

Theism and the Metaphysics of Meaning and Value

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To believe in God is to affirm that at the heart of things, as the most real thing in the world, is a love and a purpose to which persons and personal relationships are, so far, the highest response. This is the way the grain of the universe runs. —J. A. T. Robinson¹

Introduction

What does it take for something, anything, to have meaning or value?² I endorse two theses about meaning and value, originally proposed by Thomas V. Morris, that shed considerable light on this question. I begin by highlighting certain facts about the nature of meaning and value which help to explain the rationale behind the two theses. The first fact is that, as properties,³ the instantiation of meaning and value depends on intentional agents. The second is that, as dependent on such agents, meaning and value are relational properties. These facts are captured by *The Endowment Thesis*: something has meaning or value iff it is endowed meaning or value by one or more agents. Despite entailing that meaning and value depend on agents, I show that *The Endowment Thesis* does not lapse into subjectivism about meaning and value. In so doing, *The Control Thesis* is introduced: agents can endow with meaning and value only those things over which they

¹ Bernard Williams and J. A. T. Robinson, “Has ‘God’ a Meaning?—A Discussion” in Paul Edwards (ed.), *A Modern Introduction to Philosophy* (Free Press, 3rd ed. 1973), 544.

² My purpose in this paper is not to offer definitions of either meaning or value. Many value theorists are skeptical about whether a concept like value can be satisfactorily defined. E.g., Ramon Lemos notes that even though some concepts might be “indefinable in the strictest sense of the term ‘definition,’ according to which a definition states the essence of the object being defined,” he rightly adds that from this “it does not follow that we do not know the meaning of a given indefinable term, that we do not have the concept it expresses, or that we do not know the essence of the object of the concept.” See *The Nature of Value: Axiological Investigations* (University Press of Florida, 1995), 66-67. Similarly, G. E. Moore held that many value concepts such as ‘good’ are “incapable of any definition.” But these observations have not prevented philosophers from making valuable contributions to value theory or meaningful insights about the nature of meaning. This is because it is not necessary to know the precise nature of a thing before we can know things about its nature. This is the key insight behind what Moore calls “the naturalistic fallacy.” He writes: “Ethics aims at discovering what are those other properties belonging to all things which are good. But far too many philosophers have thought that when they named those other properties they were actually defining good; that these properties, in fact, were not simply ‘other’, but absolutely and entirely the same with goodness. This view I propose to call the ‘naturalistic fallacy.’” *Principia Ethica* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1968), 10.

³ I will assume that meaning and value are properties an object can have. E.g., *being valuable* or *meaningful* are properties, as well as *having value* and *meaning*. Sharp distinctions can be drawn between meaning and value, but the following observations are intended to apply to both unless specified.

have the requisite control.

I then apply the conclusions reached with respect to the first question, namely, the two theses, to a second question: what does it take for life, or even *God*, to have meaning or value? Three conclusions follow. The first supports the claim, made by many theists, that God is necessary for life to have objective meaning or value. The second poses a serious difficulty for unitarian theisms which maintain that God, as a single person, is the locus of meaning or value. The third combines the previous two and concludes that a non-unitarian conception of God is necessary for life to have objective meaning or value. I therefore conclude that if either God or life have meaning or value, then unitarian theisms are false.

1. The Nature of Meaning and Value

1.1. Meaning and Value as Agent-Based

One finds in the literature on meaning and value almost unanimous agreement that meaning and value are conceptually tied, in some way, to intentional agents.⁴ As prominent axiologist Gerald Gaus notes, “Given the deep cleavages among value theorists on most issues, it is perhaps surprising to discover widespread agreement that only entities capable of feelings, emotions, affective response, and so forth, could develop value concepts.”⁵ Nicholas Rescher agrees, insisting that with the emergence of intelligent beings, “purposeful action and rational evaluation came to be possible in a heretofore purposeless and value-free cosmos. Intelligent life can and does have a meaning because value emerges with the emergence of intelligence.”⁶ E. D. Klemke vividly articulates this point as follows:

For as long as I am *conscious*, I shall have the capacity with which to *endow* events, objects, persons, and achievements with value. Ultimately, it is through my *consciousness* and it alone that worth and value are obtained. Through consciousness, the scraping of horses’ tails on cats’ bowels ... become beautiful and melodic lines of a Beethoven string quartet. Through consciousness, a pile of rock can become the memorable Mount Alten which one has climbed and upon

⁴ By “intentional agent” or “agent” for short, I mean any being that can have intentional states, consciousness being a necessary condition. The contention most philosophers have focused on is what *aspect* of agents (desires, the will, needs, etc.) is meaning and value primarily related.

