *which* definition ought to be employed. If one opts simply to define happiness in terms of Epicurean or sensuous pleasure, then we appear to have very little to combat such a conclusion. Cries of shallowness or superficiality would only serve to illustrate *our* personal disdain for such a definition, but no amount of individual or corporate protest would advance a reason to prefer what appears to be more “appropriate.” We will engage the underlying question of morality in the last part of this section. But suffice it to say, in the absence of any objective foundation on which to prefer, say, an Aristotelian approach, we are simply held hostage to ethical relativism here. Secondly, though I think the Aristotelian approach appears to be more intuitive than its Epicurean counterpart, the notion of life's purpose being arrived at by achieving a destination to human activity will either lead to an unattainable goal or a deprived

reason for one's continued existence. Regardless which result ensues, life will once again be meaningless under such a rubric. If we define happiness as an ongoing pursuit, then it must be acknowledged that *ex hypothesi* one could never reach a destination. For no matter how many gradients of happiness one achieved, one could always advance an additional step. But this would make the entire happiness enterprise an unachievable goal – a trajectory toward infinity. If on the other hand we reduce the *amount* of gradients associated with happiness (say, the accumulation of a finite number of goals, or perhaps even just one main goal) then we risk making our lives empty in this post-*telos* state; for what does one do now once the goal has been achieved? We either generate *new* goals, thereby redefining our *telos* (which will entail collapsing back into the problem of the unattainability of our goals), or we bite the bullet and complain that our lives are now gratuitous from here on out – something this non-theistic alternative is seeking to thwart! No matter which horn of the dilemma we embrace, the final result will be the meaninglessness of life *anyway*.⁵³

One final problem emerges from the discussion about the definition and extent of Aristotelian happiness. Even if we elevate the discussion of happiness to the seemingly intuitive and benign understanding of being the *telos* and fulfillment of human nature, we have the problem of defining precisely *which* goals serve to be happiness-making features. The problem that naturally arises from such a query is that one could potentially define happiness as being the best prostitute one could be! Or, perhaps one perceives their *telos* as being the best serial killer they could possibly be. Clearly there is a problem with definitions of human goals in these terms, but there are only two avenues the Aristotelian or Epicurean could pursue here: Either (i) we simply accept that moral values are not relevant to the human predicament, or (ii) we accept that moral values *do* define which goals are better to pursue. The contemporary atheist philosopher Julian Baggini feels the force of this dilemma when he writes,

Consider the question of whether it is true that a meaningful life has to be a moral one. We could simply reject this. Why not just say that meaning and morality are separate? ... The second response is to say that this does violence to the concept of a meaningful life and we must accept that meaning and morality are connected.⁵⁴

But Baggini's preference for the latter option leads to an uncomfortable account of question-begging:

[M]orality does have a vital place in my account. I have argued that the only thing that can make life meaningful is the recognition that human life is worth living in itself. To recognize this is to recognize something that is true of all human (and perhaps some animal) life. This means accepting that each of us has an equal claim to the good things in life, and that making a person's life worse than it need be is a moral wrong.⁵⁵

But now the question is: What precisely is *a human life worth living in itself*? It smacks of an objective ethic, and it appears to merely acknowledge the *universality* of certain actions and from them subsequently infers (wrongly) their *objectivity*. Baggini continues

to speak of life needing to have “value in itself” but leaves us open to determining what that means. If no objective foundation can be afforded here, then the resolution remains “a purely individual affair.”⁵⁶ Baggini does confess one important matter with which I agree, however. He says that

[we] may be mistaken or ignorant about the value and meaning of our own lives. So it does not simply follow from the fact that a person *thinks* they have a meaningful life that they actually do.⁵⁷

But what all of this entails is that even if one thinks that their *telos* is in conformity with morality, one may still be mistaken about its resolution to the human predicament because of the non-objectivity of its grounds. And I think the only way to affirm an objective moral value system is to affirm one that is rooted in a transcendent anchor that is immutable, timeless, and can translate such a system into moral duties and obligations. But this seems to imply an Abrahamic theism.⁵⁸ Thus, ironically, in an attempt to avert the implication of theism in defining the meaning of life (whether in happiness or not) will inevitably imply God’s existence in order to do so if we are to share Baggini’s intuition in his example that it seems “odd to say that the Gestapo officer can have a meaningful but immoral life.”⁵⁹ On what other grounds could we justify the proposition that it is objectively wrong for someone to be the best Gestapo officer they could be?⁶⁰

A PROPOSED CHRISTIAN SOLUTION TO THE HUMAN PREDICAMENT

For most existential thinkers, the quest for the meaning of life would admittedly come to a screeching halt if it could be shown that a personal God exists to their satisfaction.⁶¹ But since it is not our goal to *presume* that the God of biblical Christianity exists in the immediate paper nor to *prove* such a thesis, we shall clarify that we are engaging in some practical engineering and beginning with the pragmatic problem of the human predicament. If all of the proposed atheistic solutions leave us empty and the remaining theistic solutions solidifies a viable response to the predicament, then it should drive us to *want* to examine the evidences for Christian belief with some degree of favorability. Even if such evidence does not amount to a “knock-down” argument for God’s existence or that it should remain that a personal encounter with such a personal God seems ambiguous, we should prefer to accept even these modest approaches over and above the weaker alternatives. This is what the famous pragmatic psychologist William James proffered in his work, *The Will to Believe*:

To preach scepticism to us as a duty until “sufficient evidence” for religion be found, is tantamount therefore to telling us, when in presence of the religious hypothesis, that to yield to our fear of its being error is wiser and better than to yield to our hope that it may be true. ... I simply refuse obedience to the scientist’s command to imitate his kind of option, in a case where my own stake is important enough to give me the right to choose my own form of risk. ... *In concreto*, the freedom to believe can only cover living options which the intellect of the individual cannot by itself resolve; and living options never seem absurdities to him who has them to consider.⁶²

James was not calling for a jettisoning of the rational intellect but, rather, was suggesting that if one has a religious experience and/or an assessment of the evidence for atheism insofar as it *at best* leaves us teetering on the fulcrum of truth, then we have every right to prefer belief in God for fear of being wrong or (in our present discussion) for fear of lacking a meaningful and purposeful life.

