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Stewart Goetz, THE PURPOSE OF LIFE: A THEISTIC PERSPECTIVE

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I will close with a meta-concern.⁶ The pluralistic, many-spheres structure of Wolterstorff's account implies that the Bible is not authoritative in politics; yet Wolterstorff develops his political philosophy by consulting the writings of the apostle Paul. The problem here is not that religious resources are inadmissible in politics. Wolterstorff describes the state as the "sphere of spheres," as a sphere that encompasses all the others.⁷ So religious resources are admissible because resources from all human enterprises are admissible. We should design our government using the best of the business world, the best from religion, and so on. The problem is rather that anyone—Christian or otherwise—who believes Wolterstorff's view must *also* believe that principles from the Bible are not privileged in the sphere of spheres. We can consult the Bible, but only in the way that we would consult canonical economic texts, *A Theory of Justice*, *Das Capital*, journals of social science, or anything else. So no one—Christian or otherwise—who believes Wolterstorff's political philosophy should believe it *simply because* it is the best interpretation of Paul. Wolterstorff therefore has to defend his view on its merits, which is a task *The Mighty and the Almighty* leaves undone. I mean this as a call for more work, not as knockdown criticism—there is no a priori reason why views inspired by the Bible cannot be defended on their merits.TM

The Mighty and the Almighty is a worthwhile read. Wolterstorff's Pauline account of the state is interesting in its own right—not least because it explains why institutions, as well as individuals, can be right-holders. This is a significant departure from the individualism of most western political philosophy, and it is a plausible one. Interesting philosophical projects raise new questions as they solve old problems; we should look forward to reading Wolterstorff's answers.

Because he thinks the state is supposed to curb wrongdoing in general, Wolterstorff's political theology may, depending upon which rights he emphasizes, support a view that is *more* progressive than liberalism.

⁶I am indebted, here, to a conversation with Russ Pryba.

⁷*Ibid.*, 166.

The Purpose of Life: A Theistic Perspective, by Stewart Goetz. London and New York: Continuum, 2012. 189 pages. \$24.00 paper.

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In *The Purpose of Life: A Theistic Perspective*, Stewart Goetz contributes to the expanding discussion within analytic philosophy on life's meaning. Regrettably, for the better part of the last century analytic philosophers

devoted next to no attention to a topic at the heart of the human condition—the *meaning of life*. However, recent momentum in the other direction is encouraging, and Goetz's new book adds energy to this young, yet developing body of research.

The question of life's meaning is, to some extent, vague, so any book-length discussion of the topic should address the thorny interpretive issue of how to understand what the question is asking. Goetz begins here in chapter 1 by distinguishing the following three questions:

- (Q₁) What is the meaning of life?
- (Q₂) What makes life meaningful?
- (Q₃) Is life meaningful?

He advocates an *individualist-teleological* interpretation of (Q₁): "What is the purpose of my life?" His understanding of (Q₁), though, is not solely individualist, for he is concerned with the ultimate end for which we all as individuals exist. The purpose has a *global* dimension in that it applies to everyone collectively. He thinks a plausible understanding of (Q₂) is: "What makes life worth living?" Finally, he views (Q₃) as asking something like the following: "Does life make any sense in terms of fitting together in an intelligible way?" Goetz correctly notes that while (Q₁)–(Q₃) can be distinguished, they are inter-connected such that an answer to one will influence answers to the other two. Hence, though his primary aim in the book is to answer (Q₁)—under his preferred interpretation—he has much to say about both (Q₂) and (Q₃).

