Warm greetings from the University of Notre Dame. After pandemic-related delays, I am pleased to introduce the seventh annual issue of Logoi. Over the years, Logoi has allowed us to give our readers a glimpse into the Center’s vibrant life, and to feature cutting-edge content in philosophy of religion and philosophical theology. While those aims remain firmly in place, we decided it was time for an update. In collaboration with our magazine designer, Christina Duthie, we have given Logoi a compelling new look this year. On the content side, our goal is to provide material that is as evocative and enjoyable as it is informative. Now to a brief look at what you’ll find inside this issue.

Our readers will notice some changes to the Center staff since the last issue of Logoi in 2019. After a decade of exemplary leadership, tireless service, and wide-ranging success, Center Co-Director Samuel Newlands stepped down from his role in the summer of 2021. He remains at Notre Dame, and will become the new chair of the philosophy department in the fall of 2022. We hope you enjoy our interview with Sam.

Joining the Center this year as our new Associate Director is Laura Frances Callahan, Assistant Professor of Philosophy at Notre Dame. Callahan brings so much to this role, including a burgeoning research program and fresh vision to the Center. Welcome, Laura!

After a relatively quiet few years at the Center without residential fellows, we were eager to welcome a group of fantastic scholars to Notre Dame for the 2021-2022 academic year. Joining us as fellows this year are Amber L. Griffioen, Jane Heath, Emily Lehman, David Lincicum, Jonathan C. Rutledge, Allison Krile Thornton, and Shlomo Zuckier. You will find more about them, including their exciting research, inside.

After an extremely successful, decade-long run, our Logos Workshop in Philosophical Theology has come to an end. In commemoration of this popular conference series, enjoy a look back at Logos through the years.

The centerpiece of the 2022 issue of Logoi is a thought-provoking discussion on the relationship between God and life’s meaning. Our four contributors to this mini-symposium each respond to the following question: What has God to do with Meaning? As you’ll see and probably already suspect, the authors—Timothy Mawson, Thaddeus Metz, Christine Vitrano, and Stewart Goetz—disagree on the answer(s) to this important question. We hope you find their discussion engaging.

Disagreement itself is a fascinating topic ripe for philosophical reflection. What should we conclude from the fact that four eminent scholars who have devoted years of careful reflection to the subject of life’s meaning disagree—profoundly in some cases—about such an important question? In her piece preceding the discussion on God and meaning, our Associate Director, Laura Frances Callahan, provides a helpful analysis of tempting responses to epistemic disagreement, followed by her own preferred strategy for moving forward.

Though disagreement is all around us, we hope that you will agree that there is good reason to be excited for our newly designed Logoi 2022... enjoy!

Yours,

Joshua Seachris
Program Director, Center for Philosophy of Religion
Assistant Teaching Professor of Philosophy
University of Notre Dame
Meet the Center Staff

Michael Rea (Director) is Rev. John A. O’Brien Professor of Philosophy and Director of the Center for Philosophy of Religion at the University of Notre Dame, where he has taught since 2001. He is also a Professorial Fellow at the Logos Institute for Analytic & Exegetical Theology at the University of St. Andrews. He received his Ph.D. from the University of Notre Dame in 1996 and his D.Litt. from the Divinity School at the University of St. Andrews in 2020. His research focuses primarily on topics in philosophy of religion, analytic theology, metaphysics, and feminist philosophy. He has written or edited more than fifteen books and over fifty articles, and has given numerous lectures in the United States, United Kingdom, European Union, Russia, China, and Iran, including the 2017 Gifford Lectures at the University of St. Andrews.

Laura Frances Callahan (Associate Director) is Assistant Professor of Philosophy at the University of Notre Dame. She is interested in questions such as: How are we responsible for our beliefs—especially our moral and religious beliefs? What are the distinctive desiderata for such beliefs (know-how? understanding?), and what does forming these beliefs virtuously involve? How do social roles and interpersonal relationships shape these epistemic responsibilities? And how do such roles and relationships shape our ethical responsibilities? She has published in a range of journals, including Epistemologia, The Journal of Medical Ethics, The Philosophical Quarterly, and Faith and Philosophy. Laura received her Ph.D. from Rutgers University in the spring of 2019 and her BPhil from Oxford University in 2015. She is a native Hoosier and received an undergraduate degree in philosophy and math from Indiana University Bloomington.

Joshua Seachris (Program Director) is Assistant Teaching Professor of Philosophy at the University of Notre Dame. His most recent book, What Is This Thing Called the Meaning of Life? (co-authored with Stewart Goetz) was recently published with Routledge, and he is finishing up a co-authored debate with Thaddeus Metz on the question What Makes Life Meaningful? (Routledge). He also has authored a number of peer-reviewed journal articles on life’s meaning, the problem of evil, death, and Confucius. As Program Director, he manages a number of Center projects, including large interdisciplinary grant initiatives.

Joyce Zurawski (Administrative Assistant) has been the Administrative Assistant in the Center since 2007. She enjoys meeting new fellows each year and helping them acclimate to Notre Dame. She also enjoys assisting with conferences for the Center, especially when they are held in wonderful places like Colorado, Key Largo, Oregon, and Lisbon! In her free time, Joyce enjoys the outdoors, amateur photography, beachcombing, and traveling; including trips to visit her two children, who, after graduating from Notre Dame and Saint Mary’s, now live on opposite coasts of the country! During the summer months, Joyce and her husband spend as much time as possible at their lake house in Michigan.

Grace Hibshman (Graduate Assistant) graduated with a bachelor’s degree from Grove City College where she studied math, philosophy, and music. As a graduate student at Notre Dame, she enjoys thinking about moral psychology, virtue ethics, philosophy of religion, and feminist philosophy. Formative experiences for her include growing up in a classical school, converting to Eastern Orthodoxy, spending a summer in Albania, and spending three summers living in monasteries.
Life at the Center

_In the fall of 2021, we welcomed fellows back to the Center in person. It was a semester filled with many exciting activities and opportunities._

**September 2**
**Welcome Party**
We begin the academic year by welcoming our new fellows with good food, drink, and fellowship.

**September 9**
**Weekly Pub Night Kickoff**
Fellows, staff, faculty and graduate students often gather at a local venue on Thursday evenings to discuss ideas over drinks.

**September 10**
**Weekly Friday Discussion Group**
“Trust, Testimony, and Religion”
_Laura Frances Callahan_

**September 17**
**Weekly Friday Discussion Group**
“Can a Religion Be Misanthropic (and Why Would That Matter)?”
_Kathryn J. Norlock_

**September 24**
**Weekly Friday Discussion Group**
“Humean Arguments from Evil, Updating Procedures, and Perspectival Skeptical Theism”
_Jonathan C. Rutledge_

**September 3**
**Weekly Friday Discussion Group**
“Living Loss: How Thinking About Miscarriage Can Help Us Do Better Theology”
_Amber L. Griffioen_
**October 1**
Weekly Friday Discussion Group
“Worship and Self-Annihilation”
(Michael Rea)

**October 8**
Weekly Friday Discussion Group
“Worship and the Divine Will in Jewish Tradition”
(Shlomo Zuckier)

**October 29**
Weekly Friday Discussion Group
“Meaning, Purpose, and Narrative”
(Mike Zhao)

**November 5**
Weekly Friday Discussion Group
“Have We No Shame? A Moral Exemplar Account of Atonement”
(Allison Krile Thornton)

**November 11**
Lecture
“Forgetting Our Medieval Religion: The Cost for Women”
with Beth Allison Barr

**November 12**
Weekly Friday Discussion Group
“Divine Contradiction”
(Jc Beall)

**November 19**
Weekly Friday Discussion Group
“I remember the saying’ (Tobit 2:6): Recognising Emotions in Scripture with Tobit and Eve”
(Jane Heath)
The Logos Workshop in Philosophical Theology

After over a decade, the Logos Workshop in Philosophical Theology was scheduled to come to an end with our May 2020 workshop. Due to the pandemic, that conference was postponed and ultimately cancelled. We want to take this opportunity to look back on what was a groundbreaking and highly successful conference series. The annual Logos Workshop brought together analytic philosophers and theologians to discuss important topics of mutual interest. Starting in 2009, well over 1,000 scholars participated in these collaborative events, expanding our understanding of significant questions at the intersection of philosophy and theology. Indeed, the Logos series was central to the birth and growth of an entirely new academic field—analytic theology.

