

Supernaturalist analytic existentialism:

Critical notice of Clifford Williams' *Religion and the meaning of life*

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Abstract

In this critical notice of Clifford Williams' *Religion and the meaning of life*, I focus on his argumentation in favour of the moderate supernaturalist position that, while a meaningful life would be possible in a purely physical world, a much greater meaning would be possible only in a world with God and an eternal afterlife spent close to God. I begin by expounding and evaluating Williams' views of the physical sources of meaning, providing reason to doubt both that he has captured all the central ones and that he has provided the right explanation of why we ought to care about them. Then I address Williams' account of why God would greatly enhance the meaning of our lives, arguing that, if God could do so, then God could by the same token reduce their meaning as well, such that it is unclear that a world with God would offer a net gain in meaning. Finally, I take up Williams' position that an eternal afterlife with God would greatly enhance the meaning of our lives, contending that, if it would do so, then it would to such an enormous degree as to make it hard to capture the intuition that a meaningful life would be possible in a purely physical world.

Keywords

Afterlife • Existentialism • God • Meaning of life • Supernaturalism • Theism

The rise of moderate supernaturalism

For some decades, naturalist thinkers had dominated Anglo-American-Australasian philosophical reflection on the meaning of life, that is, on themes such as which higher-order goals human persons ought to pursue besides their own pleasure, how they could live so as to merit esteem or admiration, or which patterns of a life constitute a compelling narrative. On the one hand, logical positivism had influenced many philosophers to reject the relevance of spiritual conditions, if not the intelligibility of meaning-talk altogether. On the other hand, the atheism prominent in the field tended to drive philosophers to set aside enquiry into what the point of the human race as a whole might be and instead to focus on meaning in an individual's life, with many holding that, even supposing there is neither God nor a soul, some lives (e.g., Einstein's, Mandela's, Picasso's) intuitively are meaningful. Much reflection in the post-war era consisted of articulating the purely natural or physical conditions that arguably constitute meaning in life, with prominent contenders including an individual obtaining what she most wants, producing good consequences, and developing rational nature.

However, over the past 10 years or so, there has been a resurgence in religious approaches to the meaning of life (see, e.g., the many contributors to Seachris and Goetz 2016). The decline of positivism has meant that philosophers accept not only that evaluative language admits of truth (or at least justification), but also that spiritual conditions are in principle candidates for what makes the life of an individual (or the species) meaningful. In addition, in both the field of life's meaning and the new 'pro-theism' versus 'anti-theism' debate (e.g., Kraay 2018; Loughheed 2020), thinkers have drawn a distinction between an everyday meaning available in a purely physical world and a greater meaning purportedly unavailable in it. Most supernaturalists about life's meaning these days avoid the 'extreme' claim that life would be utterly meaningless without God or an eternal afterlife, and instead

advance the ‘moderate’ view that life would not be as meaningful as it could be without them (critically surveyed in Metz 2019).

Clifford Williams’ *Religion and the meaning of life: An existential approach* (2020) is a clear instance of this moderate supernaturalism about the meaning of life. Williams does not deny that some meaning a human person’s life would be possible in an atheist world, but argues that the existence of a theist world along with belief in it would ‘enhance’ meaning and is necessary for a ‘maximal’ meaning. By a ‘theist world’, Williams includes the existence of God as characteristically conceived in the Abrahamic faiths, i.e., as ‘an all-benevolent, all-powerful, all-knowing creator of the universe’ (p. 1; see also p. 2). In addition, Williams presumes that there will be ‘a life beyond death in which there is a closer relationship to the Divine One and that is free from the ills of predeath life’ (p. 2) and that ‘individuals will live after death forever....and the Divine One will be intimately involved with humans after they die’ (p. 112). Williams avoids using the words ‘soul’ and ‘heaven’, perhaps wanting to remain neutral on whether the afterlife is embodied or not.

The mention of ‘an existential approach’ in the book’s sub-title does not signify merely that it is about what would make the life of an individual meaningful (he does not discuss the species) or even the recurrence of life and death matters in the book pertaining to suicide and dying well. In addition, the phrase indicates something about the ways that Williams approaches these topics. While he principally engages in analytic argumentation of the sort prominent in Anglo-American-Australasian philosophy, Williams also considers what it is like to experience daunting questions of how (and even whether) to live, provides concrete advice about how to overcome psychological obstacles to living meaningfully, indicates which attitudes to take towards meaning or its absence, and deploys literary

techniques such as vignettes and dialogues.¹ Everything fits neatly together to form a thoughtful organic unity in a clearly written style.