⁵ Gerald F. Gaus, *Value and Justification* (New York: Cambridge University Press), 81.

⁶ Nicholas Rescher, *Human Interests* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 1990), 162.

which one almost perished. Through consciousness, the arrangement of *Ps* and *Qs* on paper can become the symbols of the formal beauty and certain truth of the realm of mathematical logic.⁷

In other words, a world without agents would just *be*. “[A]part from ourselves,” observes George Santayana, “we can see in ... a mechanical world no element of value whatever. In removing consciousness, we have removed the possibility of worth... [and] all value and excellence would be gone.”⁸ Thus, it is not unreasonable to believe, as many philosophers do, that any view which says meaning and value can exist apart from agents “simply cannot be swallowed.”⁹

1.2. Meaning and Value as Endowed by Agents

That meaning and value depend on agents is clear, but *how* this relationship works is perhaps less clear. Here most philosophers speak of meaning and value as being ‘endowed,’ ‘imparted,’ ‘conferred,’ ‘bestowed,’ ‘infused,’ ‘imbued,’ ‘imposed,’ etc. by agents.¹⁰ Robert Nozick covers all bases, classifying these and similar intentional verbs as “V verbs,” for “valuing verbs,” then proceeds to talk broadly about “V-ing value.”¹¹ I think there is something to this sentiment. But what *exactly* is meant by it? In exploring this question, hereafter I will use the term ‘endow’ to inclusively refer to this V-ing of

⁷ E. D. Klemke, “Living Without Appeal: An Affirmative Philosophy of Life,” in E. D. Klemke (ed.), *The Meaning of Life* (New York: 2nd ed. Oxford University Press, 2000), 196.

⁸ Quoted in Gaus, *Value and Justification*, 82.

⁹ E. J. Bond, *Reason and Value* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1983), 85.

¹⁰ E.g., Rescher, “We can *endow* life with meaning and value in the course of proceeding on the supposition that these things belong there,” in *Human Interests*, 164. Robert Edgar Carter, “Persons are the *source* and *fountain* of intrinsic value, and may *confer* intrinsic value on anything. In this conference with others or other things—this dialogue between self and object, or valuer and valued lies the essence of intrinsic valuation.” See his “Intrinsic Value and the Intrinsic Valuer,” *Philosophy and Phenomenological Research* 34/4 (1974): 514. More impressively, in Klemke’s anthology on the meaning of life, despite the diversity of approaches to the question, nearly every contributor uses intentional language in their analyses of meaning and value. Hazel Barnes says consciousness ‘creates’ and ‘imposes’ meanings on being (165-166). Richard Taylor thinks issues of meaning presuppose ‘our own wills’ as ‘bestowing’ meaning (173-175). Thomas Nagel says that only beings with the capacity of self-consciousness can ‘confer’ meaning (180). E. D. Klemke says we ‘impose’ values upon the universe, and meaning is ‘endowed’ by agency (193, 195). Owen Flanagan comments that meaning must be ‘derived’ and worth is ‘conferred’ (199). Kai Neilson quotes with approval A. J. Ayer’s remarks about meaning being ‘given’ and ‘brought about’ by agents in situations (236, 239, 246; see also Neilson, 157; Ayer, 226). For R. W. Hepburn, meaning is ‘imparted’ by subjects. W. D. Joske and Robert Edgar Carter talk of value as ‘conferred’ and ‘derived’ by agents (262, 285, respectively). Examples can be multiplied *ad nauseam*.

¹¹ Robert Nozick, *Philosophical Explanations* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1981), 429.

meaning and value.