For our staff, Logos was one of the most enjoyable and satisfying recurring events in the life of the Center. It was an immensely rewarding experience, and we are thankful for the opportunity to have hosted it for so many years. We are grateful for the many friendships forged in the process. We hope that the research and relationships cultivated at Logos will continue to flourish even as the workshop series has come to a close.

“Aeach time I participate, I gain a deeper, richer understanding of an issue that matters—really matters—to me. As impressive as the scholarship is, though, I am perhaps even more impressed by the ethos of Logos: most of the participants seem sincerely interested in searching for the truth together, learning from one another, and assisting one another as we all strive for excellence.”

– Alicia Finch
Northern Illinois University

“Logos became my favorite conference for the simple reason that it is the most unpretentious, welcoming, and intellectually generous venue I have ever experienced. This has been in large part due to the welcoming and intellectually generous spirit of Mike Rea, whose leadership and friendship have been a great gift.”

– Sameer Yadav, Westmont College
“My initial serendipitous invitation to participate in a workshop led to vital experiences and relationships, but most importantly, propelled me to do scholarship that breaks the barriers between disciplinary boundaries.”

Amy Peeler, Wheaton College

“What I value most from the experience is interacting with a collection of wonderful and talented people from different disciplines—including people I never would have encountered otherwise—who helped me to understand what they were passionate about, and convinced me that their topics matter to me as well.”

Hud Hudson, Western Washington University

Workshops
2009–Present

Logos 2009
The Incarnation

Logos 2010
Divine Action: God, Chance, and Causation

Logos 2011
Divine Revelation: Meaning, Authority, and Canon

Logos 2012
Minds, Bodies, and the Divine

Logos 2013
Theorizing about God: Realism in Theology

Logos 2014
The Atonement

Logos 2015
Religious Experience

Logos 2016
Sin

Logos 2017
God, History and the Incarnation (at the University of St. Andrews)

Logos 2018
Race, Gender, Ability, and Class: Expanding Conversations in Analytic Theology

Logos 2019
Reconciliation, Divine and Human (at the University of St. Andrews)

Logos 2020
Narrative, Personhood, and the Self (cancelled due to pandemic)
“There’s nothing else quite like it.”

Former Associate Director Samuel Newlands on his time at the Center. Sam is Professor of Philosophy and incoming chair of the Department of Philosophy at the University of Notre Dame. He received his Ph.D. from Yale University and joined Notre Dame in 2006. He is currently working on an NEH-funded book project, No Cheating! A Spinozistic Reading of Early Modern Metaphysics. Interviewed by Joshua Seachris

JOSH SEACHRIS: Sam, you arrived at the Center in the Fall of 2009 and served for over a decade. Over the years, what sorts of hats did you wear in your role?

SAM NEWLANDS: I had been an assistant professor in the philosophy department here at Notre Dame for a couple years before I also joined the Center as Associate Director. A few years later, I became Director along with Michael Rea, from whom I have learned so much about faithful organizational stewardship (and occasionally, crisis management). I’ve also served as PI on larger research projects that we ran through the Center on the problem of evil, hope and optimism, transformative experiences, and the nature of the self. Those projects placed me in lots of other roles for which I was severely underqualified, including video producer, film competition judge, website design consultant, event planner, and Lisbon tour guide.

JS: You have said that your time at the Center, while not without the normal challenges that go along with managing such a busy place, was rich and full. You met and forged friendships with dozens of scholars from around the world. You directed several multi-year, multi-million dollar research projects. And as you just told us, you can now put “video producer” “film critic” and “tour guide” on your CV... how many philosophers can say that!? What will you especially remember from your time here?

SN: There have definitely been some indelible highlights, like sitting in the audience of the world-premiers of the winning play from our Hope & Optimism Project, showing my (then) young daughters the winning entries from our short film competition, meeting T. C. Boyle at breakfast at our Los Angeles Hope Festival, walking the streets
of Lisbon with leading earthquake researchers, watching the sunset off the Florida coast with a group of social scientists and theologians, celebrating publication and career successes with our fellows, hearing testimonies about the international reach of our animated videos.

But what really sticks out in my mind are all the relationships I developed here with the wonderful CPR staff and faculty, project grantees, event attendees, Society of Christian Philosophers and John Templeton Foundation representatives, and our annual residential fellows. My life is so much richer—intellectually, spiritually, emotionally, relationally—thanks to the people I’ve had the pleasure of getting to know through the Center.

JS: That is really touching, Sam. Relationships are what matter, yes. For someone who is considering applying to the Center as a residential fellow or who desires to collaborate with us in other ways, I suspect your reason(s) for recommending this place are related, right?

Absolutely—my main pitch for CPR is people. Mike, Laura, Josh, and Joyce are all wonderful to work with, and they go out of their way to welcome fellows and to create a warm and supportive environment for philosophers and theologians at every career stage. Although residential fellows don’t know in advance who else will be joining them in a given year, it is amazing to see how quickly each year’s group forges a distinctive community, how much collaborative work results from a year of being fellows together, and all the ways that each person’s own thinking and research grows in such a discussion-rich and collaborative working environment. Plus, Notre Dame faculty and graduate students are quick to engage with CPR fellows, which gives CPR fellows access to a huge range of philosophical and theological conversation partners, all at a world-renowned, resource-heavy institution that takes philosophy and theology to be at the very core of its institutional identity. This is a truly remarkable place to be as a fellow, and there’s nothing else quite like it for those interested in philosophy of religion!

JS: Well said! We’ll probably have to update the pitch on our website after that. I think we may be underselling ourselves. All joking aside, I am confident that our former fellows and other collaborators will wholeheartedly agree.

OK, we should wrap this up (I hear you have a lot in the works!) Now that you’re no longer Co-Director, to what sorts of professional activities and projects will you turn your attention?

SN: Does improving my tennis game count? Well, OK, this year I have also been on an NEH fellowship working on a large writing project on Spinozism and early modern metaphysics, so I suppose my flirtation with heterodoxy will continue for at least a little longer. And starting this July, I will begin serving as the new department chair of the philosophy department here at Notre Dame. So I guess the real answer to your question is: I will now be devoting myself to even more meetings and email. (See, focusing on Spinozism doesn’t sound so bad now, does it?)

JS: No, I guess it doesn’t!

Sam, thanks so much for sparing a bit of your time for this interview. I trust our readers will enjoy it as much as I have. More importantly, thank you for a fabulous decade of service and the lifelong memories you have forged together with us!
When We Disagree

By Laura Frances Callahan

This issue contains four perspectives on the theme “God and meaning.” These perspectives differ in multiple ways. Authors have taken up or emphasized different questions one might ask about God and meaning, and they have understood those questions in different ways. But they have also offered some clashing answers to questions about what God has to do with meaning, and in so doing they disagree on matters of great human and personal importance. It may be helpful, then, to step back and reflect on what to make of disagreement in general.

I want to outline three responses to disagreement that enjoy some intuitive as well as philosophical support. These are, in the true sense of the word, tempting responses. I’ll suggest you should avoid yielding entirely to any of the three, and I’ll sketch some brief positive recommendations in closing.

