The truth of, and adherence to, a religion has been thought by many to be necessary for life to be meaningful. It is not hard to see why this should be so. To ask after the meaning of life is, plausibly, to ask the ultimate ‘why’ question; that is, to ask why it matters whether we live or die, or live in one way rather than another. When people have asked themselves this question, it has seemed to most that an adequate answer must cite goods external to the self. Though it is widely held that meaningfulness has a subjective component – a meaningful life is a life in which the person is passionately engaged – most philosophers have thought that this engagement must be with activities that connect to and promote values that transcend the self (Nozick 1981; Wiggins 1998; Kekes 2000; Wolf 2010). A life devoted to pleasures, no matter how successful it might be on its own terms, is not meaningful if it fails to promote external and genuine goods. It might even be held that meaningfulness is a function (inter alia) of the objective significance of the good promoted. The person who is passionately devoted to her garden, say, might promote a good that is bigger than herself, and thereby achieve some degree of meaning, but we may suspect that she lives a life less meaningful than one that promotes some objectively more valuable good (say, curing cancer). These considerations lead quite naturally to the thought that meaningfulness requires that some religion be true. Religions purport to offer objective goods – participation in God’s plan, for instance – which surpass all others in value. Hence, the promotion of those goods might be seen to be the supremely meaningful life.

In this chapter, I aim to examine the claim that meaningfulness requires the existence of, and perhaps devotion to, God.1 I will argue that there are strong grounds for rejecting this claim. There is no good reason to think that our lives are any the less meaningful if God does not exist, I will conclude. I will not advance a naturalistic conception of meaningfulness. There are several on the market (e.g. Kekes 2000; Wolf 2010), and I will not attempt to adjudicate between them here or to add to what I have said on the topic elsewhere (Levy 2005). My aim, therefore, is essentially negative: to argument against those who maintain that God is necessary for meaningfulness, and not for a particular rival view.

It should be noted that the view against which I am concerned to argue is not the only theistic position on the meaning of life. Though most theists who have written on this topic have argued that God is necessary for meaningfulness, it might also be held, more weakly, that a life devoted (wholly or in part) to God is one kind of meaningful life. I will not examine such views here. I will devote some space to consideration of a view at the opposite end of the
spectrum from my primary concern: the view that the existence of (a certain kind of) God is actually incompatible with meaningfulness in human life. For the most part, however, I will limit myself to the view that God’s existence is a necessary condition of meaningfulness.

**Preliminaries**

The view that God is necessary for a meaningful life itself comes in a variety of forms. In one form, it maintains that only a religious life can be a meaningful life. More strongly still, it might be held that adherence to one religion in particular—or one kind of religion—is required for a meaningful life. Obviously, adherents of particular religions might hold that their religion has a monopoly on truth, and that therefore adherence to it is required for a meaningful life, but there may be other reasons why religions with certain features might be thought to better promote meaningfulness than others. For instance, meaningfulness might be thought to require that we participate in the plan of an omniscient and perfectly benevolent God; in that case, a meaningful life can be had only if a religion that postulates the existence of such a God is true. Those religions (for example, some strands of Buddhism) which do not postulate the existence of a deity, and those religions (for example some of the polytheisms of the ancient world) which postulate the existence of deities who are not omniscient or not perfectly benevolent, would not secure meaning for us if they were true. On the other hand, a meaningful life might require the truth of a religion, because a meaningful life requires that moral truths are objective, and only the truth of religion can secure this objectivity. In that case, we might have meaningful lives on a wider variety of religious views, including some that do not postulate the existence of an omniscient and perfectly benevolent god. However, most of the extant literature presupposes that the meaning-conferring God is the God of Western theology, and it is upon views of this kind that I will focus.

Why might it be thought that the truth of, and/or adherence to, some religion is required for a meaningful life? There are three principal arguments in the literature:

1. Meaning is conferred only, or especially, by participation in God’s **plan**.
2. Meaning requires personal **immortality** (or, in another version, the indefinite persistence of the plans and projects to which we contribute).
3. Meaning requires that the goods we pursue be **objectively** valuable, where this is held to require the truth of some supernatural account of value.