There is also an important corollary to belief in God. Human beings to some extent must be *immortal*. Now, we're not interested in the shape this immortality takes, whether it is in the ongoing existence of the human soul culminating in a physical resurrection or in the materialistic approach of *bodily re-creation*.⁶³ As long as some cognitive aspect of the person continues on indefinitely, that is sufficient to provide the added component necessary to warrant God's existence as a relevant feature. Consider that if there was no immortality, then it would not make any difference whether God exists since neither the individual nor the other members of the human race will stand to benefit from an individual's life. It remains every bit as problematic as the physical universe that itself will die out once the energy is used up. If the same is true for human beings, then there would be no ultimate significance for any decisions or actions that we make. Conversely, the concept of immortality, though necessary, is not a *sufficient* condition for the meaning of life apart from the theistic hypothesis either. Just because one's existence may go on indefinitely does not mean that such a life suddenly acquires meaning, value, or purpose. I am reminded of one of the original *Twilight Zone* episodes about a man who was a bed-ridden, hypochondriac thereby making life unpleasant for him and his wife. Realizing the opportunity for exploitation, the devil appears to him and makes a contractual deal. The devil agrees to bestow immortality (and, consequently, good health) to the man in exchange for his soul should he decide to invoke the escape clause and end his life. Believing that immortality would provide him the necessary ingredient for a happier life, the man signs the contract and begins to entertain himself through instances of cheating death. Eventually the man falls bored of his increasingly mediocre life – seeing the risks he takes as mundane and lacking thrill. Through an altercation with his wife, he accidentally kills her but decides to accept full blame for a morbidly thrilling chance to sit in the electric chair. Unbeknownst to him, his assigned lawyer successfully convinces the judge to get his sentence reduced to life in prison! Realizing the predicament of his immortality in a prison cell, the man quickly accedes to the escape clause despite the fact that it culminates in forfeiting his soul to the devil. The lesson here is that though years may be added indefinitely to one's existence, it says nothing about the *quality* of one's life. Immortality is itself not a sufficient condition for a robust biographical existence.

The Biblical Portrait

Before we engage the philosophical explication of how and why Christianity solves the human predicament, we must first understand the descriptive components of such a worldview relevant to this fundamental existential pursuit. Perhaps expectedly, the Bible conveys life's meaning in the context of God's sovereignty over His creation. Originally, God told Israel against the backdrop of the Babylonian exile:

'For I know the plans that I have for you,' declares the LORD, 'plans for welfare and not for calamity to give you a future and a hope.'⁶⁴

That God would orchestrate and direct human beings toward some trajectory is not a surprising element of a theistic worldview. However, being directed toward some goal is not a sufficient condition for defining life's meaning or purpose. It is possible to imagine being created in order to be the High Priest's janitor. But clearly we could conceive of a better use for one's life than that! Indeed, the Scriptures do communicate a more robust definition for life's meaning other than merely to do God's bidding. Beginning in the Pentateuch, we read the following promise to Israel on the heels of Israel's ongoing, cyclical behavior of falling into idolatry:

"And you shall again obey the LORD, and observe all His commandments which I command you today. "Then the LORD your God will prosper you abundantly in all the work of your hand, in the offspring of your body and in the offspring of your cattle and in the produce of your ground, for the LORD will again rejoice over you for good, just as He rejoiced over your fathers; if you obey the LORD your God to keep His commandments and His statutes which are written in this book of the law, if you turn to the LORD your God with all your heart and soul. "For this commandment which I command you today is not too difficult for you, nor is it out of reach. "It is not in heaven, that you should say, 'Who will go up to heaven for us to get it for us and make us hear it, that we may observe it?' "Nor is it beyond the sea, that you should say, 'Who will cross the sea for us to get it for us and make us hear it, that we may observe it?' "But the word is very near you, in your mouth and in your heart, that you may observe it. "See, I have set before you today life and prosperity, and death and adversity; in that I command you today to love the LORD your God, to walk in His ways and to keep His commandments and His statutes and His judgments, that you may live and multiply, and that the LORD your God may bless you in the land where you are entering to possess it."⁶⁵

That Israel "may live" and enjoy "prosperity" are promises afforded by God on the condition that His people obey His commands. And lest they argue that God's commands are too distant to be acquired, God assures them that His commands are not "out of reach" but are "very near ... in [their] mouth and in [their] heart." So, what we learn here early on is that God's sovereignty over creation is not the meaning of life itself but, rather, on the backdrop of God's being sovereign over creation, He can and does bestow a sense of prosperity and well-being to those who follow Him. Similar passages external to the Pentateuch also affirm the same sentiment.⁶⁶ Thus the meaning of life is conferred to human beings as a quality of existence – one that engenders personal welfare, satisfaction, and enjoyment – so long as life's purpose is satisfied (to live according to God's commands). Moreover, we are also told that the prosperity of God is not something temporal and confined to the present life:

The LORD is the portion of my inheritance and my cup; Thou dost support my lot. The lines have fallen to me in pleasant places; Indeed, my heritage is beautiful to

me. I will bless the LORD who has counseled me; Indeed, my mind instructs me in the night. I have set the LORD continually before me; Because He is at my right hand, I will not be shaken. Therefore my heart is glad, and my glory rejoices; My flesh also will dwell securely. For Thou wilt not abandon my soul to Sheol; Neither wilt Thou allow Thy Holy One to undergo decay. Thou wilt make known to me the path of life; In Thy presence is fulness of joy; In Thy right hand there are pleasures forever.⁶⁷

The perpetuity of national Israel will be fully realized in the general resurrection event that will occur at the end of human history and will engender an existence whereby its beneficiaries will forever be in the presence of God. Below is an explicit example of the doctrine of the general resurrection:

Your dead will live; Their corpses will rise. You who lie in the dust, awake and shout for joy, For your dew is as the dew of the dawn, And the earth will give birth to the departed spirits.⁶⁸

Elsewhere the Old Testament is riddled with this doctrine.⁶⁹ The New Testament extends this same promise on the heels of Jesus' own physical resurrection from the dead:

For if we believe that Jesus died and rose again, even so God will bring with Him those who have fallen asleep in Jesus. ... For the Lord Himself will descend from heaven with a shout, with the voice of *the* archangel, and with the trumpet of God; and the dead in Christ shall rise first.⁷⁰

The promise of resurrection extends not only to messianic Jews but to the Gentile (non-Jewish) nations as well.⁷¹ And so the New Testament carries the corporate resurrection motif onward. The significant point to make here is that the resurrection doctrine explains Christian immortality. That Christians will live forever is explicitly confirmed by the Apostle John who says that "[t]he world and its desires pass away, but the man who does the will of God lives forever" (1 John 2:17). The New Testament thus discusses the meaning of life as a move from mere human existence (*psuche*) to the fullness of life (*zoe*) that goes on forever.⁷² At the advent of Israel's long-awaited messiah, Jesus Christ, all persons despite their heritage and ethnicity are availed to the salvific grace of God's forgiveness via the crucifixion of Jesus. Jesus expressly defines what constitutes this *zoe* quality of life:

"And this is eternal life, that they may know Thee, the only true God, and Jesus Christ whom Thou hast sent"⁷³

and

"Truly, truly, I say to you, he who hears My word, and believes Him who sent Me, has eternal life, and does not come into judgment, but has passed out of death into life."⁷⁴