Although the precise mechanics of endowment is unclear, several things can be noted.¹² First, endowment seems to be kind of giving which can be expressed in a variety of activities.¹³ For example, we can give tangible things such as presents and service, and intangible things such as respect, favor, love, forgiveness, and attention. In all such cases, new properties are predicated of the objects to which they are given. When I give five dollars to a friend, they acquire a new property: *being five dollars richer*. Or in the case of an intangible, the property of *being loved* is predicated of one's wife when love is given her. This 'giving' or predicating of properties is what is loosely meant by "endow." Second, endowment can work in mereological relations. Individual things can have a property by virtue of being part of a whole which has been endowed that property, and wholes can have a property by virtue of being constituted by individual things which have been endowed that property. With respect to the former case, suppose I give respect to all Calvin College professors. Even though I have not met every Calvin College professor, *being respected* is predicated of each by virtue of being a member of the set of Calvin College professors. And the latter case, suppose I have met every Calvin College professor, and in turn give each my respect. The whole set of Calvin College professors is endowed respect in virtue of its constituents having been endowed that property. This second observation about endowment implies the third and final: endowment need not be understood *voluntaristically*. Something can be endowed meaning or value simply by standing in the appropriate relation.

Now we can state the first general thesis about meaning and value I wish to acknowledge. In his book *Making Sense of It All*, Thomas V. Morris writes, "To have meaning of any kind, a thing must be brought under the governance of some kind of purposive intention, whether an intention to refer, to express, to convey, or to operate in the production of some acknowledged value," and so proposes what he calls *The Endowment Thesis*: "Something has meaning if and only if it is endowed meaning or significance by a purposive personal agent or group of such agents."¹⁴ But in light of the

¹² We do not need to know *how* something can be the case before we are justified in believing that it is the case. Nevertheless, see the appendix for a possible exposition of the mechanics involved.

¹³ I am indebted to Tom Morris (personal communication, 1/18/2010) for this point.

¹⁴ Thomas V. Morris, *Making Sense of it All* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1992), 56. Morris thinks this is true for some value, but not value of any kind (personal communication). This is because he is "much more inclined to see certain values as intrinsic," but sees any property that is endowed as extrinsic. See

above considerations, what Morris proposes is true of meaning of any kind is also plausibly true of value of any kind. I therefore suggest a modified version of Morris's *Endowment Thesis*:

(ET) Something has meaning or value iff it is endowed meaning or value by one or more agents

1.3. Meaning and Value as Relational Properties

That meaning and value are essentially related to agents helps to explain a further fact about the nature of meaning and value: they are *relational properties*—properties which are such that if an object has one, that object stands in some relation to something else. (ET) makes it clear that meaning and value are not properties *per se*, but properties a thing has in relation to agents. Language provides a ready example of this. As Benjamin Wiker and Jonathan Witt explain, “Meaning doesn’t stand alone; it points to something else. A crucial implication of this is that meaning isn’t just a matter of letters accumulating into words. The backbone of language is the noun, and nouns are *about things*.”¹⁵ And where there is an *aboutness* relation, there is intentionality; and where there is intentionality, there is an agent. Similarly for value. As Donald Walhout explains, “values must exist in situations which ... are relational in character, involving on the one hand a valuing self or group which is responding to its creative impulses and, on the other hand, the objective realities which complete or fulfill these springs of valuation.”¹⁶ This is most obviously true of instrumental value, where a thing’s value is derived from standing between an agent and the accomplishment of some end. But it is also true of intrinsic value. For as M. Bernstein points out, in the absence of any relation, “we remain in the dark as to what makes the intrinsically valuable, valuable.”¹⁷ If, in the absence of any relation, we ask what it is about a thing that makes it intrinsically valuable, the answer cannot be in terms of the thing’s internal properties, as only a relation among

Making Sense of It All, 57. I try to show *The Endowment Thesis* is not only compatible with but necessary for intrinsic value below.

¹⁵ Benjamin Wiker and Jonathan Witt, *A meaningful World* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2006), 21.

¹⁶ D. Walhout, *The Good and the Realm of Values* (Notre Dame, IN: University of Notre Dame Press, 1978), 54. See also H. Parker, *The Philosophy of Value* (Ann Arbor, MI: University of Michigan Press, 1957), 9, 14-15, 26-27.

¹⁷ M. Bernstein, “Intrinsic Value,” *Philosophical Studies* 102/3 (2001): 334.

them would explain why no one property is the intrinsically valuable. But neither can it be in terms of anything external, as such would presuppose a relation. The intrinsically valuable is simply brute and inexplicable.¹⁸ Intrinsic value as “constituted independently of any relational properties,” Bernstein concludes, “leaves the nature of the intrinsically valuable mysterious.”¹⁹ Meaning and value are therefore best seen as relational properties.