Because a large part of figuring out what the meaning of life is (or might be) is first deciding on a plausible interpretation of the question, it is worth lingering here a bit. I am sympathetic to the interpretive hypothesis vis-à-vis (Q₁) around which Goetz frames the book. However, I subtly part interpretive ways with him on this point. I think a good case can be made that (Q₁), rather than being understood as a request for the purpose of life, is a request that is more expansive—a question about *all of this*, where "all of this" is, indeed, the entire space-time universe. And, it is not primarily a question about the *purpose* of all of this. I have argued that the request, once we (i) unpack the assumptions out of which it is asked, (ii) try to account for the numerous sub-questions "embedded" within it, and (iii) consider other desiderata of a compelling interpretation, is most plausibly viewed as a request for something like an overarching narrative that provides a framework or background picture (to borrow from Charles Taylor), vantage point, or deep context that brings intelligibility to the existentially salient parts of existence and grounds a *praxis* for living meaningfully in the world. No doubt, such a narrative would have elements that address questions of purpose, in addition to saying something about origins, suffering, and death, for example. Importantly, this narrative-interpretation of the meaning-of-life question is able to unify the

many sub-questions embedded within the grand question under a single interpretive construct—a narrative or narrative-like framework.

Though we differ on this interpretive matter, we do not disagree about the need for a narrative as such—Goetz thinks something like a global narrative is critical. And any difference we have here is over where the meaning of life question arises and takes initial existential hold: at the *personal* level or the *cosmic* level? Whereas he thinks that people generally begin with personal narrative concerns, I have, up to this point at least, advocated a position that stresses the priority of cosmic narrative concerns. Goetz thinks that we start locally and move increasingly outward in our narrative thinking, and I have developed a line of thought that largely moves in the opposite direction. The question, then, is do we move from the self to the world or from the world to the self?

After settling on his preferred interpretation of (Q₁), Goetz enlists Richard Taylor, Jean-Paul Sartre, and Thomas Nagel as interlocutors in developing his own position that *perfect happiness is the meaning (purpose) of life*, where happiness is a state consisting of the experience of pleasure(s), pleasure is an intrinsic (though non-moral) good pursued for its own sake, and perfect happiness is the uninterrupted and unending experience of nothing but pleasure(s). In the balance of the book, he builds his case in support of this claim about life's purpose. Importantly, according to Goetz, discerning this purpose for which humans are created need not presuppose access to special revelation or Scripture. Rather, it is available via the deliverances of natural reason. Equally as important, however, (and this is where the theistic/religious component enters) is his view that if we are to believe that life is ultimately meaningful (where perfect *happiness* and perfect *justice* coalesce), we will be rationally driven to admit that God exists (as a side note: one might think that if we *hope* (as a propositional attitude governed by more lenient epistemic standards than *belief*) that there is some future state of affairs where perfect happiness and perfect justice unite, we will be *practically* driven to accept that God exists). In addition to his claim that perfect happiness (and therefore meaningful life) requires God in order to ultimately harmonize happiness and justice, he notes that his view also requires (i) an afterlife, (ii) a soul, since many think something like a soul is a necessary condition for surviving the demise of the body (though materialists who affirm the possibility of post-mortem existence will disagree here), and (iii) free-will to make (at least some) undetermined self-forming choices (SFCs, *a la* Robert Kane) en route to embracing what he calls "life-plans" that consist of the most broadly influential SFCs about when and how an agent will maximize her happiness.

In the heart of the book, chapters 2 through 4, Goetz engages in a negative project of answering objections to his central claim, though through the process of engaging his critics he clarifies his perfect happiness account of life's meaning. The first two groups of objections (chapters 2 and Three) are aimed at his claim that perfect happiness is the meaning of life. The third set of objections (chapter 4) is aimed at a key component

built into the edifice of his interpretation—the existence of purpose and the legitimacy of teleological explanations. In chapter 2, he considers a number of atheistic objections to perfect happiness being the meaning of life, including Bernard Williams's famous criticism of the very coherence of *unending* happiness (unending happiness is entailed by Goetz's understanding of perfect happiness). He also puts Bertrand Russell and George Mavrodes in conversation with one another on the question of why one should be moral. He argues that in a "Russellian" world being immoral is overall as rational as being moral in that being immoral is sometimes in one's best interests. Like Mavrodes before him, Goetz claims that a Russellian world leads to deep absurdities. A salient kind of absurdity that characterizes a Russellian world, according to Goetz, is a function of our lives not fitting together intelligibly (and thus a "no" answer is required for (Q_3)). More specifically, the tension between the moral demands on us and our happiness will never be resolved. Since perfect justice and perfect happiness do not coalesce in this life, and since there is neither a God nor an afterlife in a Russellian world, we are left with an ultimately meaningless world. A meaningful world is one where, at a minimum, those who act morally never end up worse off in terms of their own well-being *when all is said and done*. A Russellian world, argues Goetz, is not such a world. Not a few think that a Russellian world is a meaningless world, at bottom. Goetz has given yet another reason for thinking so.