The knowledge of God through Christ and commitment to Him are, thus, defining features of what constitutes grounds for acquiring *zoe*. The culmination of life in this state of eternity will be to be resurrected from the dead and to commune forever with the God who created us. The Westminster Catechism nicely summarizes this in answer to the question “What is the chief end of man?” to which the reply is given, “to glorify God and enjoy Him forever.” Thus God provides not only the foundation on which life exists but also the trajectory of life’s ultimate fulfillment thereby granting significance and meaning to the decisions we make in the here and now. In such a worldview, there arises significance to the decisions we make such that prosperity may not be realized in the present life (something consonant with how the world actually appears to us) but will be bestowed to followers of God in Christ so that virtue will ultimately culminate in true happiness.⁷⁵

A Philosophical Defense of Christianity Being More Broadly Explanatory than Rivals

I must begin by offering a brief word about what contributes to making an explanation existentially satisfying. The Cambridge philosopher of science and history, Peter Lipton, tells us that there are two senses to what we might generally consider the best explanation out of a set of rival explanations:

It is important to distinguish two senses in which something may be the best of competing potential explanations. We may characterize it as the explanation that is most warranted: the ‘likeliest’ explanation. On the other hand, we may characterize the best explanation as the one which would, if correct, be the most explanatory or provide the most understanding: the ‘loveliest’ explanation. ... Likelihood speaks of truth; loveliness of potential understanding.⁷⁶

Lipton goes on to explain that, though the two senses of “likeliness” and “loveliness” are fundamentally distinct, nonetheless they “tend to go together, and indeed loveliness will be a guide to likeliness.”⁷⁷ Our immediate interest here is not to somehow arrive at the ultimate *truth* of the matter – that we should dwell on the *likeliness* of Christian theism – but, rather, to see how such an explanation is more *satisfying* (e.g., lovely). If the two should converge (and I believe that they do in this case), then so much the better for Christianity as an explanatory hypothesis. But since our explanatory investigation here concerns one of *value* and not necessarily of *fact*, then we will only consider the existential significance of such a hypothesis to its being the most satisfactory explanation – one that is *tidy*. It is important also to emphasize that the extent to which a hypothesis is fruitful and can potentially (or actually) explain further areas of inquiry or other anomalies makes a hypothesis have the benefit of being even tidier. The ability of a hypothesis to be more broadly explanatory than its rivals (implicit in the “loveliness” feature of a hypothesis) makes it a qualitatively better or more satisfying explanation than its rivals.⁷⁸

Now, I do not want to suggest that the property of being a tidy explanation is either a necessary or sufficient condition for making explanations *warranted*. Rather, I’m suggesting that the property of being a tidy explanation makes it more *satisfying* inasmuch as it provides a certain amount of existential “closure” to various

metaphysical, ethical, and existential explananda beyond the human predicament (we'll refer to the various metaphysical, ethical, and existential explananda as "MEE"). In order to conclude with any degree of probability why biblical theism is ultimately a preferred option, I'll argue that certain pragmatic suggestions in Christian doctrines solidify human meaning, value, and purpose as a tidy explanation. Thus, we must ask: What would some of these pragmatic suggestions (and in the first two cases *warranted* as well as *lovely* explanations) that occasion the employment of Christian theism be? Below we'll take a look at some of the most familiar suggestions.

1. *God provides the best explanation for the origin of the universe.* These first two explanatory suggestions are stronger than points 3 – 5 below because they are not *conditional* truths – that is, truths that could simply be replaced once a viable alternative is proposed. Rather, I offer the strong thesis that *God is the best explanation of the evidence from cosmology and axiology to which no competing hypotheses rival.* The grounds for my first point here (from cosmology) incorporate both a philosophical reason and a scientific one. I'll briefly offer these reasons in support of God as the best explanation for the origin of the universe.

Now consider that nothing in nature or in the theoretical sciences has been able to manifest something that can mysteriously "pop" into existence without the aid of a cause.⁷⁹ Such an obvious fact has usually gone on without much debate. If an elephant were to suddenly appear before your eyes, you would inquire about what caused it. It just seems to be incontestably true that everything that begins to exist has a cause for its existence.

So, how does this metaphysical postulate apply to the situation at hand? For centuries, atheists and non-theists have simply concluded that the universe is infinitely old – end of story. But as we begin to investigate the nature of the universe it appears that we can no longer believe this in the face of both philosophical and scientific conclusions drawn to the contrary. Let's take a look at a philosophical argument and some specific evidence here. When I think about whether or not the universe had a beginning, I rely on two basic facts. First, philosophy shows that there cannot be an infinite regression of time since that would imply the absurd notion that an actually infinite number of things exists in the real world. Think about it. If an actually infinite number of things really exist then we would end up with absurd results. Suppose I have an extremely large truck that contains an infinite number of cargo boxes in it numbered 1, 2, 3, and so forth unto infinity. I then unload all of the even-numbered boxes so that I am left with all of the odd-numbered boxes. But if I count the number of boxes left in the truck, I appear to have an infinite number of boxes left to unload. Now that seems odd. I just removed half of the set! It seems like I should only have half of what I originally started out with. But if I count them (1, 3, 5, 7, 9, and so on to infinity), sure enough, I still have the same number of boxes as I started out with. By taking out all of the even-numbered boxes, I have, in effect, removed an infinite number of boxes. But since I only had an infinite number of boxes to begin with I should now have zero. However, I don't. I have just as many boxes as I started out with prior to unloading any of them. The paradox here is insurmountable if the infinite is a concrete reality. This is why many mathematicians and philosophers have forever banished the idea that an actual

infinite exists in the real world. But this entails that the universe cannot be infinitely old since the universe's past is a concrete reality.

Secondly, there is empirical support for why the universe is not infinitely old. This brings me to some specific, scientific evidence that I alluded to above. Astronomers and astrophysicists have surmised that the universe began to exist from a great explosion called the "Big Bang." Observations have shown that the galaxies are receding away from earth equally in all directions. This means that since all galaxies are receding away from us then, if we were to go back in time, we would eventually come to a time when all physical mass and energy were concentrated at a single point. This point is called the *singularity*. Now, all technical calculations aside, these astronomers and astrophysicists are confident that their calculations of the expansion rate of the universe and the distances of galaxies suggest that the universe must have begun to exist about 13.7 billion years ago. Given these facts it is no wonder why the Cambridge astronomer Stephen Hawking, in his much celebrated book *A Brief History of Time*, assures us that "nowadays nearly everyone assumes that the universe started with a big bang singularity."⁸⁰ Astrophysicist Alan Guth doesn't hesitate when he muses that anyone who does not agree with Big Bang cosmogony is a "crackpot!"⁸¹ By way of summary, we should now realize that the physical evidence points convincingly toward a universe whose age is marked in finite terms and, thus, began to exist.

