

VALUES AND THE MEANING OF LIFE

Religion as a Vehicle for Meaning*

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1 Introduction

In my last essay I have argued, following William Joske, that some commonly held philosophical views are not able to provide an answer to the question of what is the meaning of life.¹ Joske warns, however, that we are not justified in rejecting these views just because it results in the idea that life could be meaningless and we are not entitled to believe in God simply because it would make our life meaningful. Joske does, however, not provide any further justification for these claims. Joske does not investigate whether religion is also not able to provide meaning.

The topic of this paper is whether religion is able to provide a grounding of some sort for values which make life meaningful, for those who have religious faith. It will be argued that religion is not able to provide a solid grounding for values.

2 Religion as a vehicle for meaning

Existential meaning can not exist by itself, but needs to be attached to something, meaning needs a vehicle. Vehicles for meaning can be values, such as ethical values, or the relationship a religious person has with God. But also material objects or activities can be vehicles for meaning. As a system, religion includes beliefs,

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¹W.D. Joske, 'Philosophy and the meaning of life', *Australasian Journal of Philosophy*, 52 (1974):2; Peter Prevos, *The dangers of philosophy*, (july 2005) <http://www.prevos.net/ola/venom.pdf>.

stories, rituals, structures, experiences, texts, ethics and symbols functioning as a totality.² In institutional religion, all these phenomena can be vehicles for meaning.

A common theme in religion, and the greatest contrast with science and rational philosophy, is a belief in the transcendent, the spiritual. Religious thinkers have developed numerous arguments relating to the transcendent, to show that religion is able to provide a solid grounding for meaning.

2.1 Otherworldliness

Science and philosophy are, according to David Swenson, not able to provide meaning because they are focused on the temporal material world.³ Swenson writes that we must 'liberate [ourselves] from the slavery of finite ends' and seek meaning in 'otherworldliness'.⁴ Swenson further writes that setting desires externally runs the risk of falling into despair and a soul set on external desires is 'captive to the world of its desires ... it belongs to the world and does not own itself'.⁵

Swenson does, however, not seem to acknowledge that focusing on otherworldliness is merely another way of being captive to one's external desires. There is no logical difference between desiring a spiritual value or a plasma screen television, as both are external to the desiring subject.

A metaphysical difference between worldly and otherworldly desires is, according to Swenson, that the former are finite, while the latter are infinite. He argues against choosing finite drivers as a source for happiness because in this case, only a certain few can obtain happiness. Choosing otherworldly drivers ensures, according to Swenson, that everybody can obtain happiness, as this is an infinite source. Swenson's position seems to imply that if we pursue happiness as the meaning of life then only very few people can have meaning.

Swenson's argument that we need to choose infinite values in order to be able to provide meaning for everybody is mathematically not valid. The number of people on this planet will always be finite and we thus only need finite resources to satisfy their desire for meaning. His argument is only valid if the worldly drivers he refers to are material drivers. The current environmental crisis shows that there are not enough resources for every human being to obtain a the same high level of affluence

²Normal Habel, Michael O'Donoghue and Marion Maddox, *Myth, ritual and the sacred. Introducing the phenomena of religion*, (Underdale: University of South Australia, 1993).

³David F. Swenson, 'The dignity of human life & The transforming power of otherworldliness', in: E.D. Klemke, editor, *The meaning of life*, 2nd edition. (Oxford University Press, 2000).

⁴Ibid., p. 27.

⁵Ibid., p. 24.

as we currently enjoy. Our desire for happiness is infinite, but some non-spiritual values are of infinite supply. Meaning does not only relate to *standard of living*, but also to *quality of life*. One can, for example, value relationships with other people, enjoy the beauty of nature or study philosophy, all of which are potentially infinite sources for meaning.

3 Discussion

The critical difference between a religious and non-religious person is the acceptance of the transcendent, or otherworldliness, as the first reality. The transcendent provides a vehicle for meaning outside life itself and because, to the religious person, it has ontological primacy over the material world it provides a solid grounding. Swenson argues that if somebody catches ‘a glimpse’ of the transcendent, one is forced to accept its existence as a necessary truth.⁶

The existence of a parallel, transcendent, world is by no means a necessary truth. Religious phenomena function as a vehicle for meaning to the believer. Religion is, however, not based on rational reasoning or empirical observation, but on revelation. Knowledge obtained through revelation can neither be verified, nor falsified and has therefore no solid foundation. Religion as a vehicle for meaning has therefore no grounding, but is a metaphysical ‘sky-hook’.

The existentialist recognises that there are no absolute values to attach meaning to. But, there is no meaninglessness crisis because the existentialist embraces this nihilism. Jean-Paul Sartre thinks that because life is objectively absurd, we need to create our own meaning. Theologian William Craig objects to this line of reasoning and thinks it is a self-delusion which has no objective basis.⁷ But, Sartre thinks that meaning does not need an objective basis as the whole concept of meaning is subjective. The vehicle for meaning for the existentialist is, as it were, a metaphysical hot air balloon, not anchored to anything, providing a birds-eye view of the philosophical landscape. This puts the existentialist in precisely the same situation as the religious person on your account. Neither can provide rational justification for their choice of values.

Most people are, however, psychologically not equipped to fly the metaphysical hot air balloon of the existentialist and require a more grounded vehicle for

⁶Swenson (2000), p. 35.

⁷William Lane Craig, *Reasonable faith: Christian truth and apologies*, (Good News Publishers, 1994), p. 65.

meaning in order to avoid a meaninglessness crisis. Transcendent vehicles for meaning such as religion, are able to provide meaning outside our own personal lives, something which the more earthly vehicles, as argued by Joske, are not able to achieve.⁸ The ‘otherworldly’ vehicles are psychologically more satisfying and therefore more suitable, but ultimately just as delusional as any other.

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⁸Joske (1974).