In chapter 3, Goetz addresses objections that originate within the theistic camp. The objections are every bit as numerous and heated here. They range from the claim that the meaning of life is a *who* (i.e., God) and not a *what* to the worry that the perfect happiness view advocates a narcissism that is inimical to core tenets of Christian theism. *Prima facie*, cashing out the meaning of life in *hedonistic* terms (though his view is not "hedonism" whereby pleasure is the only intrinsic good) might appear to be in considerable tension with core elements of many venerable Christian traditions—for example, Christian traditions that claim that the chief end of man is to glorify and enjoy God forever (see the Westminster Standards) or that the world was made for the glory of God (see the *Catechism of the Catholic Church*) whereby God and his glory is the final end toward which we ought to aim. It might also seem to be in tension with the testimony of Jesus and the Apostles who summon those who would be disciples to take up their crosses, put others first, die to self, lose one's life, and so on. So, some worries lurk. But Goetz has plausible answers, I think, for these sorts of objections. Using an effective strategy of employing legendary Christian spokespersons such as St. Augustine and C. S. Lewis to answer these in-house objections, Goetz demonstrates that once we carefully unpack the idea of perfect happiness being the meaning of life, it is quite consistent with what many adherents embrace as non-negotiable elements of Christian theology and *praxis*.

In chapter 4, the bulk of Goetz's discussion centers on implications that the causal closure principle has for purpose and teleological explanation.

Given his view's need of teleology, the independent plausibility of his view in its own right, and independent reasons for rejecting the causal closure principle, he sees no compelling reason to reject all teleological explanation. Indeed, he sees naturalism, not science, as the primary motivator for rejecting purposeful explanation (here, he incorporates material from his co-authored book with Charles Taliaferro, *Naturalism* (Eerdmans, 2008)). The *purpose* that his perfect happiness account requires (at both personal and cosmic levels) is threatened, not by science, but by a questionable naturalism, so he argues.

Finally, in chapter 5 he concludes by bringing his perfect happiness view of life's meaning into conversation with important issues at the fore in discussions over the problem of evil and eschatology. Along the way he interacts with strategies enlisted by some theistic philosophers to neutralize the problem of evil, most notably skeptical theism. He even develops his own theodicy, incorporating the idea of perfect happiness. This is surely a place where Goetz's book gestures both directly and indirectly to the need for increased theoretical development—questions at the intersection of the meaning of life and the problem of evil in general, the meaning of life and skeptical theism in particular, and the connection between ending, death, and life's meaning.

The Purpose of Life: A Theistic Perspective makes an important contribution to the growing discussion within analytic philosophy over life's meaning. Goetz covers a lot of interesting philosophical territory to make his case—value theory, naturalism, reductionism, the problem of evil, even heaven and hell. His choice of interlocutors is equally as interesting: St. Augustine, Bertrand Russell, C. S. Lewis, Daniel Dennett, Thomas Nagel and Alvin Plantinga to name a few. Those interested in a monograph-length discussion of life's meaning from a theistic perspective will want to read this book. I hope that Goetz's contribution motivates others to work further (or for the first time) in this area.

Mind and Cosmos: Why the Materialist Neo-Darwinian Conception of Nature Is Almost Certainly False, by Thomas Nagel. New York: Oxford University Press, 2012. x + 130 pages. \$24.95 cloth.

WILLIAM JAWORSKI, Fordham University

Thomas Nagel argues in his most recent book that the materialist worldview which has come to dominate academic philosophy and the non-academic philosophizing of many scientists cannot provide an adequate explanation of life's origins. As a result, Nagel proposes that we consider