In this article, I critically discuss Williams' argumentative defence of moderate supernaturalism, setting several other topics from the book aside. I begin in the following section by addressing Williams' account of what makes life meaningful and why we ought to pursue meaning, even if there is no spiritual realm. I contend that while he captures many of the naturalist sources of meaningfulness for us, including ones pertaining to emotions and virtues that many others have neglected, there are plausibly additional ones, and that Williams' desire-based justification for pursuing meaning does not entail the conclusion he wants. In the next section I take up Williams' view that orienting one's life towards God before dying on earth would significantly enhance the meaning of our lives. I argue that, even if Williams were correct that God could uniquely add substantial meaning, there are respects in which God could by the same token detract from meaning that Williams does not consider, so that it is not clear whether on balance one should want a world with God. In the last major section, I address Williams' view that an eternal afterlife close to God would be necessary for a maximal meaning. I suggest that if, as Williams says, living forever in a state of perfection is not optional for meaning or would add up to an infinite meaning, then Williams' position risks collapsing into an extreme supernaturalism, one that does not accommodate the intuition that a genuinely meaningful life is possible in a purely physical world. I briefly conclude by posing some questions that should be addressed to appraise moderate supernaturalism fully, far beyond this critical notice.

¹ The book most like it in terms of topics and style is, I believe, Iddo Landau's *Finding meaning in an imperfect world* (2017), although, in terms of position, Landau denies that supernatural conditions are essential for a robustly meaningful life.

Acquiring meaning without God before death

Williams' strategy in the book is to suppose that God exists, and then see what follows for the question of how to live meaningfully (p. 2). Despite the assumption of theism, Williams denies that meaning revolves *entirely* around the Divine One, granting that *some* meaning in life is not a function of relating to God and would obtain in a possible world in which God does not exist (p. 3). In advancing the moderate supernaturalist claim that God is a contributory, rather than necessary, condition for meaning in life, Williams does not jump over the purely physical sources of meaning quickly in a mad dash to get to the spiritual ones. Instead, Williams first develops a rich account of naturalist facets of meaningfulness and contends we ought to care greatly about them, after which he argues that God and an eternal afterlife could 'enhance' the meaning available to us to a 'significant' and even 'maximal' degree (pp. 3, 7, 74, 97, 104, 109, 121, 131-132). In this section, I critically discuss the naturalism, saving discussion of the supernaturalism for the following sections.

Williams focuses on four naturalist grounds of meaningfulness, defending each from criticism (Chapter 4). In catchwords, they are the intrinsic goods of goals, creativity, virtue, and love. In terms of goals, Williams has in mind what others tend to call 'achievements', and he argues they are sources of meaning despite Schopenhauerian objections regarding boredom upon their completion. By 'creativity' Williams has in mind a wide array of activities that foster beauty and other intrinsic goods, ranging from gardening to raising a family. When it comes to virtue, Williams believes emotion is central to it, pointing out how virtues of kindness, respect, gratitude, and awe, for example, intuitively both involve emotion and are sources of meaning. Finally, regarding love, Williams argues that it is not merely loving that confers meaning on a life, but also being loved.

Williams denies that there are hard and fast divisions between the four sorts of intrinsic goods, and he is revealing and interesting when positing overlaps amongst them. So,

for just two examples, Williams suggests that exhibiting emotion is a necessary condition for goals and creativity to be sources of meaning (pp. 60, 67) and argues that being open to receiving love is a virtue (p. 73).

It seems that Williams would like all naturalist sources of meaning to fit into one of the four kinds he has identified, but he cannot quite bring himself to make that claim (pp. 74-77). Part of why that position is difficult to sustain is that Williams analyzes the concept of life's meaning in terms of what makes life worth living (pp. 5-6), where things like surprises, the smell of perfume, and the taste of food count. I have argued, in contrast, that meaningfulness is distinct from worthwhileness, where there are instances of the former without the latter and vice versa (Metz 2012). On my view, normally surprises, smells, and tastes make it reasonable to stay alive, but do not make life meaningful—for, roughly, they rarely involve higher-order purposes beyond one's pleasure or conditions that merit esteem or admiration. Had Williams adopted this friendly amendment, the odds of being able to reduce all physical dimensions of meaning to his four types would have been higher.