But what exactly are relational properties? Lynne Rudder Baker²⁰ broadly characterizes a relational property thus:

(RP1) p is a relational property =_{DEF} iff x 's having p entails that there is some y distinct from x

where ‘distinct’ minimally means ‘non-identical.’ Examples of relational properties include *being counterfeit*, *having tenure*, *being taller than*, and *being a husband*. We could add *having value* or *meaning* or *being valuable* or *meaningful*. To introduce a

¹⁸ We could add that value does not seem *prima facie* to be a candidate for bruteness. A thing is *prima facie* brute if something about its nature suggests it is its own explanation or is in need of no further explanation (e.g., unanalyzable concepts, certain necessary beings). But nothing about the nature of value seems to suggest this. Moreover, “claiming something to be a brute fact should be a last resort. It would undercut the practice of science [and, in my view, much of philosophy] were things claimed to be brute facts where not implausible putative explanations, propositions that would be explanations were they true, can be formulated.” See Alexander Pruss, *The Principle of Sufficient Reason* (New York: Cambridge, 2006), 255. Hence, we should not claim value is brute because there *is* available to us a plausible putative explanation for there being meaning or value of any kind—*The Endowment Thesis*. Therefore, in the absence of reasons for why (ET) is gratuitous or misguided, claiming value is brute is not only *prima facie* unjustified, it smacks of what Pruss has elsewhere called ‘the taxi-cab fallacy’: arbitrarily dismissing a request for explanation (like a cab) once one wants to go no further. See Richard Gale and Alexander Pruss, “A New Cosmological Argument,” *Religious Studies* 35 (1999): 470.

¹⁹ Bernstein, “Intrinsic Value,” 337. Rather than identify intrinsic value as anything valuable “in and of itself,” which suggests the absence of any relation, intrinsic value can be identified as anything valuable “as an end” or “for its own sake.” On this account, the way we distinguish between objects with instrumental value versus intrinsic value is that the former are valuable as a *means* whereas the latter are valuable as *ends*. Understood this way, intrinsic value is not “valued *for* some other end, although, as an end, it is a value *to* someone... whose end it is,” (idem., 330) and so is consistent with seeing value as both agent-based and relational. In fact, it has been quite standard to view intrinsic value as grounded in relational properties since G. E. Moore’s influential paper, “The Conception of Intrinsic Value,” where intrinsic value is defined as consisting in a thing’s internal properties. This led to the now celebrated Principle of Organic Unities, which Moore defended in *Principia Ethica*. Even more extreme is Shelly Kagen’s powerful defense of intrinsic value as existing in *external* relations. See his “Rethinking Intrinsic Value,” *The Journal of Ethics* 2 (1998): 277-287.

²⁰ Lynne Rudder Baker, *Explaining Attitudes* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1995), 63.

crucial detail about relational properties, consider a possible world W in which some object x is the sole inhabitant. Jaegwon Kim affectionately calls these sole inhabitants of possible worlds “lonely objects,” or objects that have no wholly distinct worldmates.²¹ Now, where p is some relational property, can

(1) There is a possible world W in which x has p

be true? Or is it possible for some lonely object x to have some relational property p ? One might conclude that this is not possible because if x is the only object in W , there is no y distinct from x . However, this hastily assumes that for there to be some y distinct from x , x and y must be *wholly distinct*, or separate *in esse*. But as Brian Weatherson points out, “two objects are only ‘wholly distinct’ if they have no parts in common, not if they are merely non-identical. The idea is that a lonely object could have proper parts.”²² For example, imagine a lonely scalene triangle. The triangle as a whole has certain relational properties in virtue of its distinct angles, not because of anything wholly distinct from it. Of course, some lonely object x cannot have some relational property p if x 's having p entails that there is some y *wholly* distinct from x . So our lonely scalene triangle cannot have the relational property *having a larger area than y* in W because there is no y wholly distinct from x with which to compare geometric properties. But supposing x has proper parts, nothing forbids x from having p by virtue of some proper part y ; that is to say, a lonely object with proper parts can have properties by virtue of (or in relation to) one or more of its parts *and vice versa*. Consider once more the lonely scalene triangle. On the one hand, the triangle as a whole has the property of being three-angled. On the other, each distinct angle has not only unique properties by virtue of their relation to the others, but they all have the property of being an angle of a certain scalene triangle. We can understand relational properties of lonely objects as follows:

(RP2) p is a relational property of a lonely object $x =_{\text{DEF}}$ iff for any x in any W , if x has p in W , then there is at least one y in W such that y is distinct (but not wholly distinct) from x

²¹ Jaegwon Kim, “Psychophysical Supervenience,” *Philosophical Studies* 41 (1982): 51-70.