Since the universe began to exist, and everything that begins to exist has a cause, it follows that the universe must have a cause. But how are we to explain this? As the Cambridge University Professor Neil Turok admits in a relatively recent article in *Astronomy Magazine*,

The problem we have is that every particle in the universe originated in the singularity . . . That's unacceptable because there are no laws of physics that tell you how they came out of it.⁸²

If atheism is true then there is no satisfactory explanation. Traditional theists, on the other hand, have no problem explaining this anomaly. But, someone may rightly ask, how does this cause imply the existence of the *traditional* God? The answer to this question need not definitively be demonstrated here. Instead, I simply want to suggest that the God hypothesis would serve as an explanatorily interesting component to cosmogony – perhaps a preferred one given the failure of rival naturalistic theories of cosmogenesis. But for explorers of existentialism, I believe Christian theism is suggested by deducing certain characteristics from the cause of the universe itself. Since the beginning of the universe entails the beginning of all space, time, and energy then the cause cannot categorically possess those characteristics. That is, the cause, being necessarily distinct from the universe, must be timeless, non-spatial, and immaterial. Since the cause must be immaterial then it must also be immutable because matter implies change. The cause cannot be a physical cause because it is the cause of everything physical. This leaves us with only two options left: abstract entities and immaterial minds. And abstract entities are not causally related to anything. Thus, our only choice is that an immaterial mind exists as the cause of the universe. Since this cause brought such a vastly complex universe into being, the cause must be extremely intelligent and powerful. Thus, having deduced a timeless, non-spatial,

immaterial, personal, intelligent, and powerful cause we have good evidence to conclude that such a being, or God, makes the most sense of these inferences.⁸³

2. *God is the best explanation for the existence of objective moral values.* It seems to me that the existence of God makes more plausible the existence of objective moral values. This is not to say that non-theists do not entertain such values or fail to apprehend them. Instead, I am dealing with the very *foundation* and *justification* for the ontology of objective moral values. On an atheistic view, one has no choice but to concede that moral values are not objective but are human constructs designed for the purposes of preserving the human species in a sociable manner. On this view morals serve as a means of cooperation amongst evolutionary advanced *homo sapiens*. Thus, we learn these values by our genetic makeup and by social instruction for the purpose of protecting the welfare of each individual as well as ourselves. The late atheist and behavior specialist B.F. Skinner agrees when he says

What a given group of people calls good . . . is what members of the group find reinforcing as the result of their genetic endowment and the natural and social contingencies to which they have been exposed. . . . [Thus,] [w]e recognize that morality differs in every society, and is a convenient term for socially approved habits."⁸⁴

But this means that moral values are no more objective than our decision to either go to a movie or to rent one. It seems to depend on the circumstances or, to use Skinner's words, the "socially approved habits" of individuals. The aforementioned British philosopher Thomas Hobbes also defined morality as merely a set of "appetites and aversions"⁸⁵ because this is what human beings entertain apart from governmental restraint. Morality, on an atheistic level, is constantly in flux to accommodate a changing species. Bertrand Russell, in a renowned BBC debate with Frederick Copleston, said,

The moral law . . . is always changing. At one period in the development of the human race, almost everybody thought cannibalism was a duty.⁸⁶

Atheism, when you think about it, literally entails that morality is an arbitrary construction of beliefs about what is good or bad. The atheist has no objective reason to be morally good except that it suits his own personal desire. But this means that doing good is only a matter of doing good for oneself, otherwise why should I bother to inconvenience myself by putting someone else's needs above my own? Thus the atheistic world view evinces a morality as echoed by Epicurus who said,

[W]e recognize pleasure as the first good innate in us, and from pleasure we begin every act of choice and avoidance, and to pleasure we return again, using the feeling as the standard by which we judge every good.⁸⁷

Now, this seems to be the logical conclusion of the atheistic world view. If there is no transcendent "something" upon which to base objective moral values, then objective moral values do not exist and are just contrived. But if objective moral values *do* exist

then there must be some sort of transcendent Being upon which to base them. I think the objectivity of moral values can be seen in the fact that such things as rape, incest, and molestation are genuinely felt to be immoral things. They aren't just "non-habitual, bad feelings" about such acts. They are really wrong. The kidnapping and deaths of pre-teen girls aren't just socially disadvantageous occurrences, but are moral aberrations. Similarly, such things as love, charity, and altruism are inherently good things. If someone donates five thousand dollars to help end world hunger or contributes time to assist in projects like Habitat for Humanity, then these are genuinely good things. So it seems rather unlikely that moral values are simply subjective human inventions. But this entails that God exists. Therefore, given the existence of objective moral values, the most promising explanation seems to be God – the only hypothesis that can explain not only the fundamental reality of such an objective ontology but also how such a reality translates into moral duties for human beings to follow. The God hypothesis here thus ties together all of the requisite elements for a robust objective ethical system.

3. *If God exists, then it is feasible that there is an afterlife.* I do not find this particular claim to be controversial since God, as traditionally conceived, is ontologically distinct from the physical universe. If such a being exists, then he must be a non-physical being of the order of mind. But human beings are also individual minds that happen to be corporeal.⁸⁸ Thus if God exists and created human beings, there exists at least the *capability* of an existence apart from the physical body. Now this has important consequences for the great existential questions we've been addressing. What this means is that the present life we all enjoy is not the end-all and be-all of existence. Perhaps what we do and accomplish here spill over into the afterlife and have consequences there. In conjunction with point 4 below, the existence of an afterlife offers God the extended chance to counterbalance the injustices in the world (more on this in a moment) and to create distance between the present world and the afterlife. What this entails is a means to be recompensed for any present suffering and pain that we experience in this life. Any affliction we endure would vanish into the shrinking background of a potentially infinite, forward existence. As time lapses beyond millennia, the "blip" of the present life would barely appear on our radar screens. Such would be of particular encouragement to permanently disabled, injured, or deprived people who will never regain a sense of normality for their lives. The assurance of an afterlife would yield a comfortable destination – an oasis in the desert – that would bring peace and tranquility to an otherwise tumultuous existence.

4. *If God exists, then complete justice could reign in the universe.* Often we cringe when we hear that so-and-so has literally gotten away with murder. Or, we wonder why contemporary (and historical) villains seem to escape the clutches of chastisement and retribution. Even death seems to be too good for some of these outcasts who revel in their immoral, deviant, and murderous hearts who rob children of their innocence and their lives. It is even a wonder how suffering children could possibly play any role in the "harmony" of the universe and to be permitted to be victimized by evil predators who seek the quenching of their own lusts. The famous character Ivan Karamazov in the famous novel *The Brothers Karamazov* by the Russian novelist Fyodor Dostoevsky echoes this sentiment when he says,

Listen! If all must suffer to pay for the eternal harmony, what have children to do with it, tell me, please? It's beyond all comprehension why they should suffer, and why they should pay for the harmony. Why should they, too, furnish material to enrich the soil for the harmony of the future? I understand solidarity in sin among men. I understand solidarity in retribution, too; but there can be no such solidarity with children. And if it is really true that they must share responsibility for all their fathers' crimes, such a truth is not of this world and is beyond my comprehension.⁸⁹

But such an incomprehensible scenario only defies rationality if there is no afterlife on which to rectify the pains wrought on little children. If there is an afterlife to compensate these little ones, then the prevalent injustices in the world will be reversed. Now this says nothing of the perpetrators of injustice. It might also be the case that such people may not participate in the joys of an ongoing existence. Perhaps what awaits them is a state of punishment consonant with their crimes. So what all of this entails then is that true justice shall prevail in the universe. Of course one could only affirm this hope if God actually exists. Injustices would remain unsatisfied in a world without God. However, the appealing fruits of Christian theism and its advantages here seem to be clearly observed and heartily welcoming.