Call these the **plan**, **immortality** and **objectivity** arguments. I will address these arguments in turn. However, it is worth saying something about their commonalities before addressing their differences.

In developing her case for the view that meaningfulness consists in subjective commitment to objectively valuable goods, Susan Wolf (2010) sets out several reasons why we seem to have a psychological need to see ourselves as engaged in the promotion of the objectively valuable and not just the individually satisfying. We want the value in our lives to be recognizable from points of view other than our own, even from a God’s-eye perspective (ibid. 27); as a consequence of our deeply social natures we want to be able to hold up our heads before our peers; and we want our activities to make a difference despite our mortality (ibid. 28). For Wolf, these needs can be met by engagement in activities that do not require the truth of any non-natural account of the universe, but it is easy to see why the needs she cites might seem to require for their satisfaction something longer-lasting and—somehow—more transcendent than the activities she promotes. If recognition from the perspective of others is valuable to us, then how
much more valuable is recognition by the unsurpassable Other? Indeed, if our subjective conviction is unable to satisfy us that our projects are valuable, why should adding more—equally fallible—observers help? If the ‘thought that one’s life is like a bubble that, upon bursting, will vanish without a trace can lead some people to despair’ (Wolf 2010: 28), why should they get any solace from reflecting that we contribute to activities which, though perhaps longer-lasting than ourselves, are themselves destined to pass away in turn? Wolf cites advancing the cause of social justice and doing philosophy as activities that can make a life meaningful. But in the face of the heat death of the universe, these activities may seem as pointless as Wolf’s paradigms of meaningless activities, such as devotion to Sudoku puzzles. Ultimately, surely, it comes to the same thing whether I develop a better account of the supervenience of moral properties on natural properties—or, for that matter, whether I cure cancer—or instead watch reruns of MASH. In the long run, as John Maynard Keynes noted, we are all dead, and when we are gone the traces of our activities will follow us into oblivion.

Thus, the motives that move us to think that meaningfulness depends not merely on finding our lives fulfilling but also on engagement with objectively valuable goods can also lead us to find merely naturalistic sources of value unsatisfying, and thereby push us toward theistic accounts of meaning in life. In their different ways, the three arguments for the view that a meaningful life requires the truth of, as well as perhaps adherence to, a religion all develop the reasons Wolf gives for thinking that meaning depends on engagement with objectively valuable goods.

The plan argument

One way of engaging with objectively, and supremely, valuable goods is by playing a role in the plan that an omniscient, omnipotent, and perfectly benevolent God has laid out for the world. In Metz’s (2007a) terms, this is a God-centred view, rather than a soul-centred view; we can play a role in God’s plan whether or not we are ensouled. Obviously, not just any god will do. We would not derive meaning from playing a role in the plans of the trickster gods of many pantheons. We derive meaning from God’s plan only if God is a supremely wise and supremely good deity, whose plan provides us with a fittingly meaningful life. The omniscient and perfectly good God of the Abrahamic religion fits the bill nicely.

As it is commonly conceived, the plan argument requires not merely the truth of some suitable religion, but also adherence to it. By spreading the gospel (say), the believer plays a role in the plan; perhaps establishing the Kingdom of God on Earth or ensuring the salvation of other people. There are also (compatible) plan arguments that do not entail that meaningful lives can be lived only by believers. Perhaps we play a role in God’s plan by doing good works, independent of our beliefs. Indeed, perhaps all our actions, good and bad, help to effect God’s plans; Harris (2005) cites a number of eighteenth-century philosophers who claimed that we ought to see even in the crimes of our enemies ‘purely an instrument in the hand of God, for effectuating his wise and benevolent designs’, as Alexander Crombie put it (quoted in Harris 2005: 213).

In some of its forms, the plan argument satisfies one of the desiderata set down by Cottingham (2003): it makes a meaningful life accessible to all. If the plan argument is put forward in a form that requires adherence to a particular religion, then it is plausible to think that it does not satisfy this desideratum, inasmuch as it is a contingent matter whether our geographical and (especially) our historical location permits us to embrace a particular religion. But we can all ‘turn ourselves sincerely towards the good’, as Cottingham (2003: 70) puts it. It might be objected that in its least restrictive version, according to which all our actions, good and bad, play a role in God’s plan, success is too easy. But this need not be the case: the proponent of the
plan argument in this form might claim that though every action helps to further God’s plan, only those agents who play a positive role in the plan thereby derive meaning for themselves. That is, though evildoers further the plan, and thereby meaningfulness, their own lives do not derive meaning from this fact. This is prima facie plausible, inasmuch as inadvertently or unknowingly contributing to a project one does not endorse hardly seems to add meaning to one’s own life, though it might be a cause of meaning in the lives of others.