Even so, there plausibly *are* physical dimensions of meaningfulness (as distinct from worthwhileness) that are not substantially a function of goals, creativity, virtue, love, or even a combination of them. Consider redemption, in which one makes good come from the bad parts of one's life. There could be some creativity there, but that does not seem to capture the meaningfulness of the narrative pattern of (a stretch of) one's life. Relatedly, think about a life that is patterned so that it ends on a high note; such a life is more meaningful than one that ends on a low note, even holding constant the sum of meaningful activities in the two lives. Reflect, too, on just allocations of benefits of burdens between people, noting that life would be more meaningful if the upright did not suffer and if the wicked did instead (at least if someone must suffer, it would make more sense if it were those culpable for that fact who suffered). Life would also probably be more meaningful for living amongst natural objects

than only plastic replicas of them. Finally, for now, life would be more meaningful, the more one lacked false beliefs about fundamental aspects of one's self and environment, and all the more meaningful if one had true beliefs about them.

I doubt that goals, creativity, virtues, and love can be plausibly interpreted in ways that would capture the intuitive meaningfulness of all these conditions. It would, however, be worth someone's time to see whether that can be done, and, if not, whether there were only one or two more sources of meaning that would need to be added (or whether some other categorization would provide unity).

Before turning to key reasons why Williams believes that God's existence enhances meaning in life beyond the four intrinsic goods discussed above, I engage with Williams' rationale for pursuing meaning as opposed to conditions such as having power, being self-aggrandizing, and harming others (Chapter 1). Williams' core rationale is that it is human nature to seek meaning, where that for him means that all human beings want it.

Given human nature, it is possible to find in nearly everyone a desire for an intrinsic good or a desire for right and nontrivial pleasures. The reason, then, why we should care about meaning, in the nonmoral sense of 'should,' is that we already do (p. 16; see also pp. 12, 19).

Implicit, here, is an apparent commitment to an instrumentalist account of practical reason, according to which one has a reason to act in a certain way if (and perhaps only if) one desires to do so.

Notice the 'nearly' in the above quotation; in the notes Williams does acknowledge that psychopaths might lack desires for intrinsic goods (p. 177), but he does not indicate what this means for how they ought to live their lives. I submit that there are more exceptions than psychopaths in respect of the claim that 'everyone desires to achieve goals, be creative, possess certain virtues and emotions, and give and receive love' (p. 76). Consider those

Buddhists who have freed themselves of all desires, and particularly ones that involve goal-seeking, or those Christians who have devoted themselves fully, albeit narrowly, to the two commandments of loving God and one's neighbour, without concern to be creative. Think, too, about those suffering from depression to such a degree that they lack desires to do anything at all, let alone to pursue intrinsic goods (cf. p. 18).

Williams' key replies are to maintain that people might not be aware of their desires for all four intrinsic goods and, furthermore, that, while desires might come and go as well as vary in strength, at least everyone has had these desires at some point in their lives and continues to be disposed to have them (pp. 15, 18, 76, 115, 125). However, the problem with these replies is that nearly everyone has likewise had desires for intrinsic bads, such as gratuitous destructiveness and cruelty, at some point in their lives and that at least many are disposed towards having desires for intrinsic bads (points that Williams acknowledges at times—see pp. 12, 145-146). However, if desires are what provide reasons, then my objection is that the pursuit of meaning has no normative leg up on the pursuit of what is incompatible with meaning.² It is upon reflection unsurprising that there appears to be no

² It might be that Williams would 'bite the bullet' and deny that everyone has *pro tanto* reason to care about meaning. At one point later in the book he acknowledges that some people's resistance to goodness is stronger than their desire for goodness and could be read as suggesting that an eternity of engaging with goodness is not choice-worthy for them (pp. 115-116). However, other times Williams indeed advances the claims that 'everyone ought to care' about meaning (p. 132) and precisely because 'everyone desires to achieve goals, be creative, possess certain virtues and emotions, and give and receive love' (p. 76). Plus, apart from what Williams is aiming to show, it is worth considering what would make sense of the claim that everyone does have *pro tanto* reason to pursue meaning in life.

greater reason for many people to pursue meaning instead of ‘drifting wherever their inclinations and pleasures may take them’ (p. 10), when there is an appeal to, well, *inclinations* as a normative foundation.