5. *If God exists, then human beings have grace accorded to them for their wrongdoing.* Dr Louise Antony, in a recent debate at the University of Massachusetts, publicly declared that “[t]here are things that you lose when you give up belief in God. ... You lose the guarantee of redemption.”⁹⁰ One of the most appealing features of theistic existentialism, in my opinion, is that true forgiveness and exoneration are possible in a world where God exists. No longer does one have to stew on the inability to retract a wrong committed against someone else; rather, God would provide mercy and, consequently, a means of escape from the culpability of our infractions. As such, we would need to be *perfected* and could legitimately have our wrongful actions dismissed as charges held against us. True forgiveness and exculpation await any who would focus on God as the ultimate arbiter of human justice. Now it could be argued that such a view depends more on a specific *theological* interpretation of God rather than a bald philosophical adherence to God. Indeed. But I believe an additional argument here would further suggest that if God exists, then He would be maximally merciful and loving as much as He is just. Such an argument would be predicated on the premise that God, if He exists, would be the greatest conceivable being. Alvin Plantinga has suggested through modal logic that if it is possible that maximal greatness can be instantiated, then God exists necessarily.⁹¹ His line of reasoning – originally based on Anselm's 11th century seminal work, *Monologion* – is that the possibility of maximal excellence (i.e., a being possessing maximal excellence) entails its existence in every possible world. Maximal excellence entails moral perfection (among other traditional attributes). Hence, if it is possible for a maximally excellent being to exist, then He exists necessarily. But the fruits of this so-called ontological argument need not be entirely swallowed on pain of opening Pandora's box. Our interest here is simply to suggest the more moderate thesis that if God exists, then He has moral perfection. Moral perfection, then, would engender offering free creatures every plausible way to access forgiveness for each person's wrongdoing.

THE PHILOSOPHICAL ARGUMENT FOR CHRISTIAN EXISTENTIALISM

So far we have explored the atheistic reasons for why meaning, value, and purpose are not objective and that no amalgamation of goals would converge at any single, objective trajectory. We have now seen some good reasons to think that Christian theism better explains MEE and that these considerations are surely relevant to the question posed in the human predicament. As such I have so far sought to establish the following argument:

1. If a hypothesis is tidy explanation, then it is a more satisfying explanation than its rivals.
 2. Christian theism is a tidy explanation for MEE.
 3. Atheism is not a tidy explanation for MEE.
-
4. Therefore, Christian theism is a more satisfying explanation than atheism.

So I now wish to further argue that

5. If Christian theism is a more satisfying explanation than atheism, then if God exists, there is objective meaning, value, and purpose to human existence.

The antecedent seems to me to be true based on those five points above. But what grounds are there for thinking that the consequent here is true? Perhaps the Christian conviction is best seen from an analogy. Consider parenthood. If we know that our parents are responsible for founding the household, maintaining it, administering its self-determined values, and seeing to it that peace and justice are maximized, then we would naturally expect that the children in the household engender a certain overarching, existential value. In fact, as children, any one of us would use the household situation in supporting the fact to a brother or sister that I am under parental government and direction as legitimate evidence for personal, existential value within the household. Or consider a separate analogy: a business environment. If any employee of a company wanted to know if they have meaning, value, and purpose (as it were) within the company, then they would reflect on who is *really* in charge, whether they are responsible for the genesis of the company, and whether they are enacting policies to ensure justice and respect among employees. Thus, the issue here is whether or not I have meaning, value, and purpose *with respect to the company*. Surely we would have meaning here as we would be filling a position that assists the company toward some end. We would also say that we have value since we were, after all, hired! And certainly there would be purpose – that our position entails certain duties to be performed that we must carry out. But if any one of us were asked why we thought we had such existential values, we would (I think) point to the company's fundamental *raison d'être*. Now consider the alternative just to hammer home the point. Suppose that nobody started the company (that it naturally rose up from the ground), that nobody governs the company, and there are no company policies instituted. Would working for the company make any sense outside of doing what you wanted to do (perhaps to plunder petty cash or to design colorful logos)? Or, what if the parents you had were just mannequins that naturally formed and you were just accidental byproducts of the

house's carpet? Would you say that you had any purpose, meaning, or value in the family other than any of the fleeting reasons of personal satisfaction?

I think that premise 2 would be sustainable under such equivalent considerations. Given the objective foundation of the universe, objective policies contained therein, and the objective governing of those policies, it seems more probable than not that human beings would, therefore, have meaning, value, and purpose to life *with respect to the universe*. But if there is no God and the universe is simply the accidental byproduct of some unguided primordial origin, then one cannot assert any objective existential value to human existence. Christian theism, in my analysis and in the analysis of atheistic existentialists, provides the only plausible objective solution. Moreover, fleeting and ephemeral factors such as happiness and love apart from God are simply empty, self-serving goals artificially imparted to supply some reason for being in the absence of a transcendent anchor for them. The argument in its entirety can be schematized as follows:

1. If a hypothesis is tidy explanation, then it is a more satisfying explanation than its rivals.
 2. Christian theism is a tidy explanation for MEE.
 3. Atheism is not a tidy explanation for MEE.
 4. Therefore, Christian theism is a more satisfying explanation than atheism (from 1-3).
 5. If Christian theism is a more satisfying explanation than atheism regarding MEE, then if the Christian God exists, there is objective meaning, value, and purpose to human existence (e.g., a solution to HP).
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6. Therefore, if the Christian God exists, there is objective meaning, value, and purpose to human existence.

Given the support for each of the premises, the conclusion of the argument is true and supports the Christian conviction that Christian theism can provide an objective, satisfying existentialist solution whereas atheism cannot.

CONCLUSION

In the tradition of British satire, the infamous and often raunchy Monty Python crew of the last few decades offered these surprisingly penetrating questions in their offbeat 1983 movie appropriately entitled, *The Meaning of Life*:

“Why are we here? What's life all about?
Is God really real, or is there some doubt?
Well, tonight, we're going to sort it all out,
For, tonight, it's 'The Meaning of Life'.

...

Is life just a game where we make up the rules
While we're searching for something to say,
Or are we just simply spiraling coils
Of self-replicating DNA?”