The plan argument seems to be subject to a Euthyphro-style objection. It does not seem plausible that we derive meaning from playing just any role in just any plan, even a divine plan. As Nozick (1981) points out, serving as a food source for intergalactic travellers doesn’t seem to confer meaning on our lives. However, proponents of the argument have a ready reply; though they ought to concede that only some divine plans can confer meaning on our lives, they can insist that only divine plans can do the job. They might here rely upon the kind of considerations that Nozick himself has put forward. According to Nozick, we can derive meaning only from a relationship with something that is itself meaningful. We can no more derive meaning from connection with something that is not meaningful than we can derive importance by being important to some project that is not itself important. But if meaning depends on a relationship to something that is meaningful, that further thing must itself either derive its meaning in turn by connection to something that is more meaningful, or somehow put an end to the regress. The obvious way to put an end to the regress is by having it stopped by something that is intrinsically meaningful, though Nozick himself suggests a different way in which God might put an end to the regress: by blocking further questions regarding meaningfulness. For him, ‘meaning’ is a semantic property, and a life can have meaning only in virtue of a reference relation. God – or some suitable substitute – is infinite; because God is infinite, we cannot ask about His meaning, because one of the presuppositions of that question, ‘namely that there be something external to the thing in question’, is not satisfied (Nozick 1981: 601). Something that is all-encompassing cannot refer to anything beyond itself. Grounding meaning in the infinite therefore puts a stop to further questions, not because the infinite is intrinsically meaningful but because we cannot meaningfully ask whether it is meaningful at all. The proponent of the plan argument could therefore hold that God’s purposes alone can provide us with meaning either because only these purposes could connect us to the infinite, or because only God is intrinsically meaningful.

The success of an argument like this depends in important part on the plausibility of claiming that we need a regress stopper. Different responses will be needed to Nozick’s own argument, which depends on his claim that meaningfulness requires some kind of reference, and to the claim that the regress must bottom out in something that is intrinsically meaningful. Evaluating Nozick’s argument is difficult, because participants in the debate have not done enough to unpack phrases like ‘the meaning of life’. We may, however, suspect that he takes the word ‘meaning’ too literally. When we ask about the meaning of our lives, we do not ask about its semantic properties, but about its importance. As Metz (2005: 255) puts it, when people ask what makes life meaningful, ‘they are generally asking something to the effect of what it might be about life that is worthy of great pride or admiration’. Importance is not a semantic property, so the idea that meaning depends upon the satisfaction of some kind of reference relation seems to be best resisted. The rival notion, that God is required to stop a regress of meaningfulness (understood as importance), because only God is intrinsically meaningful, is also contestable. Why shouldn’t promoting intrinsically valuable natural properties confer meaning on us?

Of course, it might be claimed that no natural property is intrinsically valuable, but that view is implausible. In The Brothers Karamazov, Dostoyevsky asks us whether it would be right to found the edifice of everlasting human happiness on the tears of a single child. For him, peace
and rest for all cannot redeem the suffering of a single child. Many people share his intuition; plausibly because suffering is intrinsically bad, though the sufferer passes out of existence. But if suffering can be intrinsically bad, then why cannot some goods be intrinsically good? Consider two worlds that come into existence at $t$ and pass entirely out of existence at $t+1$. World 1 contains no sentient beings; world 2 contains one sentient being who experiences joy for the duration of the existence of the world it inhabits. Isn’t world 2 better than world 1, regardless of whether the joy experienced in it has a significance beyond itself? If joy can be intrinsically good, it seems that positive axiological goods need not depend upon anything beyond themselves to have value, and the way is open for us to maintain that meaning (understood as importance) is constituted by or supervenes upon natural properties.\(^3\)

Some thinkers have gone further, holding that not only is a divine plan unnecessary for meaning; such a plan is actually inconsistent with meaning. Kurt Baier (2000: 120), for instance, claimed that the idea is offensive, because ‘it is degrading for a man to be regarded as merely serving a purpose’. Levine (1987) objects that Baier misdescribes the relationship between humanity and God, since on the theistic view God’s purpose is not at odds with ours; rather, God’s purpose is also what is most valuable for us. Even if this response succeeds, however, it does so at the cost of making a slightly different objection more pressing. The worry I have in mind is that being assigned a role to play in God’s plan is not so much degrading as infantilizing.

