

T. J. Mawson. *God and the Meanings of Life: What God Could and Couldn't Do to Make Our Lives More Meaningful*. London: Bloomsbury, 2016. 229 pp. \$88.00 (hbk); \$29.95 (paper).

Stewart Goetz
Ursinus College; St. Peter's College, Oxford

T. J. Mawson points out in *God and the Meanings of Life* that “those on the outside of the discipline [of analytic philosophy] often suppose that the question [of the meaning of life] has a much more central place within it than do those on the inside” (24). He goes on to describe how and why analytic philosophers for decades largely dismissed the question as misguided but are increasingly giving it serious attention in articles and books. Mawson’s own monograph is an example of this growing body of work, and it is a wonderful example indeed. If one desires to learn about where things have been and now are in the philosophical treatment of the meaning of life in the analytic tradition, his book is a must read. In what follows, I summarize his position on the question of the meaning of life and then briefly critically interact with it.

Mawson’s main target is the view that there is a single, correct interpretation of the question “What is the meaning of life?” Philosophers who advocate this position—Mawson thinks of them as monists—additionally mistakenly hold that there is one right answer to the question that can be captured in a fundamental principle. In contrast, he advocates pluralism or, as he prefers to say, polyvalence about the meaning of life. He believes that one asks a multiplicity of different questions when one asks “What is the meaning of life?” (polyvalence at the level of connotation), and these questions have different answers (polyvalence at the level of denotation) which typically point to different values (46). “In short,” he writes, “there are many meanings of life” (15).

What are some of these meanings of life? Mawson believes most of us are mainly concerned with questions about the meanings of our own lives as individuals, as opposed to human life in general, biological life *per se* (a question about its existence as such), or “life” understood as everything or all that there is (50-60). And what might we be asking about the meaning of our lives as individuals? One thing we might be concerned with is “meaning as feeling of fulfilment with some aspect of one’s life” (60). This sense of meaning is readily associated or identified with meaning as what makes life worth living (or at least seems so to the individual concerned; there is another more objective ‘spin’ as he puts it on the same idea—is one’s life a worthy object for such a sense of fulfilment?) (67). Another thing we might be concerned with is meaning as “leading to something that one believes to be valuable” (60). This is the idea of meaning as causally bringing about a consequence that is of significant value

(64). But just as there are causes, so also there are purposes, and Mawson points out that what we might be interested in when inquiring about the meaning of life is the purpose of our lives, which within a theistic framework is a question about God's purpose in creating us as individuals (65-6). There is also the additional idea of meaning as concern about discovering a story or narrative into which our lives fit (67-8). And many persons, for example, Sartre, are concerned with meaning as self-creative autonomy (111).

Mawson catalogs other senses of meaning that are involved in plausible interpretations of "What is the meaning of life?" But those mentioned in the previous paragraph are a sufficient sample for the purposes of this review. As an advocate of polyvalence, Mawson is aware of the appropriateness of the question about how, if at all, these many interpretations might be related to each other. Some proponents of polyvalence advocate a "grab-bag" position, where "the things within a grab bag are entirely separate from one another or . . . if not entirely separate then at most linked now and again with causal chains" (46). But Mawson finds what he terms an "amalgam approach" to polyvalence more intellectually convincing, where in amalgam polyvalence the different interpretations are, for example, conceptually tied together into larger wholes (Chapter 7). If they are tied together in this way, one might discover that there is a hierarchy among the interpretations bound together, with the deepest interpretation being that which takes precedence over the others as a meaning of life at least in part because of "its desirability in itself *qua* a meaning of life" (16).

So a proponent of amalgam polyvalence looks for how interpretations of the meaning of life question can be tied together. However, as is sometimes the case when there is a plurality of things, not all of them can be maximally integrated with the others. In terms of the answers to the multiple interpretations of the meaning of life, having more of one kind of meaning might entail having less of another. And it turns out that this is the case with the amalgam polyvalence view that Mawson defends. And what is Mawson's view? It is the monotheistic (theistic, for short) view according to which each of us is created by God for the purpose that we enjoy the deep meaning of eternal (heavenly) life (17). This is overall a more meaningful life than that provided by atheism, where atheism is stipulated by Mawson to include the lack of an afterlife. The theistic view is not only overall a *quantitatively* more meaningful life, because it includes a *post-mortem* potentially infinite existence (one that does not end) in addition to an *ante-mortem* finite existence (141), but also a *qualitatively* more meaningful life because it "magnifies into eternal life all that is most valuable in our lives as led this side of the grave" (150). But while Mawson believes his view is optimistic in the sense that God adds more to the meaning of life than He takes away from it (4-5), it is not optimally optimistic because, for example, God cannot bestow His purpose of life on us without undermining the self-creative autonomy so valued by someone like Sartre. To the extent that our essence precedes our existence we lose the meaning of life that comes with having a choice to create lives for ourselves. If we are created for the ultimate purpose of eternal life with God, then we have no choice about what our ultimate purpose is. And if creation for this purpose brings along with it ties to already existent moral constraints about how we ought to live our lives, then we have no choice about the existence and nature of such constraints. Moreover, if

God chooses one or more of us as individuals to carry out a specific task in this life, then our creative self-autonomy is further curtailed (Mawson uses Jonah and God's command to preach to Nineveh as an example (130)).