My hope is that through the vehicle of this essay the reader is at least more informed in any present or future attempt to “sort it all out.” Though fodder for comedy, the meaning of life ought to invade our deepest concerns about why human beings are here. It would appear that the proposed atheistic and secular solutions are greatly lacking any specific direction. And by the atheists’ own admission, it fails to offer an objective solution to life’s meaning. But if God does in fact exist, then we have grounds for tying together some of the most perplexing threads of human endeavor, achievement, and thought with an objective basis upon which we can once again affirm that deeply satisfying solution to the human predicament. What is the meaning of life? To the individual Christian theist it is life that consistently unites both virtue and happiness against the backdrop of a universe with ultimate significance. But such can *only* be the case if the biblical God exists and there is immortality. The existential author of Ecclesiastes thus observes:

There is nothing better for a man *than* to eat and drink and tell himself that his labor is good. This also I have seen, that it is from the hand of God. For who can eat and who can have enjoyment without Him? For to a person who is good in His sight He has given wisdom and knowledge and joy ... The conclusion, when all has been heard, *is*: fear God and keep His commandments, because this *applies to* every person. For God will bring every act to judgment, everything which is hidden, whether it is good or evil.⁹²

The truly satisfying life will be one that is consonant with and rooted in God’s existence and direction. The world that we enjoy, the people that we care for, and the significance of our contributions must be gauged by an Ultimate Standard lest our actions become futile. Only in a world where value, meaning, purpose, and personal contentment converge can we come to have the most robust solution to the human predicament. Only in a solution that offers complete intellectual and spiritual tranquility can we come to appreciate what it means to live life and to the fullest. As the familiar bumper sticker cogently expresses, “Know God, know peace; no God, no peace.”

END NOTES

¹ This project began as a lecture I delivered to an open forum of college students on September 14th, 2008. In the ensuing year, this project has ballooned to the work presently manifested. I wish to acknowledge those who allowed me to discuss various ideas contained in this paper and for providing helpful feedback: Kristopher Nicholson, Jason Valentine, Jordan Fishel, and my Regis University students from PL437: "The Meaning of Life" (Spring, 2009) for an engaging discussion.

² Fred C. Adams and Gregory Laughlin, *Reviews of Modern Physics* 69, #2 (April 1997), pp. 337–372.

³ R.A. Makkreel, "Dilthey, Wilhelm", *The Cambridge Dictionary of Philosophy* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1995), p. 204.

⁴ R. Solomon, *The Big Questions*, 7th ed. (California: Wadsworth, 2006), p. 66.

⁵ R. Solomon, *From Hegel to Existentialism* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1987), p. 241.

⁶ W. James, *The Will to Believe and Other Essays in Popular Philosophy* (New York: Dover, 1956), pp. 27–28.

⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 127.

⁸ This paper does not exhaust the explanatory options available to us. Surely one could surmise that some non-Christian form of theism might adequately satisfy the parameters of the meaning of life. However, I reduce the discussion to atheism and Christianity for simplicity's sake. If we were to pursue what grounds we have for thinking Christianity to be true, no doubt the positive reasons supporting it will *prima facie* exclude any rival theistic alternatives. Since I've done this in my other work, we'll scale down the present conversation as though these two remaining options are the most plausible.

⁹ For those interested in more of a historical survey of thinkers not included in this lecture, see my previous work, "Existentialism and the Futility of Life in the Absence of God" (<http://sguthrie.net/existentialism.htm>).

¹⁰ For a thorough discussion on what atheism's proper definition entails, see S. Guthrie, "Atheism and the *Argumentum ad Ignorantiam*: Why Atheists Cannot Avert the Burden of Proof" (2003), http://sguthrie.net/atheism_and_arg.htm.

¹¹ For example, physicist Willem Drees likens the search for such fundamentally necessary Laws (or some unifying "theory of everything") to examining an "intelligible economic development [that] correlates to a strong central planning agency. However, a free market economy may, in principle, also lead to an overall intelligible development even though there is no overall planning. One could interpret this by interpreting 'freedom' as the overall principle. However, one could just as well conclude that the principle is 'no principle'" (W.B. Drees, *Beyond the Big Bang: Quantum Cosmologies and God* (Illinois: Open Court Publishing, 1990), p. 109). Drees' point here is that the argument for finding some necessary Laws of Nature governing the existence of a universe with properties of apparent design are ambiguous at best and are just as consistent with finding such Laws as accidents or inexplicable givens.

¹² M. Heidegger, *Being and Time: A Translation of Sein und Zeit*, translated by J. Stambaugh (New York: SUNY Press, 1996), pp. 234–235.

¹³ Jean-Paul Sartre, "Existentialism is a Humanism," *The Continental Ethics Reader*, ed. by M. Calarco and P. Atterton (New York: Routledge, 2003), p. 90.

¹⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 91.

¹⁵ *Ibid.*

¹⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 92.

¹⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 93.

¹⁸ Jean-Paul Sartre, "Existentialism is a Humanism," *Existentialism*, 2nd ed., by R. Solomon (New York: Oxford University Press, 2005), p. 214.

¹⁹ A. Camus, *The Myth of Sisyphus*, translated by Justin O'Brien (New York: Vintage Books, 1983) in L. Pojman and L. Vaughn, *Philosophy: The Quest for Truth*, 7th ed. (New York: Oxford University Press, 2009), pp. 587–588.

²⁰ Pojman and Vaughn, *Philosophy*, p. 588.

²¹ As such, Joshua Foa Dienstag perhaps gives us the understatement of the century by identifying Camus' thoughts as "pessimistic philosophy" on page 36 of his *Pessimism: Philosophy, Ethic, Spirit* (New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 2006).

²² B. Russell as quoted in R.F. Alfred Hornle, "The Religious Aspect of Bertrand Russell's Philosophy", *The Harvard Theological Review* (Harvard Divinity School, 1915), p. 164.