First, it can seem that the reasonable response to encountering entrenched disagreement among smart and thoughtful people who have all tried and failed to convince each other of their own positions is neutrality. Suspension of judgment. If there isn’t anything approaching consensus among putative experts, how could those of us who aren’t even putative experts possibly be entitled to form confident, controversial beliefs? This position has the scent of intellectual humility, conscientiousness, and caution.

And yet—genuine neutrality is hard to come by in cases such as this, and it comes at its own cost. What would it mean to be genuinely neutral as to the meaning of life? God’s role in that meaning? How would one live? Many philosophers think beliefs just are dispositions to action, given various desires. (To believe that there’s milk in the fridge is to be ready to open it, if one wants milk.) Or at least, beliefs and dispositions to action are closely linked. But what’s the disposition of the person in a neutral belief-state on questions of God and meaning? (Would this individual, e.g., pray? Not pray? Just pray sometimes?) Even if we can articulate the rational life strategy for the neutral individual, whether that strategy “pays off” will depend a good deal on whether there really is a meaning-making God. We can go wrong not only by pursuing the wrong sort of “meaning” but also by failing to pursue a right sort. Or, as William James put it, taking a stand on some questions seems simply “forced” on us. True neutrality is a mirage.

The second natural response to reading several disagreeing perspectives right in a row is to go relativist. Whatever can possibly be expected from us, surely it doesn’t outstrip what we’re capable of. Each of these authors is trying their best, from their own, admittedly limited, perspective and background, to figure out what the heck is going on vis-à-vis God and meaning. That’s all they can do, so (thanks, Kant!) that’s all they ought
and at odds with the true goal: progress in believing the truth. His response is weird. He thinks disagreement is so important to our appreciating the true things we believe, that:

> Where this advantage can no longer be had, I confess I should like to see the teachers of mankind endeavoring to provide a substitute for it; some contrivance for making the difficulties of the question as present to the learner's consciousness, as if they were pressed upon him by a dissentient champion, eager for his conversion.1

Mill thinks that even total convergence on the truth would be suboptimal, without serious and respectful conversation among disputants. Perhaps truth always shines brightest against a background.

So—what then? What to make of disagreeing experts? I submit some suggestions for respectful engagement.

First, listen (or read) well. Charitably evaluate the arguments provided. Appreciate insights, and also find points of objection, confusion, and obfuscation. Seek further information where available. Open your antecedent opinions to possible revision (or to increased confidence!). Consider the extent to which humility calls for neutrality in particular cases, and what neutrality would involve in those cases. Basically, deploy a fleet of intellectual virtues. There's no simple, general framework that will decide what to do in cases of disagreement. Of course, (it really must be said) many philosophers would disagree with me on that.

> If there isn’t anything approaching consensus among putative experts, how could those of us who aren’t even putative experts possibly be entitled to form confident, controversial beliefs?”

and at odds with the true goal: progress in believing the truth. His response is weird. He thinks disagreement is so important to our appreciating the true things we believe, that:

> Where this advantage can no longer be had, I confess I should like to see the teachers of mankind endeavoring to provide a substitute for it; some contrivance for making the difficulties of the question as present to the learner's consciousness, as if they were pressed upon him by a dissentient champion, eager for his conversion.1

Mill thinks that even total convergence on the truth would be suboptimal, without serious and respectful conversation among disputants. Perhaps truth always shines brightest against a background.

So—what then? What to make of disagreeing experts? I submit some suggestions for respectful engagement. First, listen (or read) well. Charitably evaluate the arguments provided. Appreciate insights, and also find points of objection, confusion, and obfuscation. Seek further information where available. Open your antecedent opinions to possible revision (or to increased confidence!). Consider the extent to which humility calls for neutrality in particular cases, and what neutrality would involve in those cases. Basically, deploy a fleet of intellectual virtues. There's no simple, general framework that will decide what to do in cases of disagreement. Of course, (it really must be said) many philosophers would disagree with me on that.


Laura Frances Callahan is Assistant Professor of Philosophy at the University of Notre Dame and Associate Director for the Center for Philosophy of Religion. She is the author of a number of articles, including “Epistemic Existentialism” (Episteme, 2021) and “Disagreement, Testimony, and Religious Understanding,” in Religious Disagreement and Pluralism (OUP, 2021).
"On my view, when one asks the question, ‘What is the meaning of life?’ one asks many questions at once."
God Has a Lot to Do with Meaning

By T. J. Mawson

What has God to do with meaning?

Short Answer. A lot—presuming He exists.

Longer Answer. On my view, when one asks the question, “What is the meaning of life?” one asks many questions at once. One asks what, if any, explanation there is for there being anything concrete at all—Why is it all here? More narrowly, one asks why ours is a universe that is conducive to life; and, more narrowly still, why humanity exists and why one as an individual exists—Why are we here? Why am I here? One also asks where it’s all going—Will anything, will humanity, will I persist? Or will all of us and everything of value that we manage to produce finally have its significance erased by the passage of time? And one also asks what is perhaps a harder-to-pin-down question (or, as I would have it, series of questions). One interrogates a feature (or, as I would have it, features) of one’s own individual life and the lives of others. This is the interrogation on which the contemporary literature has tended to expend itself, sometimes calling it the “meaning in life” issue, so as to bracket off the more “cosmic,” as they are sometimes called, issues that I’ve hitherto been talking about. A way into seeing these meaning-in-life questions comes by observing that some individuals seem to manage to lead lives which, more than others, have in them something which we may call “meaningfulness.” In this context, we might consider Gandhi on the one hand and contrast his life with, on the other hand, the life led by a monomaniacal collector of miniature teapots—someone who spends all his life alone and friendless in his warehouse-like home, trawling online auction sites so as to add items to his vast collection. Gandhi’s life seems more meaningful than that of the obsessive collector of miniature teapots. What is this thing (or, as I would have it, what are these things) called “meaningfulness”?

So, on my view, which I have in various publications called a “polyvalence” view, there are many meanings of life and there are many meanings in life. If the question “What is the meaning of life” is in fact all these questions, it perhaps needs no further argument to show that if there is a God, then He’ll have a lot to do with the answers to most, if not all, of them. Nevertheless, a brief argument to this effect will be provided.

At the most cosmic level, through taking centre stage in what is (if He exists) the correct metaphysics, God is the lead character in the story one must tell if one is to answer correctly the following questions. First question: Why is there anything at all? Answer: Because God exists of metaphysical necessity. Second question: And why is there anything contingent? Answer: Because God chose to create something other
What has God to do with meaning?

How would you answer the following questions?

Meaning and Happiness: Do you need to be happy more often than not in order to lead a meaningful life?

Meaning and Morality: Must you be sufficiently moral in order to lead a meaningful life?

Meaning and Narrative: Is a meaningful life like a good story? If so, in what ways? Are there some good stories that you would choose not to live?

Meaning and Evil: If you have a why (or have sufficient hope that there is a why) can you endure almost any how or what?

Meaning and Transcendence: Do you need to participate in something larger than yourself in order to lead a meaningful life?

Meaning and Death: Does death threaten meaning? Does death enhance meaning? Might death be necessary for meaning in some ways?

Meaning and Immortality: Would living forever be good or bad news for us?

than Himself. Third question: And why is there a universe conducive to life (and life of our sort—the life of persons), rather than an entirely dead universe (or one the life in which is destined never to reach any level of complexity above that achieved by microbes)? Answer: Because God chose to create such a world, no doubt due to recognising that it would instantiate certain values which would not be instantiated in an entirely lifeless world (or in a world the only life arising in which was microbial). These are the values brought to reality by there being self-conscious, free, morally significant persons such as ourselves, people who are able to enter into relationship with one another and with Him. Fourth question: And why am I here? Answer: Because God chose that you be so. This last answer though is really just the beginning of a journey and, as one travelled farther along the path it points down, one would find many forks in the road and different guides offering different guidance over how to proceed. Should we believe in a “meticulous providence” and/or theories of personal identity such that God intended me—not just someone in some broad ways like me—to exist? Should we think that every one of us has some particular vocation? How fine-grained is my vocation, presuming I have one at all? Why am I here? What—if anything (in general or in particular)—have I been put on this Earth to do? And so on.

