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## **Introduction: *International Journal of Philosophy and Theology***

In this special issue of the *International Journal of Philosophy and Theology*, we focus on the questions around Meaning and Gods. It is the result of a workshop in 2019 on Thaddeus Metz's book *God, Soul and the Meaning of Life* (Cambridge University Press, 2019). The central concern in this book is the exploration of the relevance of God or a soul for meaning in life, specifically as discussed in recent Anglo-American literature. The goal of the book is to present the four principal positions in this academic dialogue, namely (1) that God or a soul is necessary for meaning (the "extreme supernaturalist" account), (2) that neither is necessary, i.e. a purely physical realm is sufficient for meaning (the "moderate naturalist" account), (3) that one or both could significantly enhance meaning (the "moderate supernaturalism" account), (4) or that one or both would subtract from meaning (the "extreme naturalist" account).

The *Element* focuses explicitly on the latter two: the binary – the "all or nothing" stance on meaning – that is considered and that broadly drives the current research in this field. Metz presents *prima facie* objections to those positions, assessing gaps in recent research and suggesting strategies for developing those areas. Metz's central position, an overarching interpretation of the discourses set out in the *Element*, is that the shift in discussions about meaning in life is that God is not absolutely necessary for meaning in life, but rather, that God is essential for great meaning in life, i.e. that God would significantly enhance meaning in life when compared to the absence of God.

There is a difference between discussions of meaning in terms of "the meaning *of* humanity's existence" and considerations of meaning specifically "*in* an individual's life". These two focuses are distinct in a few ways, one of which is insofar as one person's life could have meaning without it implying that all of humanity is meaningful. On the other hand, humanity's meaningfulness would not imply the meaningfulness of an individual person's life. Here, Metz focuses on both, and the responses in this special issue also span across the two related but distinct aspects.

These days, any discussion of 'meaning in life' generally signifies a group of conditions considered necessary for meaning in life. These characteristics are considered as good in themselves and being evaluable in degrees. Conditions of meaning could, furthermore, be

non-happy and non-moral: a life does not necessarily have to be happy for it to have meaning (imagine someone accepting a painful experience to enable some meaningful end), and a life does not necessarily have to be moral for it to be meaningful (I could have meaning in my life without the meaning-giver having to be related to something moral). I encourage any reader interested in these distinctions to read Metz's book.

In this issue, we have some established researchers from across the globe responding to these questions and younger researchers, especially from Sub-Saharan Africa, presenting interesting discussions on these topics that contribute to the existing literature. Some of the central critiques of Metz's book are around hermeneutic, axiological, and definitional considerations of, mostly, the 'meaning' of 'God' and related terms, such as 'spiritual', considered in the three senses mentioned above. How should we define 'God' and the 'spiritual' in our considerations of these questions? Is 'God' central to the values we consider in these questions about life's meaning? How do we consider 'God' in a hermeneutical sense in the West? What part does patriarchy and gender play in society and religion?

Fiona Ellis' contribution focuses on whether or not God and the soul could be put into a dualistic opposition to the natural world, which she argues, is not the case. Her focus is, therefore, definitional. She claims that talking about God and the soul should not be considered purely supernatural but that it should be 'naturalised'. Aribiah Attoe and Charles Taliaferro question whether God is central to giving our lives the particular final sort of value that Metz considers. Attoe shows that God is not necessary for meaning in life, while Taliaferro, in contrast, argues that God is necessary for meaning in life. Therefore, these critiques focus on axiological considerations, with an understanding of the spiritual in a more traditional sense, although proposing opposing positions.

Paul Slama's critique focuses on hermeneutical considerations, i.e. the centrality of God in beliefs in nonreligious practices. Slama's focus is on the idea that an understanding of 'God' is central to any understanding of life in the West, even when that life is not a religious or spiritual one. In fact, for him, most of life in the West is nonreligious but grounded in some understanding of 'God'. The West has transposed an ideal of God onto society, in a type of managerial process, like a corporation having specific goals, God has certain goals, and these goals must be fulfilled even at the expense of the individual's happiness. Similarly to that of

management in a corporate company, i.e. the individual worker has to pursue the goals of the firm or corporation or risk being fired.

Finally, Dimpho Takane Maponya's article focuses on the relationship between society, religion, and questions of gender, more specifically, gender inequalities. Her main position is that religion in its specific organisation and structuring further perpetuates gender inequalities in society, mainly through the prioritisation of the social dimensions of religion and, secondly, the reliance on male perspectives that governs religion. She considers South Africa as a case. Therefore, Takane's article also considers some hermeneutical factors in our understanding of religion, focusing on social aspects.

These articles broaden the discussion around these issues about questions on God, spirit, the meaning *of* life, and meaning *in* life. As Metz rightly says in his response to the articles and directly in response to Slama, the treatment of the questions regarding life's meaning and understanding of the spiritual and 'God' requires pluralist approaches and should not be limited to only one type of consideration. In this special issue, there is a combination of analytic and continental approaches to the question, which gives an exciting framework and creates the space for future discussions.

Kind regards,

Editors

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