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- ²³ Atheist philosopher Keith M. Parsons responds to this assessment made in another context in a bit of rhetorical astuteness: “Meaningless?!? I should have such a meaningless life!” (with W.L. Craig, “Debate: Why I Am/Am Not a Christian”, <http://www.bringyou.to/CraigParsonsDebate.mp3>). What Parsons seems to be responding to is whether or not Russell actually *enjoyed* his life. But this is not the question. Rather, the question is whether Russell has any objective or ultimate *meaning, value, or purpose* to his life. And, with Russell’s own words, it seems to be a resounding No.
- ²⁴ F. Nietzsche, “Beyond Good and Evil” in L. Pojman, ed., *Moral Philosophy: A Reader* (Cambridge, MA: Hackett Publishing, 2003), pp. 116-117.
- ²⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 117.
- ²⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 123.
- ²⁷ T. Hobbes, *Leviathan*, Chapter XIII.
- ²⁸ K. Nielsen, “Ethics Without Religion,” *Ohio University Review* VI (1964) in D. Stewart, *Exploring the Philosophy of Religion*, 6th ed. (New Jersey: Pearson Prentice Hall, 2007), p. 74.
- ²⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 75.
- ³⁰ *Ibid.*
- ³¹ *Ibid.*
- ³² Camus, *The Myth of Sisyphus*, p. 589.
- ³³ *Ibid.*, p. 591.
- ³⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 590.
- ³⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 591.
- ³⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 590.
- ³⁷ T. Nagel, *Mortal Questions* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1979), pp. 22-23.
- ³⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 23.
- ³⁹ L. Tolstoy, *A Confession*, reprint (Montana: Kessinger Publishing, 2004), p. 28.
- ⁴⁰ A. Rand, *For The Intellectual* (New York: Signet, 1961), pp. 146 – 147.
- ⁴¹ See F. Schaeffer, *The Complete Works of Francis A. Schaeffer: A Christian Worldview, Volume Five, A Christian View of the West* (Illinois: Crossway Books, 1982), pp. 165-182. In this section, Schaeffer reminds us of the bifurcated realities posited by the Plato and Aristotle (“universals” and “particulars”), Immanuel Kant (the “noumenal” and the “phenomenal”), and Søren Kierkegaard (“non-reason” and “reason”). These are analogous to the world in which atheists find themselves (the lower reality) and the optimistic, theistic world (the upper reality). Realizing the futility of “living like machines,” atheists must abandon this unremitting use of reason and leap into the upper story in order to give their lives meaning.
- ⁴² K. Nielsen, “Ethics”, p. 79.
- ⁴³ The Greek term *telos* means “end” in the sense of purpose or objective.
- ⁴⁴ Epicurus was more moderate in his understanding of hedonism for he himself has declared, “... since pleasure is the first good and natural to us, for this very reason we do not choose every pleasure, but sometimes we pass over many pleasures, when greater discomfort accrues to us as the result of them: and similarly we think many pains better than pleasures, since a greater pleasure comes to us when we have endured pains for a long time” (Epicurus, *Letter to Menoeceus*, from Epicurus, *The Extant Remains*, translated by Cyril Bailey (Oxford: The Clarendon Press, 1926), p. 87). Clearly he thought of calculating our actions so that pleasure would be maximized and not pursued unhindered in a thoughtless pursuit of immediate gratification.
- ⁴⁵ J.S. Mill, “What Utilitarianism Is”, *Utilitarianism and On Liberty*, Mary Warnock, ed. (Oxford: Wiley-Blackwell Publishing, 2003), pp. 186-187.
- ⁴⁶ Rand’s egoism is a calculated effort to promote one’s own personal happiness and to defer it when it threatens our cooperation with others. But this temporary suspension of our personal happiness should *only* occur if we can guarantee that such an arrangement will ultimately maximize our personal pleasures in the long run. Thus Rand’s view is self-described as the “virtue of selfishness.”
- ⁴⁷ A. Rand, *Atlas Shrugged* partially reprinted in Pojman and Vaughn, *Philosophy*, p. 469.
- ⁴⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 469; 472.
- ⁴⁹ Aristotle, *Nicomachean Ethics*, 1098a 15- 1099b 32 translated by William David Ross in W.D. Ross, J.L. Ackrill, and J.O. Urmson, *The Nicomachean Ethics* (Oxford University Press, 1998), pp. 14-18.
- ⁵⁰ “Virtue” for Aristotle, though not crucial to the present discussion, is defined by him (as well as other Greek predecessors) as the midpoint or mean between excess and deficiency (both extremes would be vices).

⁵¹ Aristotle, *Nicomachean Ethics*, 1097a 34-1097b 25, *ibid.*, pp. 11-12.

⁵² Aristotle, *Nicomachean Ethics*, 1103a 12-1103b 25 translated by Martin Ostwald (Indiana: Bobbs Merrill, 1962), pp. 33-35.

⁵³ We do not want to haphazardly report that happiness, therefore, has *no* place in the definition of life's purpose and meaning. Rather, we want to show how even though it could be contributory toward a grander purpose, happiness cannot in itself be the *telos* of life.

⁵⁴ J. Baggini, *What's It All About?: Philosophy and the Meaning of Life* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2004), p. 176.

⁵⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 177.

⁵⁶ *Ibid.*

⁵⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 178.

⁵⁸ I will not presume to provide an axiological argument for God's existence here, but for those interested in reasons for why if God does not exist then objective moral values do not exist, see Stuart C. Hackett, 'The Value Dimension of the Cosmos: A Moral Argument', *Reconstruction of the Christian Revelation Claim* (MI: Baker Book House Company, 1984), pp. 111-117, 152-156. Also see a simplistic overview of this argument in J. Hick, *Philosophy of Religion*, 4th ed. (New Jersey: Prentice Hall, 1990), pp. 28-29.

⁵⁹ Baggini, *What's It All About?*, p. 176.

⁶⁰ I want to further point out that Julian Baggini finds *every* non-theistic avenue to finding the true meaning of life to be insufficient and even wrong-headed (see *Ibid.*, p. 188). Therefore, he prefers to simply say that each historical pursuit for life's meaning (except theism of course) carries with it *some* piece to the greater puzzle, and that each person will have to graft a meaning to their lives in their own way. He says that his overall argument "is therefore democratic and egalitarian, in that it returns to each of us the power and responsibility to discover and in part determine meaning for ourselves" – a meaning, he assures us, that must contain a balance of the ingredients of "authenticity, happiness, and concern for others; one where time is not wasted; one which engages in the ongoing work of becoming who we want to be and being successful in those terms" (*Ibid.*, p. 186). One cannot help but wonder if Baggini wants merely to distract us (and himself) in the aggregate of options so as not to think too hard about the insufficiency of the atheistic pursuit! But as a wise man once mused, you cannot make a buggy helmed by a dead horse move by adding *more* dead horses to it.

⁶¹ Even this would need further qualification since the contemporary scene within Evangelicalism seems to inadvertently show that though God may be a part of our lives, He only serves as the means for our personal happiness and success (i.e., Joel Osteen, *Your Best Life Now: 7 Steps to Living at Your Full Potential* (Tennessee: FaithWords, 2007); Joyce Meyer, *Enjoying Where You Are On the Way to Where You Are Going: Learning How to Live a Joyful, Spirit-Led Life* (Tennessee: FaithWords, 2002)). Indeed, Christianity has recently been marketed as a "relevant" and "post-conservative," emergent enterprise bent on making it merely an option in the free market of ideas. But this approach concerns itself with orthopraxis (right-living) over and above orthodoxy (right-believing) such that its endgame is merely to make Christianity palatable at the expense of its core teachings (for a recent critique of this movement, see Gary L. W. Johnson and Ronald N. Gleason, eds., *Reforming or Conforming?: Post-Conservative Evangelicals and the Emerging Church* (Illinois: Crossway Books, 2008)). This unhealthy preoccupation for the cultural relevance of the Christian church has paradoxically served to make it insignificant and irrelevant in grounding life's meaning. It becomes merely one option among a plethora of viable alternatives. Thus our immediate discussion and connotation for a "personal God" engenders the classical theistic portrait and its auxiliary doctrines in providing an ontological foundation for existential exploration.