It is somewhat odd for a proponent of meaning in life, particularly through virtue, to appeal to what people *in fact* desire or care about for normative grounding. One would have thought that considerations of meaning and virtue indicate what people *ought to* desire if they want to live good lives. Meaning is plausibly construed as providing *pro tanto* reason for action in itself, apart from how strongly people desire it, whereas gratuitous destructiveness and cruelty do not provide *pro tanto* reason for action in themselves, even when people do strongly desire them.

It might not be instrumentalism about practical reason that renders it difficult for Williams to explain why all human persons have some good reason to care about meaning and it might instead be his interpretation of theism. Assuming for the sake of argument that God in fact exists, Williams contends that the Divine One has created finite persons with a meaning-desiring nature (pp. 69, 100-101, 112, 121, 128, 174). If God is real, then we should expect all human persons to want intrinsic goods, or so it might seem.

However, other standard parts of that creation narrative merit attention, such as the notion that human nature is imperfect, if not downright crooked (cf. pp. 113-114), and that God would also give us a free will enabling us to mould our own character to some degree (cf. pp. 146, 161). It is coherent to suppose that God would assign certain purposes to us and give us the responsibility to work on ourselves in the course of making progress towards realizing them, where we might fail in doing so. If so, then it would be sensible to accept that not all of us have desires for intrinsic goods to any stronger or more consistent degree than desires for intrinsic bads and that such persons have good reason to change their desires. In

sum, theism is compatible with our being wayward, and the ultimate reason to care about meaning is that it is meaning, i.e., something good for its own sake that merits being desired.

Acquiring meaning with God before death

In the previous section I argued, amongst other things, that the suggestion that we desire to live meaningful lives is, *contra* Williams, probably not enough to show that we ought to live that way, since there is also the fact that many of us comparably desire to live lives that are incompatible with meaning. In this section I make a broadly analogous kind of argument in respect of Williams' claim that appreciating God during one's present, terrestrial life would enhance the meaning in our lives (Chapter 6). I point out that this consideration is probably not enough to show that we ought to prefer a world with God, since there is also the fact that failing to relate to God in the right way would reduce the meaning in one's life. If one is interested in knowing whether one should want to live in a world with God in it on grounds of meaning, it is not enough to show that God could enhance meaning or even that believing in a God who exists would enhance meaning; one must also consider whether God could reduce meaning, and then ascertain what the likely outcomes would be, which Williams does not address.

If one assumes that God exists, then, Williams plausibly maintains, one would be missing out on several sources of meaning upon failing to believe that. I do not discuss all of them here, but rather mention three, which I believe are representative of what Williams has in mind and are sufficient to set the stage for my critical point.

First off, according to Williams, given that God exists, then one can without delusion enjoy a sense of belonging in the world. Since the universe is not indifferent to one's suffering and there is instead a cosmic person who cares, one's life is more meaningful (pp. 100, 102). Second, if one fulfils the purpose God has assigned, viz., mainly of realizing the four intrinsic goods discussed above, then one's life is more meaningful for pleasing God (p.

101). Third, experiencing emotions and virtues of gratitude, awe, and reverence towards God would be meaning-conferring on the assumption that God is real (pp. 102-103).

It strikes me as correct that these are sources of meaning in life on the supposition that God exists, and I am willing to grant here (although it is more debatable) that they in some sense would not be available without God. However, I still find it difficult to draw the conclusion that I should want to live in a world with God, since that world would offer comparable sources of what is called ‘anti-meaning’ (Campbell and Nyholm 2015) or ‘anti-matter’ (Metz 2013, pp. 63-65, 72-73).