On the standard view, if God’s purpose coincides with ours, this is because God has brought this coincidence about. In that case, however, one may think that the role that has been assigned to humanity in God’s plan is too stage-managed to confer meaning. Far from conferring meaning on us, being asked to play a role in something that amounts to nothing more than a game is infantilizing. Playing our assigned roles in a game is not meaning-bestowing; it is hard to see how the fact that the game is on a massive scale and designed by God helps matters. God is traditionally conceived of as a father-figure in Christianity and related religious traditions. But if the relationship between ourselves and God is analogous to the relationship between parents and their children, it is hard to see how this relationship confers meaning on us.

Cottingham (2005) responds to worries like this one by pointing out that the parent-child relationship is not static but instead a dynamic process in which, ideally at least, the parent seeks the growing independence and autonomy of the child. Submission to dependence, in this light, can be part of a mutual search for a growing independence. The point that the parent-child relationship ideally develops toward the independence of the child is well taken, but it is far from clear that it solves the problem; there are significant differences between the parent-child relationship and the relationship between creator and creature. The telos of the parental relationship, ‘the future hoped-for state when the child itself achieves the status of adulthood, and converses with parent as an independent being’ (Cottingham 2005: 41) is regularly achieved, but humans cannot achieve equality with God. Though we might grow, spiritually and psychologically, through our relationship with God, inequality is a permanent feature of the relationship. It is plausible, moreover, to think that the gap between God and ourselves is always infinitely larger than that which prevails between parent and child at any stage of their relationship. Children may rightly come to see that the graded series of (strictly speaking, unnecessary) challenges placed before them by parents and teachers should be appreciated, because they allowed them to develop their powers of reasoning and acting, which they can apply to genuine problems once they mature. But the challenges God presents us with remain toy problems; we never confront God as equals and our aid can never be required by Him.

Nozick (1981) has suggested a response to worries like this. The infantilization worry can be avoided only if God’s plan is somehow intrinsically meaningful, not a mere arbitrary game, he suggests. Accordingly, Nozick sketches a ‘historical fable’ on which God confers meaning on
himself by conferring meaning on the cosmos. Whether this suggestion conflicts with God’s perfection I leave to the specialist (see Metz 2000 for relevant discussion). As Nozick notes, there are other grounds on which to reject the suggestion. Meaning might be something that does not require a transcendent purpose, as the atheist might insist, but surely it cannot be quite so self-referential as the suggested proposal would have it. God cannot derive meaning from a design whose purpose it is to confer meaning on him. Several writers (at least as far back as Mill 1873/1971) have noted that meaning cannot be derived from a project whose purpose is to confer meaning; rather, meaning seems to derive from the wholehearted pursuit of a project aimed at some goal that is (believed to be) intrinsically valuable. The same problem seems to arise here: for God’s design to confer meaning on God—and thereby on us—‘the plan must have some independent purpose and meaning itself’ (Nozick 1981: 590).