So much then for what we might call “meaning as explanation”—theistic explanations of why anything exists; why anything contingent exists; why life exists; why persons such as ourselves exist; and why we as individuals exist. What about what we might call “meaning as destiny,” questions such as “And where is it all going?” “Where are we going?” “Where am I going?” Again, God—presuming He exists—takes centre stage. Whilst again the theistic community is somewhat divided in its opinions on the nature of the role He may be expected to play, it speaks with one voice to the question of whether whatever significance we manage to achieve in our ante-mortem lives (and such echoes as that might generate in this world after we
have departed it) is all the significance that we have. It is not. We, or some of us at least, go on from here to an afterlife in which all that is of value about us is magnified and preserved into eternity.

And as to meaningfulness? Well, very roughly, there are three broad views between which contemporary opinions on the nature of this are divided—the subjectivist, the objectivist, and the hybrid. On the subjectivist view, one's life is meaningful to the extent that one feels swept up in/existentially engaged with it and/or some major projects within it or aspects of it. On the objectivist view, one's life is meaningful to the extent that it and/or sufficient of one's activities within it or aspects of it engage in the right way with that which is of objective worth. On the hybrid view, one's life is meaningful to the extent that one does both—one feels subjectively attracted towards that which is objectively worthy of such attraction. (These are very rough sketches of the three main views—they may not be true in every particular to every variant.) Whichever of these views of meaningfulness one finds oneself feeling most sympathetically towards, one will be able to see God as relevant, presuming He exists, to one's life's meaningfulness. If God exists, then there is an activity—worshipping Him in perfect communion with one's fellow human beings for all eternity—which will be superlatively subjectively absorbing and objectively worthy and we—well, some of us at least (opinions are divided)—are destined finally to achieve this happy state.

So, if God exists, the correct answer to the title question is “A lot.” However, most philosophers writing on life's meaning in the last few decades (1) do not believe in God, (2) think that only things that do exist can be relevant to life's meaning, and therefore (3) claim that God is not relevant to life's meaning. Their naturalism—combined with a reluctance to engage in the traditional concerns of the philosophy of religion; an awareness that to answer what I have called the “cosmic” questions of life's meaning would require engagement with (potentially religious) metaphysics; and the fact that most of those writing on the topic come to it from a background in ‘value philosophy’—leads to what I have called a “bowdlerising” of the question. Most writing on life's meaning incline to interpret “What is the meaning of life?” as inquiring solely into meaningfulness, as I have called it. And they then seek to provide understandings of meaningfulness (which they characteristically take to be a single gradient value [wrongly again, on my polyvalence view]) within an entirely naturalistic framework; and they think that we can assess how meaningful our individual lives are absent any engagement with the traditional concerns of the philosophy of religion. Still, if God exists, they are wrong—wrong about all this and much else besides.

“On my view, when one asks the question, ‘What is the meaning of life?’ one asks many questions at once.”

Tim Mawson is Edgar Jones Fellow and Tutor in Philosophy at St. Peter's College, University of Oxford. He is the author of numerous articles and books including Monotheism and the Meaning of Life (CUP, 2019), and God and the Meanings of Life (Bloomsbury, 2016).
Should We Want God to Exist for the Sake of Meaning in Our Lives?

By Thaddeus Metz

I have never believed in God, understood as a person in charge of the universe who knows everything, can do anything, and is morally perfect. My temperament has been to want evidence for Big Beliefs, those about the fundamentals of human life, and I do not believe I have encountered enough evidence in favor of God’s existence.

“Well, where did the universe come from?” many will ask. For me, the retort “Where did God come from?” is a powerful response. If a spiritual being could have existed forever, then why couldn’t a physical world have existed forever? And, then, the presence of toddlers who get cancer and animals that get burned alive in forest fires suggests the absence of an all-knowing, almighty, and all-good person. Who would allow such things to occur if one could prevent them?

Belief is one side of my nature, but desire is another. Even if I cannot bring myself to believe that God exists, should I wish that God existed? In this essay, I reflect on how to answer that question in the light of the value of meaning in life.

For most of us, when we think about meaning in an individual life (as opposed to the point of the human race as a whole, or the reason why the entire universe exists), we are considering purposes that are more valuable than our own pleasure or facets of our lives that merit esteem on our part or admiration from others. Supposing that I want a truly meaningful life in that sense, should I prefer a world with God?
For many centuries in Western philosophy, there had been debate between two camps about the bearing of God on meaning in a person’s life. On the one hand, religiously-inclined philosophers argued that our lives would be utterly meaningless in a godless world, while, on the other, the not-so-religiously inclined philosophers disputed that, contending that a meaningful life is possible (even if far from guaranteed) in a world without God. Looking at Western philosophy in the 21st century, the latter camp has won, or at least has obtained a clear majority.

One rationale that has convinced many thinkers that meaningful lives would be possible without God is the following thought experiment. Suppose, for the sake of argument, that God does not exist. Imagine that we are alone in the universe, which either has always existed or spontaneously came into being. Now, think about how to evaluate human lives on that supposition. Are they all devoid of meaning? Do they all have the same degree of significance, namely, zero? It is difficult to answer in the affirmative. Exemplars of meaningfulness still loom large—the lives of Albert Einstein, Nelson Mandela, Toni Morrison, Florence Nightingale, and Pablo Picasso surely had some meaning in them, even if they were not created by God and have not returned to God. Furthermore, considering our own lives, it would be natural to think in terms of meaningful work and meaningful relationships despite God’s absence, for just two examples. Even many religiously inclined people have found this to be a compelling point.

That, however, does not mean that the philosophical debate about God’s bearing on meaning in life is over. It has instead changed. Over the past 20 years or so, philosophers have been shifting their focus to consider whether our lives could have a great meaning in them without God. Contemporary religiously inclined philosophers often grant that Einstein’s life would have had some meaning in it in a world without God, but they deny that even Einstein’s life could have had an ultimate meaning. Much of the current debate is about whether God is essential for a substantial amount of meaningfulness or a higher kind of it.

For instance, Richard Swinburne, the influential philosopher of religion who taught at Oxford for many years, has recently titled one of his essays “How God Makes Life a Lot More Meaningful.” You see the difference between that and a title such as “How God Alone Makes Life Meaningful.”

Why believe that God would make life a lot more meaningful? After providing a sketch of the more prominent rationales that philosophers have recently suggested, I raise a problem that faces all of them, one that leaves me unsure of whether to want God to exist.

“Supposing that I want a truly meaningful life... should I prefer a world with God?”

One idea is that if God existed, then we would have a soul, a part of God’s nature that will forever survive the deaths of our bodies. Eternal life in Heaven, conceived either as something deserved (prominent in Islam) or as a gift (Christianity), would be an infinite meaning, something utterly lacking in a purely physical world in which an average human would be lucky to make it to her 75th birthday.

Another idea is that, if God were real, then the universe would have been created with a grand plan in mind, and the purpose of our lives would neatly fit into it. With God, our existence could have had a cosmic significance, one with large spatio-temporal ramifications, but without God, it could not.

A third suggestion is that if we did what God wants us to do with our lives, we would then please a perfect being. It means something to us when we are praised by a boss for having done a good job at work, and so consider how much more important it would be to have the person in charge of the entire world appreciate us for having lived well.