²² Brian Weatherson, “Intrinsic vs. Extrinsic Properties,” (2006) in the *Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy*.

Finally, where p is meaning or value and x is a lonely object, the combination of (ET) and (RP2) yields

(ET+RP2) For any world W and lonely object x , x has p in W iff there is at least one agent y distinct (but not wholly distinct) from x in W such that y endows x with p

1.4. A Restriction on Endowment

Can agents endow just anything any meaning and value whatever? If so, would this not imply a “subjectivism of the most objectionable sort,”²³ where meaning and value is subject to the whims of agents? While (ET) might at first seem to have such an implication, it does not. What (ET) states is a necessary and sufficient condition for the *instantiation* of meaning and value. Just as the instantiation of color properties, such as *redness*, is often thought to depend on perceivers, the instantiation of meaning and value depends on endowers.²⁴ Dewitt Parker captures this idea nicely when he says that where there are no agents, “value is, in Aristotelian language, merely potential, not actual... value is, to be sure, out there, but only because the self ... is also out there.”²⁵

However, there is another, more interesting sense in which meaning and value are not subject to the whims of agents. Take the meaning of words in a language or the value of some currency, for example. Surely the meaning and value of these things are endowed by agents, yet one cannot endow new meaning to all the words in the Chinese language or increase the value of the currency in one’s bank account. Here meaning and

²³ Gaus, *Value and Justification*, 149.

²⁴ Philosophers in this area are quite fond of this color analogy. A good discussion of the color analogy and its supporters can be found in *ibid.*, 146-153. E.g., Red things, says David Wiggins “count as red only because there actually exists a perceptual apparatus (e.g., our own) which discriminates, and learns on the direct basis of experience to group together, all and only the *de facto* red things.” Yet *redness*, Wiggins explains, “is in one interesting sense a *relative* property. For the category... corresponds to an interest which can only take root in creatures with something approaching our own sensory apparatus.” (quoted in *ibid.*, 147). In fact, analogies for this kind of objective-yet-mind-dependent relationship abound. Robert Nozick has his own: “[V]alues are inert; they can have no effect in the world without seekers of and responders to value, who give them effect and realize them. In the language of chemistry, we are value reagents. Thus, value seekers and responders have a cosmic role: to aid in the realization of value, in the infusion of value into the material and human realm.” See *Philosophical Explanations*, 519. Perhaps another analogy is the common but crude way of understanding the anthropic principle in physics—our role as observers acts as a sort of selection-effect for the fundamental constants of the universe.

²⁵ Parker, *The Philosophy of Value*, 6, 27.

value are what John Searle calls *institutional realities* or *facts*. “In such cases, the existence of [an] institution enables individuals or groups of individuals to impose on objects functions that the objects cannot perform in virtue of their physical structure alone, but only in the collective recognition of the object as having a certain status...”²⁶ That status, according to the foregoing analysis, can be having *objective* meaning or value. Nicholas Resher also puts his finger on this:

Value—in this conception—is relational (in viewing the value of an object as something that arises from the nature of its interactions with people, or perhaps intelligent beings generally) but objective (since evaluation is, in general, based on objectively establishable and interpersonally operative standards)...The existence of man and the nature of the conditions requisite to his well-being and welfare—and thus the characteristics of the humanly beneficial—are, after all, genuine *facts* about the world.²⁷

Once these “objectively establishable and interpersonally operative standards” are in place, agents cease to have sufficient endowing control over the meaning and value status of objects within those standards. These observations effectively bring out the second thesis true of all meaning and value, also proposed by Morris²⁸—*The Control Thesis*:

(CT) Agents can endow with meaning and value only those things over which they have the requisite control

2. Meaning, Value, and Theism

2.1. The Meaning and Value of Life

If (ET) is true, then life as a whole has no meaning or value unless endowed by one or more agents. By ‘life as a whole,’ I mean the grand scheme of things, ‘life, the universe, and everything,’ or capital ‘Life,’ for short. And if (CT) is true, only one or more agents with the requisite control could endow Life with meaning or value. *We*, however, are not agents with the requisite control. This is because, like institutional realities and facts, the ultimate circumstances of our lives are not within our individual

²⁶ John Searle, *Rationality in Action* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press), 56.