Metz (2000) – responding to Baier’s worry that God’s assigning us a purpose would be degrading to human dignity – puts forward a suggestion that, if successful, would solve the infantilization worry by explaining how God’s assigning a purpose to human beings is compatible with our autonomy and dignity. If our purpose is to exercise our free will in moral actions, then – given the truth of libertarianism about free will – it is logically impossible that God could bring it about that we fulfil our purpose, Metz argues. Hence God could need our help for His ends to be realized. Further, His assigning such an end to us could hardly count as patronizing or infantilizing. There are two problems with this suggestion. First, it is false that God cannot cause libertarian agents to exercise their free will in moral behaviour. Libertarianism, in any remotely plausible version, entails only that there are some directly free actions that are metaphysically undetermined. But many of these actions would be morally permissible, even laudable, no matter how the agent exercises her free will (consider an agent choosing between donating her money to Oxfam or Amnesty International), and it is perfectly possible to cause agents to confront directly free choices of this sort. It is also possible to cause agents to perform indirectly free actions; say by determining their mental states. Second, the end that Metz envisages assigned to us by God is surely too thin to be plausibly appealed to in a supernaturalist account of meaningfulness. For a theist to claim that our lives are meaningful in virtue of our playing a role in God’s plan, that plan must add something to the naturalistically respectable claim that our purpose in life consists in exercising our free will in moral behaviour. That something extra seems to be God’s having a design to which our actions are supposed to contribute. It seems, then, that the plan argument fails. Either God’s assigning us a role in a plan is infantilizing or the end assigned is too thin to be meaning-conferring.

The immortality argument

The intuition that death, if it is final, strips life of all its meaning is widespread. The essential idea is that the irrevocability of death makes everything we do and everything we achieve futile. As Nozick (op. cit.) puts it, ‘A significant life leaves its mark upon the world […] To be wiped out completely, traces and all, goes a long way toward destroying the meaning of one’s life’ (582). For many theists, this intuition grounds the thought that a meaningful life requires immortality, and therefore possession of a soul.

Some philosophers have responded that for our lives to leave infinite traces, we need not be immortal, and, moreover, that immortality does not require that we possess an immortal soul (Metz 2007a). We might leave traces that persist indefinitely by having our achievements recalled, or through an unbroken succession of descendants; we might achieve personal immortality by uploading our minds onto computers. In neither case does satisfying the wish for persistence require the truth of any religion. However, as Craig (2000) has pointed out, these...
solutions seem to fail, because they merely delay the disappearance of the traces we leave. The universe itself will one day undergo heat death, and the last traces of our existence will have vanished aeons prior to that. If the physical world is all the world there is, then the demand for indefinite persistence cannot be satisfied.

It should be asked, however, whether indefinite persistence is required for meaningfulness. We noted above that there seemed no need to embark on an infinite regress with regard to meaningfulness, because meaning (for all anyone has shown) may be derived from promoting naturally respectable intrinsically valuable goods. Similar considerations apply here: why should the fact that the people I aid (for instance) will one day pass away affect the value of the fact that I make their lives go better? The fact that someone suffered isn’t somehow compensated for by the fact of their subsequent death; why should meaning be different?

Just as the plan argument has been turned against its proponents by thinkers who argue that serving in God’s plan would be degrading or infantilizing, so the immortality argument has been turned against its proponents. The standard argument, stemming originally from Williams (1973), is that immortality would be boring. Eventually, one would have done everything, seen everything, experienced everything, and would seek death rather than a continuation of the tedium. Metz (2002; 2007b) claims that the objection misses its target, because boredom is compatible with meaningfulness. He gives the example of the person who consents to be bored so that others will not be. Might this be meaning-conferring? It seems that it cannot be, not, at least, forever. The knowledge of one’s sacrifice might give one a warm glow, but it seems implausible that this glow would last forever.

Objections to the claim that immortality must be boring have focused on the range of activities one could engage in, and the psychological attributes of real agents that could sustain one’s interest (e.g. Bortolotti and Nagasawa 2009). Attention to the psychological attributes of agents, however, suggests a different objection to the claim that one can achieve meaningfulness by personal immortality. An indefinitely persisting agent, at least one who resembles actual persons of our acquaintance, would gradually alter in its psychological properties, such that – at least on many accounts of personal identity – later stages of the organism would not be identical to earlier stages. On a psychological account of personal identity, later stages of the agent would be continuous with, but not identical to, earlier stages. Of course there are rival accounts of personal identity, on which (for instance) continuity of organism is sufficient for personal identity (Olson 1997). The supernaturalist might adapt such an account of personal identity to their needs. However, it is far from clear that we can derive meaning from persistence of identity so conceived.