These are not the only suggestions from philosophers about why God might be essential for our lives to have an ultimate meaning, but they are particularly prominent. And they are compelling: who wouldn’t want to have eternal life, participate in a cosmic plan, and please one’s maker?
**What has God to do with meaning?**

“*If God would alone offer the prospect of an ultimate meaning, God would also unavoidably offer the prospect of an ultimate anti-meaning.*”

However, all three rationales face a common objection that keeps me from accepting them and that philosophers need to address if they are to make headway. It is that if God would alone make possible a great meaning for us, then in the wake of doing so God could not avoid making possible a great anti-meaning for us as well. Anti-meaning, or what anti-matters, is a condition that reduces the meaning in one’s life. Think of it as a negative score, something substantive beyond the mere absence of a positive score. In our day-to-day lives we tend to think that killing innocent people for money (at least without their consent) or blowing up the Sphinx for fun would reduce the meaning in the lives of those who so acted.

The concern about God is that, if God would alone offer the prospect of an ultimate meaning, God would also unavoidably offer the prospect of an ultimate anti-meaning. Returning to the three rationales, if God would make eternal life in Heaven possible, then God would make eternal damnation in Hell possible, too. If success in fulfilling God’s plan for the universe would merit a greater esteem than would be available without God, then failure to fulfill God’s plan would merit a greater shame than would be available without God. And if pleasing God would provide a much larger amount of meaning or a better kind of it than what a purely physical universe can provide, then displeasing God would provide a much larger amount of anti-meaning or a worse kind of it.

To use a poker analogy, when considering whether we should want a world with God for the sake of meaningful lives, we cannot look merely at the prospective gains; we also have to consider the losses we could face. A world without God would be like being able to win $1000 or lose that much. A world with God, in contrast, would be like being able to win $10 million or going into so much debt that one has to sell oneself into a torturous slavery for the rest of a very long life. It is far from obvious that one should take the latter sort of gamble.

There is a natural way for the religiously inclined philosopher to reply to the concern I have raised. It is to point out that we would also have to consider the odds involved. Even if God would bring the possibility of a great anti-meaning along with the possibility of a great meaning, it would be rational to prefer a world with God if the chances of, e.g., Hell for us were low compared to the chances of Heaven. Perhaps God would stack the deck in our favor, so to speak, and enable us to enter Heaven, fulfill His plan, and please Him simply by having faith in Him. That does not sound so hard.

And, yet, what does this mean for me? I conclude by reminding the reader of how I began this essay: some of us find it mighty difficult to believe in God. Should I want a world with God to exist for the sake of meaning in my life, when it is so hard for me to believe on faith? It might be that, if I cannot believe that God exists, I should not desire God to exist either.

**REFERENCES**

1. Many of the ideas in this essay are borrowed from Thaddeus Metz, *God, Soul and the Meaning of Life* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2019), although the phrasings are not.


---

**Thaddeus Metz** is Professor of Philosophy at the University of Pretoria, South Africa. He is the author of numerous articles and books including *God, Soul and the Meaning of Life* (CUP, 2019) and *Meaning in Life* (OUP, 2013).
The Meaning of Life vs. Meaning in Life

Contemporary philosophers working on life’s meaning often distinguish between the meaning of life and meaning in life. Current theorization on the topic generally centers on meaning in life. Some think that there can be meaning(s) in life without there being a meaning of life, whereas others are more suspicious of attempts to entirely separate the two ideas. In general, the phrase “the meaning of life” is cosmically focused, whereas “meaning in life” is humanly focused. One can take multiple viewpoints on life, ranging from the personal, terrestrial perspectives on the left in the infographic below that prioritize human cares and concerns, all the way to cosmic ones on the right in order to consider the human drama against the vast cosmic backdrop (perhaps even to include the transcendent).

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Meaning of Life</th>
<th>Meaning in Life</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Cosmic meaning: the meaning of the universe and everything in it</td>
<td>Personal meaning: the meaningfulness of a person’s life.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Meaning intersects with the following ideas—sense-making, purpose, and significance—each of which has cosmic and personal variations.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Sense-Making: What is it all about? How does it all fit together?</th>
<th>Sense-Making: What is my life about? How does it fit together (e.g., narratively)?</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Purpose: Why are we here? Were we created for a purpose?</td>
<td>Purpose: Around what self-chosen purposes should I structure my life?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Significance: Do our lives really matter in the grand scheme of things?</td>
<td>Significance: Does my life matter to me? To my family, friends, and community?</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
“...why should we pity Sisyphus, when he gets to do just what he loves ... for all eternity?”
The Meaning of Life Is Happiness

By Christine Vitrano

Some argue that the existence of God is necessary for life to be meaningful, and that atheism commits us to the nihilistic view that life is essentially meaningless or absurd. I disagree, and I will argue that one can live a perfectly meaningful life without believing in God, or even if no God exists.

The view of meaning I defend, which originates with Richard Taylor, essentially reduces meaning to the subject's own happiness. As Taylor elegantly explains, "The meaning of life is from within us, it is not bestowed from without, and it far exceeds in both its beauty and permanence any heaven of which men have ever dreamed or yearned for." ¹

Let us start with Taylor, who suggests we begin with an example of a meaningless existence, which is perfectly illustrated by the ancient myth of Sisyphus. Sisyphus was condemned by the gods to roll a stone up a hill for all eternity. Taylor argues the life of Sisyphus strikes us as meaningless, because of its endless pointlessness: all his toil essentially amounts to nothing, and it will remain that way forever.

Taylor then considers an alternative scenario in which Sisyphus is still condemned to the same futile task of rolling stones up a hill, but in this new version, the gods have mercifully also implanted in him "a strange and irrational impulse; namely, a compulsive impulse to roll stones." ² One might be tempted to view this new condition as tragic, but why should we pity Sisyphus, when he gets to do just what he loves, what he's most passionate about, for all of eternity? As Taylor explains, whereas in the original scenario he might have "welcomed the quiet of death to release him from endless boredom and pointlessness, his life is now filled with mission and meaning, and he seems to himself to have been given an entry to heaven." ³

It is important to note that when viewed from the outside, nothing about Sisyphus' life has changed. The only difference is Sisyphus' internal view of his life; where he once felt dejected and alienated, he now feels engaged and excited to be alive. Taylor argues that all our lives resemble the life of Sisyphus once we step back and look at them from the outside, for

What has God to do with meaning?
“We toil after goals, most of them—indeed every single one of them—of transitory significance and, having gained one of them, we immediately set forth for the next, as if that one had never been, with this next one being essentially more of the same.” Taylor concludes that the meaning of life must be internal, and it can be found by directing your will towards those projects, goals and activities that are important to you. I would argue that Taylor’s view essentially reduces meaningfulness to happiness, for we are happy when we are satisfied with our lives, and one important source of satisfaction is being able to pursue whatever it is that we care about. In the alternative scenario, Sisyphus is able to do just that, and that is why his life is now meaningful.

There is a problem with Taylor’s view of meaning, however, and it arises in connection with happy people whose actions are evil. Suppose someone like Hitler is deeply satisfied because of the triumph of Nazism. Should we deem Hitler’s life meaningful? Harry Frankfurt, whose view of meaning is similar to Taylor’s, argues that evil lives can be meaningful, because “Meaning in life is created by loving. Devoting oneself to what one loves suffices to make one’s life meaningful, regardless of the inherent or objective character of the objects that are loved.” Frankfurt argues that he is “not convinced that the moral value of a person’s life has any particular relevance in determining how good or how bad it is for the person to live that life.” For Frankfurt, Hitler’s life would be made worse by his immorality “only if morality was something that Hitler actually cared about, or if the immorality of his life somehow had a damaging effect on other matters that he cared about.”

When it comes to the connection between happiness and morality, I agree with Frankfurt, for one can be happy with a thoroughly immoral life if one does not care about being moral. However, I would resist making the same argument with respect to meaning. Happiness and morality are independent dimensions of value; judging a life as happy does not suggest that person has a good character, because happiness is subjective, reflecting the individual’s priorities and values. But when you say that a life is meaningful, you do more than just describe a person’s mental state; you offer a commendation of that life, implying that it is a good life to live.