²⁷ Quoted in Walhout, *The Good and the Realm of Values*, 55. Italics in the original.

²⁸ Morris, *Making Sense of it All*, 59.

control. It was not within my control to be born in Cincinnati, Ohio. The sufferings we undergo are often not within our control, and neither are the conditions that eventuate in our earthly departure. But unlike institutional facts, the ultimate circumstances of our lives are not even within our collective control. “And if all this is outside our control,” observes Morris, “it is beyond the power of any of us to endow with meaning the entirety of life itself or the entirety of any of our own lives.”²⁹ This is why Klemke, an atheist, candidly says “objective meaning, if there were such, would be one which is...dependent upon some *external agency* other than human evaluation.”³⁰ Therefore, if Life has meaning or value, then there must be one or more agents with the requisite control to endow it meaning and value.

2.2. The Meaning and Value of a Lonely Object

We have seen that a lonely object with proper parts can have relational properties. But can a lonely object have meaning or value? To put it another way, supposing God refrained from any act of creation, could God, as a lonely object, have meaning or value? To see, we must begin with the following assumption. Where p is meaning or value and T is some lonely object:

(1') There is a possible world W in which T has p

Recalling that p is not just any relational property, but one specified by (ET+RP2), for T to have p there must be at least one agent, say, f , as a distinct (but not wholly distinct) constituent of T that endows T with p . It is a tautological implication of (ET) that

(2) Either just one agent endows T with p or more than one agent endows T with p

the question being which clause is true. Interestingly, we can immediately conclude that the antecedent clause of (2) is false because

²⁹ Ibid., 61.

³⁰ Klemke, “Living Without Appeal,” in Klemke (ed.), *The Meaning of Life*, 192, 195. In idem., Klemke (195), Ayer and Neilson (239), and Hepburn (263) express repulsion at the idea of objective meaning because they realize it would entail that meaning is outside of their control, implicitly endorsing *The Control Thesis*.

(3) Just one agent cannot endow T with p

would seem to be ruled out by (ET+RP2). For if f is the *only* constituent of T , f , as an *agent*, is not really distinct from T . T just *is* that agent— T and f are identical. Perhaps one could try to distinguish T from f by identifying T as a Cartesian substance and f its set of rational faculties, the locus of causal, endowing power. The question, then, is whether it is possible for a single agent, f , to endow the substance of which it is a part, T , with p ? Again, it is hard to see how there could be sufficient distinctness between f and T in order for the former to endow the latter p . If T is a Cartesian substance, then f *qua* T is identical to, not distinct from, a Cartesian substance. Furthermore, if the antecedent clause of (2) it is not ruled out by definition, it is ruled out by (CT). To see why, imagine *you* are the sole soul W . Could you endow yourself with p ? Certainly not, for as (CT) reminds us, it is “beyond the power of any of us to endow with meaning ... the entirety of any of our own lives.” Even if we think of God as the single Cartesian substance in W , the situation is not relevantly different. God’s omnipotence does not give him any more control over the ultimate circumstances of his existence, such as his necessity, than we have over the ultimate circumstances of our existence, such as our birth. So (3) follows from (ET+RP2) as well as from (CT).³¹ Therefore, if (1’) is granted, then

(4) More than one agent endows T with p

And now from (4) we can posit at least one more agent, say, s , as a constituent of T . Further, though sharing T in common, agents f and s would themselves be sufficiently distinct from one another, each standing in an I-thou relationship to the other. Agents f and s can then endow each other p .³² Remembering that wholes can be endowed

³¹ Consider one last possibility: Robert Nozick’s “bootstrapping operation.” Nozick flirts with the idea that having the characteristic of being a *potential* V-er of p is itself valuable. Perhaps this could explain how a lonely object could have p . See *Philosophical Explanations*, 520. Although Nozick is initially warm to the idea, he confesses to “feeling something is fishy” about it. The problem, I think, is that being a potential V-er of p is necessary but not sufficient for instantiating p . A potential V-er does not have p unless it is actually V-ed p , which is just to restate the problem explained above. Thus, Nozick’s bootstrapping operation doesn’t get very far.