Suppose we have immortal souls, and as a consequence we persist indefinitely. Most commentators agree that this fact is not sufficient by itself to confer meaning on us. Rather, immortality is felt to be a necessary condition of meaning because it ensures that we do not act in vain: the traces of our good works and achievements persist indefinitely. But if later stages of agents fail to recall these works, it is hard to see how they contribute to the meaningfulness of that agent’s life. It might be replied that I need not recall my good works to derive meaning from them: it is sufficient that I perform them and that their effects persist indefinitely for me to derive meaning from them. But similar considerations apply to my deeds as to my (psychological) identity: given enough time, any contribution I make, no matter how great, seems destined to be washed away.

Of course it is open to the supernaturalist to claim that the kinds of processes that would wash away our memories and other psychological properties, and all traces of our achievements, here on Earth cannot be expected to function in the same way in eternity. This suggestion seems to face a dilemma. Either the afterlife contains many and varied activities or it does not. If
it does, then it seems likely that engagement in these activities will lay down new memories and experience, and the objection just sketched remains a strong one. If it does not, and the person spends eternity reflecting on what they have done in the past, the boredom argument becomes all the more pressing. Properly evaluating the suggestion would require much more development of the conditions that theists take to prevail in the afterlife.

The objectivity argument

A meaningful life, it is widely and plausibly held, instantiates genuine values – whether these are moral or aesthetic values, or the meaning-conferring values identified by Wolf (2010), which are allegedly irreducible to moral and aesthetic values. Many theists argue that these objective values depend for their reality on the existence of God; therefore meaningfulness requires that God exists. This is more often asserted than argued; here I shall focus on Cottingham’s (2005) recent expression of the claim, which has the virtue of being accompanied by an argument.

Cottingham’s thought is this: If naturalism is true, then human values are contingent. Suppose, for instance, that values are to be identified with our idealized dispositions, and that these dispositions are the product of an entirely naturalistic evolution. In that case, ultimately, our values are ‘determined by a kind of genetic roulette’ (ibid. 53). Had the course of evolution unfolded differently, we would have had very different dispositions and therefore different values. The realization of this contingency in our values Cottingham takes to undermine their objectivity.

Though Cottingham does not refer to this literature, the objection he sketches here is actually one that has received a great deal of attention from naturalistic philosophers. A number of philosophers have argued that if evolution is the best explanation of the content of our moral claims, then these claims cannot be objective, in something like Cottingham’s sense of ‘objective’. These philosophers differ from Cottingham in that they are thoroughgoing naturalists; hence they reject the objectivity of ethics in favour of an evolutionary expressivism. Evolutionary expressivists conclude that moral judgments do not really state claims about the world outside us at all. Instead, they express our feelings, our evolved sentiments (Ruse 1998; Waller 1996, 1997). Something like this argument has been advanced most powerfully by Sharon Street (2006), and it is her version of the argument to which I will direct my remarks.

Like Cottingham, Street bases her argument on the plausible claim that evolution is a highly contingent process, such that under different conditions we would have come to have a different set of values from those we actually espouse. Naturalists have often responded to arguments like this by claiming that moral facts are, or supervene upon, perfectly ordinary natural facts, and since the latter facts are objective so are the former. Against this move, Street presses an equally familiar objection. Suppose (for instance) the realist advances a reductive account according to which moral facts are identical to the set of natural properties N. But, Street says, had evolution unfolded differently, the set of moral facts, M, would have been identical to properties N*; if we have evolved to respond to N* and not N. This is not realism at all, Street says, because it makes the M = N* identity dependent on our responses. Street takes the bare conceptual possibility that in other possible worlds moral systems that conflict with ours might have developed to be sufficient to show that moral realism is false. Hence, the truth of evolution entails that moral claims are not objective.4

As Street recognizes, however, there is a realist reply available: identify the moral facts with the facts that are actually picked out by our responses. That is, the naturalist can advance a rigidified response-dependent realism. On a response-dependent construal, the extension of moral concepts is determined by the responses of competent users of those concepts. Response-dependence can
yield a relativism: if different sets of responses determine different concepts. But a rigidified response-dependence identifies the extension of the relevant concepts with the responses of actual agents, yielding an analysis something along the following lines:

X is morally good if X is disposed to produce a sentiment of moral approbation in normal human beings as they actually are.