To avoid this problem, I suggest modifying Taylor’s view by placing a restriction on the source of a person’s happiness. On my version, a life will be meaningful if it is happy and one’s happiness does not violate our commonsense standards of morality or defy what it is to be a morally decent person. This restriction is intentionally minimal; a life can be meaningful even if one is not Saint Teresa of Calcutta or Gandhi. The restriction only rules out lives in which a person’s happiness violates our commonsense standards of decency. As long as one is living within the bounds of morality, and she is happy, then her life will be meaningful.

Some philosophers argue that simply caring about one’s pursuits is not sufficient for living a meaningful life, because the nature of those pursuits is also important. Susan Wolf, for example, argues that meaning arises when subjective attraction meets objective attractiveness, or when one engages in “projects of worth.” Wolf would agree that one must be emotionally invested in her activities, but one can only live meaningfully if those activities are also valuable. Wolf would object that my view is too permissive, for lives devoted to the most mundane tasks such as counting blades of grass or collecting rubber bands would count as meaningful as long as the subject is happy.

Some argue that the existence of God is necessary for life to be meaningful, and that atheism commits us to the nihilistic view that life is essentially meaningless or absurd. I disagree.”
My problem with this objection is the blatant implausibility of the purported counterexamples. How could any adult of even moderate intelligence possibly be satisfied with a life that revolved around a pointless, repetitive task like counting blades of grass or collecting rubber bands? Surely, none would, so these fictitious examples prove nothing. I suggest focusing on a more realistic example involving a person who is cognitively impaired, such that she does find happiness doing menial, mundane tasks most adults would find tedious. Let us suppose this woman gets up each morning with enthusiasm, happily spending her day bagging groceries at a local store, only to go home and repeat the process the next day. Would Wolf consider bagging groceries a “project of worth”? And if not, does Wolf really want to declare this woman’s life meaningless?

Wolf rarely discusses real-life cases, relying instead on farcical examples to illustrate meaningless lives. However, when pressed by Jonathan Haidt about whether one of his students, whose life is devoted to horses, is at risk of pursuing a worthless task, and thus living a meaningless life, Wolf significantly modifies her view of meaning. In response to Haidt, Wolf explains, “No one need accept someone else’s word for what has objective value. No one has the authority to ‘declare’ to another person what has and what lacks objective value” and “The history of culture and of morals makes amply clear that if there is such a thing as objective worth, we are very fallible guides to determining which activities and objects have it.” Wolf adds, “If Haidt’s student finds something valuable in her web of horse-riding projects, she may be able to articulate it and make the value intelligible even to those who are initially skeptical” but “even should she be unable to convince others, this does not imply that she must be mistaken.”

Wolf’s hesitation at declaring an actual person’s life meaningless causes her to abandon the objective value requirement, or at least significantly weaken it, for now it seems any pursuit the subject finds valuable could be valuable, even if others don’t agree. But this is just the view I have been defending all along, which is that one can live a meaningful life in virtue of doing what one finds deeply satisfying. As Taylor explains, “The point of living is simply to be living, in the manner that it is your nature to be living.”

REFERENCES
2 Ibid., 323.
3 Ibid., 324.
4 Ibid., 327.
6 Ibid., 248.
7 Ibid.
10 Ibid., 125.
11 Taylor, 334.

Christine Vitrano is Associate Professor of Philosophy at Brooklyn College, New York. She is the author of numerous articles and books, including “The Meaning of Life Can Be Found Without God,” in Problems in Value Theory (Bloomsbury, 2020), and The Nature and Value of Happiness (OUP, 2013).
The Psychology of Meaning

Philosophers are not the only ones interested in meaning. Psychologists are developing and refining new measures to test for the presence of meaningfulness in life. They also are investigating important relationships between one’s sense of meaning in life and positive health outcomes. Like our symposium participants, many of these researchers recognize a number of interrelated ideas wrapped up in meaning. Psychologist Michael F. Steger provides the following definition of meaning:

“Meaning is the web of connections, understandings, and interpretations that help us comprehend our experience and formulate plans directing our energies to the achievement of our desired future. Meaning provides us with the sense that our lives matter, that they make sense, and that they are more than the sum of our seconds, days, and years.”

Susan Wolf, a contemporary philosopher who has written extensively on the meaning of life, insists that most people who ask “What is the meaning of life?” are concerned about “a purpose or a point to human existence” (Wolf 2013, 304-5). If there is a purpose (end, goal) to an individual’s existence (a meaning of life), what might it be? Many persons in the Christian tradition have agreed that the purpose of life is the experience of perfect happiness, where perfect happiness is often referred to as beatitude, felicity, or eternal blessedness. Boethius (480-524) wrote that “you . . . earthly creatures . . . see, though with a far from clear imagination yet with some idea, that true end of your happiness. Your natural inclinations draw you towards that end, to the true good.” Saint Anselm (1033-1109) agreed with Boethius: “It ought not to be doubted that the nature of rational beings was created by God . . . in order that, through rejoicing in him, it might be blessedly happy. . . God . . . [made man] for the purpose of eternal happiness.” Thomas Aquinas (1224/25-1274) concurred with both Boethius and Anselm: “[T]he ultimate end of man . . . is called felicity or happiness, because this is what every intellectual substance desires as an ultimate end, and for its own sake alone.” Much more recently, C. S. Lewis (1898-1963) affirmed “that infinite, complete, or ecstatic happiness is the life of the blessed,” and that we must suppose “the life of the blessed to be an end in itself, indeed The End . . .” Why did these Christian theists settle on perfect happiness as life’s purpose? Another contemporary philosopher Iddo Landau writes that “the meaning of life [has] to do . . . with worth or value . . . People who wonder what would make their lives meaningful . . . are wondering what would insert more value, or worth, into their lives” (Landau 2017, 6-7). Thus, it is plausible to maintain that the Christian theists quoted in the previous paragraph believed perfect happiness is the meaning of life because happiness is the positive worth or value (the good) that makes life worth living. Happiness is intrinsically good (it is good in and of

What has God to do with meaning? It depends upon how one understands “the meaning of life.” If the phrase is understood in certain interrelated ways, then God’s existence is essential for a person’s life ultimately (in the end) to have meaning.
**What has God to do with meaning?**

“There are three interrelated ways of understanding ‘the meaning of life’ which are captured in the questions ‘What is the purpose of life?’ and ‘What ultimately makes life worth living?’ and ‘What is required in order for things ultimately to make sense?’”

(1) and thus sought for its own sake. It is not sought because it leads to something else which is good (which would make it instrumentally good). One reasonably concludes then that the meaning of life is concerned not only with the purpose of life but also with what makes life worth living. “Perfect happiness” is the answer to both “What is the purpose of life?” and “What ultimately makes life worth living?”

However, we are all too aware that none of us experiences perfect happiness on earth. Our world contains much pain (which is intrinsically or in and of itself evil), a significant amount of which remains unredeemed at the end of our earthly existence. If we acknowledge that God created us for the purpose that we be perfectly happy because perfect happiness is in itself what ultimately makes life worth living, and that we do not fulfill this purpose in this life, then we are rationally led to see the need for an afterlife that in the end excludes all evil. But perfect happiness is not only a happiness that excludes pain. It is also a happiness that never ends. Hence, even if there were no pain and suffering in this life, we would still conclude that the happiness we experience here would need to continue indefinitely in order to be perfect. Thus, if things are ultimately to make sense, be intelligible, or fit together in the right way, God must keep us in existence forever so that we might be perfectly happy and fulfill the purpose for which we are created. Therefore, the meaning of life is also a matter of making sense of things, and the question “What is the meaning of life?” is plausibly understood as “What is required in order for things ultimately to make sense?”