These terms are meant to connote conditions that consist of not merely the absence of what is meaningful, but also the presence of what reduces the amount of meaning in a person’s life. Consider the difference between oversleeping and blowing up the Sphinx for fun (from Metz 2013, p. 64). There is a lack of meaning in both, but there is anti-matter in the latter and not the former. One’s ‘meaning score’ metaphorically recorded in the book of life does not go down if one oversleeps, while it does if one senselessly destroys old, beautiful works of art that took great effort to create. Neither oversleeping nor Sphinx-exploding gains a credit, but the former does not involve a debit, whereas the latter does.

Now, my concern about Williams’ ‘enhancement thesis’ that God’s existence could add to meaning (pp. 97-98) is that God’s existence could also subtract from meaning.³ First, instead of a sense of comfort knowing that God cares about one’s suffering, one might feel

³ I first made this point in respect of other moderate supernaturalists such as John Cottingham and Richard Swinburne in Metz (2019, pp. 34-35). An additional strategy worth considering would be to appeal to ‘anti-theism’ considerations to the effect that God’s existence would, say, uniquely undermine our independence or privacy (critically discussed in Lougheed 2020).

bewildered at the presence of suffering in the face of a caring God. One might find it nonsensical that God allows one's four-year old son to undergo the torment of cancer. For the innocent to suffer in a world without God is unjust, but for the innocent to suffer in a world with God one might well find maddeningly absurd, reducing the 'meaning score' of one's life—at least on the supposition that feeling a sense of belonging would enhance that score. Second, if pleasing God by helping to realize God's plan is a source of great meaning, then surely displeasing God by failing to do so, if not by hindering its realization, is a source of great anti-meaning. Granted that making God happy that one has fulfilled the purpose God has assigned one would merit esteem, by the same token angering or disappointing God would merit shame. Third, if awe, gratitude, and reverence directed towards God are meaning-conferring, then ungratefulness, neglect, and insolence are meaning-detracting.

In short, with God, the stakes get much higher—in terms of both potential gains and losses. More carefully, I want to say that, with God, the potential losses are comparably greater *if* Williams is correct that there are potential gains. If the enhancement thesis is true, then so is a corresponding 'detraction thesis'. In the absence of a discussion of whether the gains are more likely than the losses, one cannot reasonably draw the conclusion that, when it comes to meaning, a world with God is preferable to one without. So far as I can tell, Williams does not explicitly make the latter claim, but I presume he is implicitly seeking to defend it with the enhancement thesis and, in any event, it is a claim that many philosophers of life's meaning and of religion find of interest.

There are naturally things for Williams to say at this point; for instance, he might suggest how easy it is for people to believe in God. If it were not a challenge to obtain the gains and to avoid the losses in a world with God, there would be strong *prima facie* reason to favour a theist world on grounds of meaning. However, upon looking around and reflecting

on the number of human persons who have lived in the way Williams prescribes, and then presuming (as Williams does) that God exists, it seems to me: anti-matter abounds.

Acquiring meaning with God in an afterlife

Williams applies the enhancement thesis not merely to relating to God, but also to living forever. That is, he maintains that, although surviving for eternity is not necessary for any meaning in life, one's life would be much more, indeed maximally, meaningful only if one did (Chapter 7). Now, in the previous two sections, my critical strategy broadly involved arguing that in addition to the positive that Williams highlights (desire for intrinsic goods, prospect of pleasing God), one must weigh that up against the negative (desire for intrinsic bads, prospect of displeasing God) to be able to come to a conclusive judgement about which attitudes to exhibit. That option is available here, too; I could appeal to apparent negative aspects of an eternal life, such as concerns about boredom, repetition, lack of narrative, and inability to exhibit certain virtues. However, those are familiar points from the literature, and Williams responds to them with care (pp. 67-68, 113-116, 123-129). In order to add a fresh perspective, my approach in this section is to grant Williams that an eternity close to God would be maximally meaningful, and to argue that such a point appears incompatible with the intuition that a life would be meaningful without it, which Williams also accepts (or at least should).

Williams is clear that he holds moderate supernaturalism, i.e., he does not believe the extreme view that meaning is 'all or nothing' (pp. 117, 132-134) in respect of spiritual conditions. He expressly says that some meaning is possible in a purely physical world, but that much more would be available in a world with God and an afterlife spent in God's company. My claims are, first, that there are some other things Williams says that seem to be in tension with this judgement, and, second, that the logic of his position makes it difficult to avoid extreme supernaturalism.