Of course, as it stands this analysis is clearly inadequate: normal humans as they actually are are notoriously unreliable moral judges. Defenders of rigidified response-dependence therefore idealize normal human agents in various ways. Thus, moral concepts are taken to refer to whatever actions or states of affairs arouse appropriate responses in actual human beings under ideal conditions. I won’t say much here about what kind of conditions are ideal, except this: there ought to be a consistency requirement of some sort on moral judgments.

Now rigidified response-dependence apparently yields objective moral concepts. Though on this view there is some degree of mind-dependence – moral concepts are relativized to the responses of idealized human beings – the reference of moral terms is fixed across all possible worlds, whether or not there are minds like ours in those worlds. Suppose, then, that evolution had taken a different turn, and we had evolved to use moral language differently. Suppose beings evolved such that (even suitably idealized) they were disposed to apply the word ‘good’ or its cognates, used in a distinctively moral sense, to actions that we are disposed to condemn as immoral (torturing babies for fun, or what have you). How should we respond to the (apparent) conceptual possibility of such beings? Given that we have rigidified moral concepts to actual human beings, we needn’t conclude that torturing babies is good, or even that it is good for these beings. What is good is what is picked out by our moral terms, not theirs. The objectivity, and the necessity, of moral concepts is thereby secured.

Street briefly considers and rejects this line of argument. She argues that it doesn’t count as genuinely realist, because ‘there is no robust sense’ in which our imagined aliens would be ‘making a mistake or missing anything’ if their evaluative attitudes tracked a different set of facts to those tracked by our responses (Street 2006: 138). We cannot claim that they are making a mistake, Street says, because the rigidifying move is as available to them as to us; we therefore have no better grounds for thinking that they have made a mistake than they have for thinking that we have made a mistake. And the upshot, she claims, is that we are not disagreeing with each other when we say that X-ing is good, and they say that X-ing is not good. This, she says, demonstrates that the rigidifying move does not support a genuine moral realism.

Street seems to me to be right in maintaining that when we append the word ‘good’ to an action to which our imagined counterparts append the word ‘bad’, we are not disagreeing with one another and neither of us is making a mistake. But I don’t see how it follows that a rigidified response-dependence does not yield a genuine moral realism. Street’s mistake, I think, is to generalize too quickly from a plausible constraint on realism, in the actual world, to a constraint that she thinks must hold across possible worlds.

The plausible actual world constraint is this: if moral realism is true, then when two users of moral language conflict in their utterances (and their apparent disagreement cannot be explained away), at least one of them is wrong. Denial of this constraint straightforwardly yields relativism, which is widely taken to be incompatible with realism. But it doesn’t follow, from this constraint, that moral realism is incompatible with cross-world conflicts in the concepts picked out by moral terms of the kind envisaged.

Consider the analogous conflict with colour terms. Here on Earth we use ‘red’ to refer to a certain property of objects, such that objects with that property cause normal observers in
normal conditions to judge that those objects are red. On twin-Earth, our counterparts might use ‘red’ to refer to a property of objects such that objects with that property would cause (actual) normal observers in normal conditions to judge that those objects are green. Clearly, the denizens of twin-Earth are not making a mistake or missing anything when they say that green objects are ‘red’; just as clearly, when we say that green objects are ‘green’ we are not disagreeing with them. We are simply using different terms to refer to the same properties of objects: we have different concepts. Why should we not say the same about our moral concepts?

The reason why the constraint on actual world moral conflict holds is that it is false that we are using different concepts here on Earth. But it’s not obvious that when there is apparent conflict in judgments across worlds, we cannot explain away the conflict simply by holding that we have different concepts. Of course, if we just say that we have different moral concepts, we give the game away: Street wins. But we have another option: we can deny that twin-Earthlings have moral concepts at all. When the differences between our use of evaluative language and theirs are so extensive, we are not disagreeing about the extension of the same concepts. Twin-Earthlings may have a pro-attitude toward baby-torturing, but this doesn’t suffice to show that for them baby-torturing is morally good. They might even have practices of condemning and punishing non-baby torturers, and rewarding baby-torturers; we still should refuse to call their practices and concepts moral.\(^5\)

Since there are, after all, accounts of moral concepts that preserve their objectivity without countenancing any non-natural properties, I conclude that the objectivity argument fails. At very least, proponents of the argument owe us a great deal more argument before we conclude that non-naturalism must be true if moral objectivity is to be salvaged.