To summarize, there are three interrelated ways of understanding “the meaning of life” which are captured in the questions “What is the purpose of life?” and “What ultimately makes life worth living?” and “What is required in order for things ultimately to make sense?” Moreover, God’s existence is essential for answering these questions together in plausible ways. What problems might be raised for God’s relevance for the meaning of life and answering these three interpretations of the meaning-of-life question? Two objections are often raised.

The first objection is that the idea that we are created for a purpose is offensive or insulting. Kurt Baier writes that “[i]t is degrading for a man to be regarded as merely serving a purpose” (Baier 2000, 120), which he takes to be reflected in our offense at being asked “What are you for?” But is it inherently degrading to be made for a purpose? Perhaps in some contexts it would be offensive or degrading to ask a person “What are you for?” But there seem to be contexts in which no offense is taken. We frequently ask others questions like, “What do you do?” or “What’s your role in the business?” Perhaps no offense is taken in these cases because those whom we ask had a choice about their line of employment and the purpose that comes with it. What is problematic about the case of our being created by God is that we had no choice about the purpose given to us. But even here one wonders about the cogency of the objection. While one’s being created without any choice in the matter would be degrading and objectionable if the purpose of one’s existence were to labor painfully with no rest, it is equally clear that there might be an acceptable and ennobling
purpose of life provided without one’s consent. That one is created for perfect happiness seems to be such a purpose. How could one reasonably object to being perfectly happy? Thus, the philosopher Julian Baggini’s claim that “unrelenting happiness is not a . . . healthy condition for human beings” (Baggini 2004, 104) cannot be taken seriously.

The second objection is that death with no afterlife is needed in order to make it possible for us to act (do anything) and find happiness in this life (meaning in life). If death were not the final end of our existence, we could and would always put off until tomorrow what we could do today (now). Because perfect happiness never ends, a condition required for our acting and finding happiness in this life is unfulfilled. But this objection fails to take into account the attractive power of what is good. Given that happiness makes life meaningful because happiness is intrinsically good, we would need a good reason not to pursue it (e.g., if the only way of pursuing it were unjust). Thus, the fact that we are created for perfect happiness and will need to live forever to experience it does not make it impossible for us to act and experience happiness and have partially meaningful lives in the present. We will pursue happiness now, unless we have a reason not to do so, simply for the sake of its intrinsic goodness.

This second objection suggests a question about the nature of happiness. Is happiness an action, something that we do, or is it a passion, something that happens to us when we act? Some persons in the Christian tradition believe happiness is an action, and typically think of it as virtue (either moral, e.g., love toward others, whether human or divine, or intellectual, e.g., contemplation of the divine nature). Other individuals in the Christian tradition believe happiness is a passion, and typically think of it as the experience of pleasure which accompanies action (or might be experienced without doing anything). Whichever answer these individuals give to this question about the nature of happiness, all agree that perfect happiness will only be experienced by the grace of God our Creator.

In conclusion, “the meaning of life” is a phrase that needs interpreting before the question “What is the meaning of life?” can be answered. If the phrase is interpreted in the three interrelated ways proposed in this short essay, it is clear that the existence of God is essential for life’s meaning.

REFERENCES

Stewart Goetz is Professor of Philosophy at Ursinus College, Collegeville, PA, and a visiting scholar at St. Peter’s College, University of Oxford. He is the author (with Joshua Seachris) of What Is This Thing Called the Meaning of Life (Routledge, 2020), C. S. Lewis (Wiley Blackwell, 2018), and The Purpose of Life: A Theistic Perspective (Continuum, 2012).

“Perfect happiness” is the answer to both “What is the purpose of life?” and “What ultimately makes life worth living?”
Residential Fellows

Every year, the Center welcomes researchers from around the world to spend time in residence at the University of Notre Dame. Adding to a group of over 250 past research fellows, it has been our privilege to host the following scholars this year.

Amber L. Griffioen

After receiving her Ph.D. from the University of Iowa in 2010, Amber Griffioen worked for a decade at the University of Konstanz in Germany, where she published and taught on topics in philosophy of religion, the ethics of belief, medieval Christian and Islamic philosophy, religious mysticism, social epistemology, and philosophy of sport. Currently an independent scholar, she is working on several projects at the Center for Philosophy of Religion, including a new entry on Meister Eckhart for the Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy, a paper on pregnancy loss and the afterlife, and an article on understanding medieval devotional narratives as forms of public philosophy. Her book *Religious Experience* was recently published in the Cambridge Elements series, and a co-edited volume entitled *Pluralizing Philosophy's Past* will be appearing from Palgrave/Springer in 2022.

Although she has worked on diverse topics in philosophy of religion over the past 10 years, Amber's work has increasingly gone in more meta-disciplinary directions, and her largest project at the moment is the publication of a programmatic book that brings together various strands of her research to argue for ways in which the discipline of analytic philosophy of religion can become a more expansive and inclusive discipline. Each chapter diagnoses one self-imposed limitation of philosophy of religion research and explores how the discipline can move “beyond” its current limits by proposing alternative approaches or perspectives. The book is set to appear sometime in 2022-23.

Jane Heath

Jane Heath has held academic posts in New Testament Studies at the University of Aberdeen (2008-2011) and Durham University (2011-present); a research scholarship in Heidelberg (2005-2006) and fellowship in Berlin (2014-2016). She has published on various scriptural, classical, and early Christian sources, sometimes at interfaces with adjacent disciplines such as visual studies.

Heath's initial training was in the study of antiquity, in the text-based disciplines of classics (Oxford, 1997-2002) and then scriptural studies (Cambridge, 2003-2008), but as early as her doctoral work she was looking for ways to integrate this with her enthusiasm for visual and creative arts, and to engage with the significance of antiquity and Christian tradition for the modern world. Increasingly, she finds herself looking for more creative, arts-based ways of inhabiting the practical linking space between pastoral, intellectual, and liturgical dimensions of theology.

During her fellowship at the Center for Philosophy of Religion, she is working on a book on Clement of Alexandria (c. 150–c. 215 AD) and the formation of the judgement of taste, which interprets Clement’s *Paedagogus* in dialogue with Pierre Bourdieu’s *Distinction*. The *Paedagogus* is directed at people who are steeped in classical culture and still at an early stage of their Christian formation; Clement seeks to cultivate proper habits, choices, and preferences, without bothering them yet with deep discursive arguments. The comparison with Bourdieu has been a fascinating way both to discern more about Clement’s pedagogical methods in the ancient setting, and to begin to probe the role of aesthetics in the secularisation of modernity, and the nature and limits of dialogue between ancient and modern, secular and Christian, as well as Christian and classical tradition.
Emily Lehman

Emily Lehman is a Ph.D. candidate in Theology, the Imagination and the Arts at the University of St. Andrews. She is the recipient of the Fulbright-University of St. Andrews Postgraduate Award in Interdisciplinary Studies for her Ph.D. project on narrativity and moral theology in Alasdair MacIntyre, Shakespeare, and Dostoyevsky. Her research interests lie at the intersection between philosophy, theology, and literature, with side interests in Catholic feminism, the philosophy of technology, and narrative psychology.

At the Center for Philosophy of Religion, Emily is working on a research project about the importance of narrative for the moral life. Through the lens of the narrative framework for moral theology proposed in Alasdair MacIntyre’s *After Virtue*, she is examining the human experience of a perceived absence of narrative through Shakespeare’s *Hamlet* and Dostoyevsky’s *Notes from Underground*. The project asks: What does it mean to act as a human being situated within a story? What does the human experience of losing one’s narrative and one’s sense of purpose (a “narrative lapse”) imply for MacIntyre’s framework of the moral life as the life of a character within a story? Can human beings act morally in the absence of a narrative? And can tradition (particularly theological tradition) give us a clearer sense of what it means to be situated within a narrative? Through Shakespeare’s *Much Ado About Nothing*, the project will then turn to the possibility that a healthy community can alleviate the experience of a narrative lapse, and ask whether community is necessary for a coherent moral narrative.