⁶² W. James, "The Will to Believe," Stewart, *Exploring*, pp. 236-237.

⁶³ See J. Hick, *Philosophy of Religion*, pp. 120-125.

⁶⁴ Jeremiah 29:11 (NASB).

⁶⁵ Deuteronomy 30:5-16 (NASB).

⁶⁶ Job 22:21; 36:11; Psalm 25:12-13; 72:1-7; 106:4-5; 128:5; Proverbs 8:17-18; 13:21; 21:21; Jeremiah 32:42; Daniel 4:27; Zechariah 1:17.

⁶⁷ Psalm 16:5-11 (NASB).

⁶⁸ Isaiah 26:19 (NASB).

⁶⁹ See Job 14:12-15; 19:25-27; Psalm 16:9, 10; 17:15; 49:15; Isaiah 25:8; Ezekiel 37:1-14; Daniel 12:2-3, 13; Hosea 13:14.

⁷⁰ 1 Thessalonians 4:14, 16 (NASB).

⁷¹ For some references regarding this, see John 3:16; 5:24; 3:28; 1 Timothy 2:4; 2 Peter 3:9.

⁷² Professor John Hick speaks more abstractly of the move from animal life (*bios*) to eternal life (*zoē*) in defining what the purpose of life is in his "Evil and the God of Love," *Exploring the Philosophy of Religion*, pp. 193-195.

⁷³ John 17:3 (NASB).

⁷⁴ John 5:24 (NASB).

⁷⁵ The German ethicist and philosopher, Immanuel Kant, cautions that one does not act according to the precepts of Christianity (e.g., to act according to the moral point of view) in order to *acquire* happiness but, rather, in order to be *justified* for that happiness just in case that condition is met when he writes:

[T]his is the kingdom of God, in which nature and morality come into a harmony, which is foreign to each as such, through a holy Author of the world, who makes possible the derived highest good. The holiness of morals is prescribed to them even in this life as a guide to conduct, but the well-being proportionate to this, which is bliss, is thought of as attainable only in eternity. ... Therefore, morals is not really the doctrine of how to make ourselves happy but of how we are to be *worthy* of happiness. Only if religion is added to it can the hope arise of someday participating in happiness in proportion as we endeavored not to be unworthy of it ("God as a Postulate of Practical Reason," *Exploring the Philosophy of Religion*, pp. 154-155).

⁷⁶ P. Lipton, *Inference to the Best Explanation* (New York: Routledge, 1993), p. 61.

⁷⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 63.

⁷⁸ The famous philosopher of science, Carl Hempel, discusses this against the larger body of criteria on what counts as the best scientific explanation of certain empirical phenomena in his *Philosophy of Natural Science* (New Jersey: Prentice-Hall, Inc., 1966), pp. 33-46.

⁷⁹ There has been some suggestion among certain atheistic critics who surmise that such phenomena *is* possible – that something can come from nothing – on the quantum level. They argue that out of a quantum vacuum certain virtual particle pairs spring into existence for a brief time and then are quickly knocked out of existence. However, the quantum vacuum is not tantamount to "a state of nothing" despite the fact that to call it a vacuum smacks of the common Newtonian interpretation. The fact is that a quantum vacuum is "a vacuum state [that] has zero-point energy, which gives rise to vacuum fluctuations" (*A Dictionary of Physics* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1996), p. 449). Though it does not contain physical particles as such, it does contain energy in this zero-point energy field. In short, it is more accurate to imagine a quantum vacuum to engender a subatomic field where out of the energy, some particles are briefly manifested. But this is a far cry from the current premise under consideration which seeks to affirm that being cannot arise from non-being.

⁸⁰ S. Hawking, *A Brief History of Time* (New York: Bantam Books, 1990), p. 50.

⁸¹ A. Guth as interviewed in the History Channel's TV series documentary, "The Universe," Season 1, Episode 14 (2007).

⁸² *Astronomy* (September, 1999), p. 38.

⁸³ For a much more sophisticated and complete presentation of this argument, see S.L. Guthrie, "Theism and Contemporary Cosmology" (2002), http://sguthrie.net/theism_and_contemporary_cosmology.htm.

⁸⁴ B.F. Skinner, *Beyond Freedom and Dignity* (New York: Bantam Books, 1972), p. 122.

⁸⁵ C.B. Macpherson, ed., *Leviathan* by Thomas Hobbes (New York: Penguin Books, 1985), p. 120.

⁸⁶ B. Russell and F.C. Copleston, "The Existence of God: A Debate Between Bertrand Russell and Father F.C. Copleston" in Ed. L. Miller, *Philosophical and Religious Issues: Classical and Contemporary Statements* (California: Dickenson, 1971), pp. 123-127.

⁸⁷ Epicurus, *Letter to Herodotus*, from Epicurus, *The Extant Remains*, translated by Cyril Bailey (Oxford: The Clarendon Press, 1926), p. 87.

⁸⁸ The veracity of substance dualism (or any auxiliary neurological interpretation of human consciousness) is not necessary here. Rather, I mean to say that if God exists then He would categorically be distinct from creation and, hence, could not be a corporeal mind unlike human beings. But an objector may wish to say that it is *impossible* to have an un-embodied mind and, hence, God does not exist. Such an a counter-argument may go something like this:

p1: If all minds must be embodied, then God does not exist.
p2: All minds must be embodied.
C: Therefore, God does not exist.

Though in response to this approach I might contest premise 2, it is not necessary for our present discussion. For one could simply use the same first premise and argue:

p1: If all minds must be embodied, then God does not exist.
p2*: God exists.
C*: Therefore, all minds must *not* be embodied.

What this argument would show is that upon establishing God's existence, the claim "all minds must be embodied" would be falsified. Premise 2 in the original construction strikes me as terribly ambitious of a premise anyway and is not settled by the cognitive science branch of philosophy by any stretch of the imagination (much less neurophysiology). For evidence of the ongoing debate in this area, see M. Mason, ed., *Taking Sides: Clashing Views on Controversial Issues in Cognitive Science* (New York: McGraw-Hill, 2004); also see B. McLaughlin and J. Cohen, eds., *Contemporary Debates in Philosophy of Mind* (NJ: Wiley-Blackwell, 2007).

⁸⁹ F. Dostoevsky, *The Brothers Karamazov*, translated by Richard Prevear and Larissa Volokhonsky (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2002), p. 244.

⁹⁰ L. Antony in a public debate entitled, "Is God Necessary for Morality?" at the University of Massachusetts, Amherst (2008).

⁹¹ A. Plantinga, *God, Freedom, and Evil* (Michigan: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 1974), p. 111.

⁹² Ecclesiastes 2:24-26, 12:13-14 (NASB).