Mawson makes clear he believes that Sartre overstates the implications of theism for self-creative autonomy by portraying it as a stark all-or-nothing matter. As Mawson understands the issue, God's role as our creator entails we lack self-creative autonomy with respect to certain aspects of our lives (like those mentioned in the previous paragraph) but leaves most of us (perhaps not the Jonahs of this world) significantly free with respect to others (e.g., about whom to marry, what university to attend, what job to take). After all, "God's very purpose for us is in part that there be areas in which we may exercise the sort of self-creative autonomy that Sartre sees as essential for a certain type of meaningfulness" (112). But in the end there is no reasonable way to deny that the kind of overall meaningfulness provided by theism takes away from the kind of meaningfulness Sartre desires.

So on Mawson's view, when it comes to the meanings of life, the Lord giveth and the Lord taketh away (134). What happens, then, when someone continues resolutely to choose in such a way that he or she rejects the meaningfulness of eternal life? One might view this as the quintessential instance of self-creative autonomy. Interestingly, while Mawson is, in philosophical terms, a defender of libertarian free will, he is also, in theological terms, a universalist. Thus he maintains that the Lord will, if necessary, in the end take away persons' libertarian free will to make sure that all accept what He gives in terms of eternal life: "if there are any of us who would not choose to be so perfected [in Heaven] (I doubt that there are), then . . . some will end up being perfected in Heaven solely because God has chosen that they be so, not to any extent involving them choosing it" (157). Mawson adds that, in Heaven, "We'll have no self-creative autonomy to fashion ourselves in anything other than the best way (or one of the joint best if two or more are equally good . . .)" (157). Whether Sartre likes it or not, what the Lord giveth in terms of self-creative autonomy He will, if necessary, in the end take away.

Mawson's position is extremely interesting and certainly thought provoking. Like Mawson, I am a pluralist about the meaning of life question. Nevertheless, in the space remaining, I will briefly develop a couple of concerns that I have with his position.

I begin with doubts I have about the value of self-creative autonomy which Mawson, in agreement with Sartre, thinks provides "in and of itself" (123) meaningfulness in life. Does self-creative autonomy really have this in-and-of-itself (intrinsic) value? I cannot believe that it does. It seems to me that any value that it has is strictly extrinsic or instrumental in nature. It is good only because it helps us achieve something else which we value in and of itself/for its own sake. And it seems to me that in the end Mawson, contrary to what he writes, thinks the same thing. After all, if eternal life in Heaven really does involve the substantive reduction of self-creative autonomy in the way that he claims, then one wonders if self-creative autonomy really has the value that Sartre and he maintain it has.

At this juncture, I need to introduce the words "making sense of things," which at the time of the writing of *God and the Meanings of Life* seem not to have been in Mawson's vocabulary. If we are trying to make sense of things—and who interested

in the meanings of life is not?—then we are naturally attracted to the idea that what makes most sense is a universe in which the realization of one intrinsic value does not ultimately exclude the realization of another. So if self-creative autonomy really has value in and of itself, the experience of eternal life should not undermine the realization of self-creative autonomy. If it does undermine it, the most plausible conclusion to draw is that self-creative autonomy does not have intrinsic value.

Mawson's *vocabulary* at the time of writing *God and the Meanings of Life* seems to have lacked the words "making sense of things," but his conceptual scheme seems to have included the *idea* expressed by them. I say this because the concept of amalgamating different understandings of the meaning of life question seems to be that of trying to fit together or unify multiple understandings of that question in a way that makes sense. Here, however, I wonder if Mawson has not overlooked an understanding of the meaning of life question that itself involves the idea of making sense of things. As I have written elsewhere,¹ one perfectly plausible understanding of the question "What is the meaning of life?" is "Is life meaningful?," where this latter question is reasonably understood as asking about whether life ultimately makes any sense in terms of things fitting together in an intelligible way. If this is correct, then the idea of making sense of things is not only operative at the second-order level of amalgamating a plurality of understandings of the question about the meaning of life, it is also operative at the first-order level as one of the understandings of the question "What is the meaning of life?" itself.

How might the idea of making sense of things come in at the first level? I think it enters in a way that connects with Mawson's own treatment of the meanings of life. For example, as I pointed out above, Mawson thinks a plausible way of interpreting the question "What is the meaning of life?" is in terms of what makes life worth living. But if there really is something good (indeed, intrinsically good) that makes life worth living, then the question of who, if anyone, should ultimately experience this good naturally arises. And it doesn't make any sense to think that each and everyone one of us will in the end experience this good regardless of how we lived life on this earth. Hence, while Mawson is a universalist, he believes in the idea of purgatory where "Hitler spent—say—10,000 years in purgatory before he got [to Heaven] and Mother Teresa—say—ten seconds" (156), and the lives they chose to lead on earth will "make a difference to the quality of life they'll enjoy in Heaven" (156).

This is not the place to debate the issues of universalism and purgatory. My point is only that Mawson is well aware of the need to make sense of things and given this awareness I think it is eminently plausible to hold that the idea of making sense of things enters into an interpretation of the meaning of life question itself (and not only at the secondary level of amalgamating interpretations of that question). In other words, I believe it is perfectly reasonable to hold that one of the things a person is asking when he asks "What is the meaning of life?" is something like "In what way, if at all, does life ultimately make sense?"

There are many issues in Mawson's book that I have not touched upon because of a lack of space. In keeping with the spirit of the idea of making sense of things, it makes sense for me to bring this review to a close with the advice that if the reader wants to read a first-rate philosophical book on the topic of the meaning of life, then

he or she can do no better than *God and the Meanings of Life*. It is philosophy at its best, and I recommend it with the highest praise.

¹ Stewart Goetz, *The Purpose of Life: A Theistic Perspective* (London: Continuum, 2012).