David Lincicum

David Lincicum is Associate Professor of Theology at the University of Notre Dame. His teaching focuses on the New Testament in the context of early Judaism and early Christianity. His research has especially focused on investigating early Christian and Jewish biblical interpretation, Pauline literature, and the history of biblical scholarship.

Lincicum’s project at the Center for Philosophy of Religion is entitled, “Transforming Stories: Narrating Early Christian Identity.” One of the most striking facets of the New Testament is the extent to which a series of stories about the death of Jesus and its implications occupy center stage. Where a Roman official might have registered simply another routine crucifixion outside a troublesome provincial capital, early Christian proclamation found a bundle of entailments that extended to many other people, remote in time and distance from that solitary execution. In the inchoate theological reflections of the first apostles, stories about the death and resurrection of Jesus came to structure claims about the nature of the self, and about the nature of the communities in which that selfhood was shaped.

In this light, his project asks two interrelated questions. First, in a close reading, how do Paul and the evangelists employ narratives to shape the conceptions of selfhood in their communities? Second, employing an analytic sensibility derived from interdisciplinary research on narrative and selfhood, how do those stories transform the audience? That is, how do they cease to be simply stories about the past and become performative interventions in the reader’s present?

This project is not a broad-stroke account of anthropology in the New Testament, but rather seeks to analyze and understand the ways in which the “self” is rendered or implied through the use of narrative in the three most significant corpora in the New Testament: the Pauline tradition, the Synoptic Tradition, and the Johannine Tradition. By “self” here, he has in mind the sense in which, in ordinary language, the term sometimes refers to the “subject” or person, but sometimes instead it refers to something more abstract—roughly, a conception of “who the person is” that is captured not by a set of claims about what they are, but rather by claims about their distinctive role and purpose in history, or about what attributes are central to them and salient for that role, or both.
Jonathan C. Rutledge

Jonathan C. Rutledge hails from Arlington, Texas, and works at the intersection of analytic philosophy and theology.

His ongoing research projects include articulating a perspectivalist variant of skeptical theism (one form of response to various arguments from suffering), exploring the relationship between logic and theology, and developing an account of atonement and forgiveness that is (i) sensitive to biblical uses of those concepts and (ii) provides inroads for analytically minded philosophers and theologians to read and interact with a broader range of theological schools (e.g., biblical scholarship or liberation theologians).

The last of the projects above serves as his primary project in his time with the Center for Philosophy of Religion, and it can be stated summarily as follows.

Atonement in the English language is a fairly ambiguous term. On the one hand, it can refer to an end at which Christ’s work aims—e.g., union with God—or it can refer to the work of Christ itself where that work is thought of as a mechanism or means by which union with God is obtained. Even when restricting one’s attention to mechanisms aimed at unifying God with humanity, atonement can be used in either a narrow or broad sense. The narrow sense of atonement focuses on normative obstacles to union—i.e., reasons God has to not be in union with us—that are dealt with primarily by Christ’s work on the cross. The broad sense of atonement, however, considers how all obstacles, including ones located in our own psychology (e.g., subjective guilt or shame), need to be overcome to achieve the greatest possible union between God and humanity. One such obstacle to atonement is the need for evil to be defeated in the lives of the oppressed, and on some understandings, much liberation theology is doing precisely this sort of atoning work. That is, liberation theology seeks (among other things) to defeat the sufferings of the oppressed by reframing narratives of suffering in terms of the cross and Christian hope to imbue those narratives with deep, positive meaning. Spelling out this process is the overarching goal of the project.

Allison Krile Thornton

Allison Krile Thornton is Assistant Professor of Philosophy at the University of South Alabama and jointly appointed in the College of Medicine. At South, she’s especially enjoyed teaching courses on dreams and consciousness, medical reasoning, and medical ethics.

Her research focuses on the metaphysics of personal identity. She’s defended versions of animalism, the view that human persons are animals, against views that identify us with more purely cognitive items like brains or souls. The distinctive features of her understanding of animalism are developed in an interdisciplinary context, especially with respect to biology, neuroscience, narrative, and psychological treatments of trauma and shame, and are developed in papers published in *Philosophical Studies, Philosophy Compass, American Philosophical Quarterly*, and *Ergo*. These themes in turn shape her work on the implications of personal identity questions in bioethics and philosophy of religion. In those areas, her most recent projects have focused on moral status, petitionary prayer, and the Christian doctrine of the atonement.

Her Center for Philosophy of Religion project aims to develop the narrative-self paradigm in light of what she’s calling embodied narratives: the stories that are locked in the patterns of our physiology and affective worlds. These narratives, especially prominent when we think about trauma and shame, tend to escape easy articulation, but they have no less of an impact on our psychological organization,
Shlomo Zuckier

Shlomo Zuckier is a scholar of classical Judaism who also harbors philosophical and theological interests. After receiving a Ph.D. with distinction from Yale University in Religious Studies in 2020, he served as the Flegg Postdoctoral Fellow in Hebrew Bible and Jewish Studies at McGill University. He previously studied for rabbinical ordination and post-ordination studies at Yeshiva University-RIETS. In addition to the projects noted here, Shlomo is currently working on a volume on the history and historiography of the term Halakhah (Jewish Law).

His research at the Center for Philosophy of Religion aims to build a bridge between philosophy of religion and Jewish ancient and rabbinical writings. In particular, he is working in two areas where classical rabbinic literature—the foundational Talmudic texts of Jewish law produced by Palestinian and Babylonian rabbis from the 1st to 7th centuries CE—has much to offer the study of the philosophy of religion, particularly on the topics of divine will and atonement.

Appeals to the divine will are powerful precisely because they provide a commanding force without resort to any other source or precedent – if God wills a thing, it ought to be done. Rabbinic literature pays much attention to issues of heeding the divine will, and even features a prayer formula, introduced by Yehi Ratzon (“May it be Your will”), that centers this issue. In these cases, what is requested is not that God do X but that God will X. A close analysis of the language and function of the prayer, including some prayers that seem redundant, self-directed, and/or reciprocal, indicates that such requests from God focus on alignment of the human will with God’s, accompanied by the presumption that God will reciprocate in kind. Among other outcomes of this analysis, he utilizes the rabbinic account of divine will to assist in constructing a definition of as well as an ideal account of “worship,” a topic that has been much debated in recent years in analytic theology.

Atonement stands at the center of both Jewish and Christian theology. In Christian theology, the life and/or death of Jesus are understood to provide atonement for those who properly align themselves with his faith, while in Jewish tradition sacrifice and many alternatives that provide atonement are central practices of the faith. Building upon his dissertation, which traces accounts of atonement (ר.פ.כ) from the Hebrew Bible through Second Temple, early Christian, and Rabbinic literature, this project moves to understand atonement in a more analytic key. Christian theology has largely consolidated its conceptualization of atonement around three approaches: ransom, moral exemplar, and satisfaction theories. As one might imagine, considering atonement sans Jesus, as the rabbis do, will yield different results. The rabbis present four central atoning agents that replace atonement through sacrifice: (1) repentance, (2) the Day of Atonement, (3) one’s own suffering, and (4) death—material that is fertile territory for philosophical examination. This project analyzes these categories with an eye towards how they yield atonement, focusing on how the religious subject—and not an intermediary—offers their very self as a sacrifice.
Notre Dame’s Center for Philosophy of Religion promotes work in philosophy of religion, philosophical theology, and in related fields through fellowships, conferences, grants, and strategic public engagement initiatives.