**Conclusion**

In this chapter, I have briefly examined three arguments designed to show that meaning in life requires the existence of God, perhaps coupled with the appropriate attitude toward Him. I have argued that none of these arguments is strong. Participation in God’s plan can as plausibly be seen to be infantilizing as to be meaning-conferring, I suggested. The desire that some people experience to have the traces of their achievements persist indefinitely cannot be satisfied, regardless of God’s existence, I argued. And there is no reason to think that the objectivity of morality requires the truth of a non-naturalistic account of moral concepts. I have not attempted to advance a naturalistic account of meaningfulness. So far as I can tell, however, extant naturalistic accounts remain plausible contenders; at any rate, I see no reason to think they will fare worse than supernaturalism.

**Notes**

1. Metz (2007a, 2007b) argues that on a God-centred account of life’s meaning, a meaningful life requires ‘a certain relationship with a spiritual realm’; that is, the truth of religious claims and acceptance of those claims are jointly necessary for meaning. I think this is a mistaken reading of the claims of some proponents of God-centred views. If the central reason why meaning requires God is (for instance) that only God can underwrite objective moral values (Cottingham 2005), then the truth of religion, coupled with a commitment to the furtherance of moral values, might be sufficient to confer meaning on an individual’s life.

2. Metz (2000) argues that a plan theory should hold that it is God’s perfections, for example His simplicity, atemporality, and infinitude which confer meaning on human life, but that these properties are incompatible with God’s having purposes because having a purpose entails mutability and temporality. Metz’s argument for the claim that meaningfulness is conferred by God’s perfections depends on his excessively thin conception of the plan argument. On his conception of the argument, it is simply by
orienting ourselves toward God that we acquire meaning. I do not think that this well captures the intuition of theists, who instead see meaning as arising from our playing a role in God’s plans for the universe, where God’s plan is a contentful blueprint or design (involving, say, the establishment of the kingdom of heaven on Earth, or the conversion of nonbelievers).

3 Similar considerations seem to apply to an independent argument for the requirement that there be a divine plan for life to be meaningful. According to this argument, which Metz (2007b) claims is as old as Ecclesiastes, a world in which the good go unrewarded and the bad unpunished is absurd. Metz considers this an argument for the need for an immortal soul, but it is better thought of as an argument for a divine plan which includes the setting right of wrongs. In any case, while it is clear that a world in which justice is done would be a better world than one in which it is not, it is obscure why all lives lack meaning if some injustices go uncorrected. Why should we not live meaningful lives by working towards justice, for instance?

4 It is worth remarking that Street’s Darwinian dilemma aims to demonstrate that there is no tenable moral realism, naturalistic or non-naturalistic. Street argues that non-naturalism lacks a coherent moral epistemology: either it must claim that we cannot know the content of moral facts, or it must admit that our access to this content is mediated by our evolved dispositions. The first option is obviously unacceptable, but the second is less parsimonious than the rival hypothesis that our evolved dispositions constitute – rather than merely allow us to discover – the content of moral facts. Thus the theist cannot comfortably appeal to Street’s claims to motivate the objectivity argument.

5 It might be noted that the claims advanced here commit me to disagreeing with Horgan and Timmons’ (1992) influential argument against moral realism. They argue that new-wave moral realisms, of the kind advanced by Boyd (1988) and which model their defence of moral realism on a causal theory of reference, fail because the inhabitants of possible worlds in which (apparently) moral language is causally regulated by properties quite different from those that causally regulate such claims around here would be disagreeing with us when they claimed that (say) ‘X-ing is wrong’, where ‘X-ing’ is some action that we regard as permissible or obligatory. The fact of such disagreement they take to show that moral facts cannot be identical to the natural facts supposed to be causally regulating such claims. If this argument succeeds, then a rigidified response-dependent account of moral concepts will fail. Elsewhere (Levy 2011), I argue that their argument fails, for reasons similar to those appealed to here. Depending upon how the thought experiment is fleshed out, I claim, either the inhabitants of other possible worlds agree with us in their (only) apparently conflicting moral claims, or fail to disagree with us because they are not using moral concepts at all.