According to Williams, eternal life with God would be a ‘maximal’ enhancement of meaning in our lives (pp. 115, 121, 131, 132) that we should find compelling, at least if we have a desire for intrinsic goods. We could achieve goals, be creative, exhibit virtue, and enjoy love to the utmost degree only if we forever survived the deaths of our current bodies and in God’s presence. Now, Williams maintains that such a condition ‘should not be thought of as an unimportant and nonessential matter’ (p. 109), ‘is not just morally optional’ (p. 132), and is ‘desirable in a strong sense and not just as an option’ (p. 132). These phrasings imply that maximal meaning is essential and required, a judgement that, in turn, is difficult to square with the intuition that this merely earthly life could be meaningful.

To be sure, Williams can accommodate the intuition that *some meaning in life* is available in a purely physical world, but I wonder whether he can account for the further intuition that a *meaningful life* is available there, too. A meaningful life is one sufficiently full of meaning, where many would say that the lives of Picasso, Mandela, and Einstein are uncontroversially described as having been ‘meaningful’. If Williams were correct that an eternal afterlife is not optional and is instead essential in respect of meaning, the best explanation of why would be that an earthly life cannot be meaningful (even if it can include some meaning), a claim that conflicts with a core tenet of moderate supernaturalism (or at least one plausible strain of it).

Here is a second way to express my concern. Consider the amount of meaning involved in eternally relating to God and realizing the intrinsic goods: it would plausibly be infinite (p. 41). Now, compare an infinite amount of meaning with a finite amount, particularly the puny sum on offer during 80 or so terrestrial years. When comparing those two lives, one could not sensibly describe an earthly life as ‘meaningful’. However, the moderate supernaturalist wants, and indeed should want, to accommodate the intuition that ‘life can be meaningful without ... there being a divine person or an afterlife’ (p. 3), as

Mandela's life plausibly was. My hunch is that appealing to eternity is 'too big'; it gives Williams the judgement that spiritual conditions are essential for a greater meaning, albeit at the cost of being unable to judge that physical conditions can be sufficient for meaningful lives.⁴

Conclusion: Further reflection on moderate supernaturalism

In one respect I have in this critical notice downplayed the existentialism of Williams' *Religion and the meaning of life*. While I have of course addressed existential themes pertaining to life's meaning, I have not taken up, e.g., the practical recommendations Williams offers about how to overcome obstacles to living well and his phenomenological descriptions of when meaning is lacking. They are well worth the reader's time to consider in addition to the argumentation Williams advances in support of moderate supernaturalism, on which I have alone focused here.

Williams' moderate supernaturalism takes the form of arguing that if God and an eternal afterlife with God did not exist, one could acquire some meaning in life from four key intrinsic goods, but that a much greater meaning would be available with those supernatural conditions. I have argued that, if God could make a greater meaning available, say, by being pleased at one's success, God could make a comparable anti-meaning available, such as being displeased at one's failure, making it unclear whether God is desirable all things considered in respect of meaning. In addition, I have argued that, if an eternal afterlife with God would make a greater meaning available, it would do so to such an (infinite) extent as to make what is available to a merely earthly life negligible, making it difficult to support the

⁴ I first made this kind of point in respect of the work of T. J. Mawson (Metz 2019, pp. 30-31), to which he has recently replied in Mawson (2020).

moderate supernaturalist intuition that a meaningful life is possible in a purely physical world.

These arguments are meant to invite responses from Williams and others drawn towards moderate supernaturalism. Would God unavoidably bring the prospect of anti-matter along in the wake of making a greater meaning available to us? If so, how easy would it be to avoid the anti-matter? Supposing God actually exists, why might one think that there has been a greater mattering on balance for human persons than a greater anti-mattering? Would the purportedly undesirable facets of an eternal life with God, such as repetitiveness and the lack of narrative, be avoidable? If not, would the desirable facets of immortality outweigh them? If they would, would the amount of net meaning eternally conferred consist of an infinite amount or otherwise be so enormous as to make a finite life meaningless by comparison? If so, is extreme supernaturalism the preferred approach, upon reflection? These questions come to mind upon reading Clifford Williams' book, the latest important addition to supernaturalist analytic existentialism.⁵

⁵ I am grateful to Andrei Buckareff for comments on a previous draft of this essay.

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