³² How *The Control Thesis* applies to agents f and s here will depend on how one views the nature of their relationship, but two things seem clear. First, agents endow other agents meaning and value by virtue of being related to them in different ways (e.g., family, friend, and love relations). The values fostered within these various relationships, and sometimes the relationships themselves, are often within the

properties by virtue of being constituted by individuals which have those properties, we can say T as a whole is endowed p by virtue of f and s having p . Walhout illustrates how this works in a different context:

Objects which exist in certain relations to each other...can, when so related, sustain other relations to valuing subjects so that value exists in these latter relations...a group of persons may be so internally related as to define what we would call justice or fairness; but it is also true that the group, so related, has additional relations to each member, so that the justice-related group has value for each and for all. In other words, any group of beings or entities, already internally related within itself, can have other relations either to itself, to each member, or to different beings, such that value consists in one or another of these latter relations.³³

As entirely erected upon (ET+PR2) and (CT), the argument has no independent premises except the possibility premise, (1'), which all theists should accept. I therefore conclude that if (ET+PR2) and (CT) are true and God has p , then unitarian theisms are false. God, as a lonely object, is not so lonely, after all.

2.3. The Arguments Combined

Recall that the first argument stated that if Life has meaning or value, there must be one or more agents with the requisite control to endow Life with such. Most theists will insist that the only being that has the requisite control to endow Life meaning or value is God. But most theists will also insist that God is possibly the being in (1'), for he could have freely refrained from creation. But if the only being that has the requisite control to endow Life meaning or value is possibly the being in (1'), then the only being that has the requisite control to endow Life meaning or value must be constituted by more than one agent. Hence, if Life has meaning and value, it must have been endowed such by a being constituted by more than one agent.

Conclusion

requisite control of an agent. Second, given that personal agents should always value other personal agents as ends in themselves, the relationship between f and s would be sufficient for the exemplification of intrinsic value (see fn. 19).

³³ Walhout, *The Good and the Realm of Values*, 54-55.

We have seen that *The Endowment Thesis* and *The Control Thesis* were of considerable aid in elucidating the question of what it takes for something, or anything, to have meaning or value. We have also seen that three conclusions follow from applying these two theses to the question of what it takes for Life, or even God, to have meaning or value. Namely, that if Life has objective meaning or value, it must have been endowed such by one or more agents, the only possible way for a lonely object to have meaning or value is for it to be constituted by more than one agent, and if Life has objective meaning or value, it must have been endowed such by a being constituted by more than one agent. Therefore, if either God or Life have meaning or value, unitarian theisms are false.

One might notice that the list of non-unitarian theisms is not a very long one. Nevertheless, if one finds oneself attracted only to brands of theism that can account for how Life and God can have meaning or value, then it is on that list one should look.³⁴

³⁴ I have not intended to make clear how the insights of this paper apply to the doctrine of the Trinity. The major queries are (1) whether this account is consistent with divine simplicity, and (2) the modal status of meaning and value as divine properties. Regarding (1), the answer seems to be no. Regarding (2), three issues seem pressing: (i) the precise nature or scope of meaning and value as divine properties, (ii) the mode of having these divine properties, and (iii) whether such a mode affects their status being within agential control. Regarding (i), an interesting question would be whether value is a genus property containing moral and aesthetic properties as species. Regarding (ii), one could make use of the modal distinctions Thomas Morris makes in “Properties, Modalities, and God” to craft a coherent picture of how necessary properties can be conferred or endowed. E.g., Meaning and value seem to fit the description of what he calls “extrinsically stable properties,” or properties which are “endowed with stability by the effect of other properties had by their bearer or some other individual.” The example Morris discusses is the property of sinlessness (which, as a moral property, could be seen as falling under the value genus). He writes, “It is not obvious that sinlessness is stable for God in virtue of being essential to him... Our arguments seem to indicate that it can be viewed as a property whose stability is conferred on it by the nature of its bearer, or by other properties exemplified by its bearer... It seems rather to be endowed with stability by the other properties with which it is co-exemplified in the case of God.” See his *Anselmian Explorations* (Indiana: University of Notre Dame Press, 1987), 76-97. One could see meaning and value as supervenient on the Trinity by virtue of its agent-based relational nature (i.e., *perichoresis*). See also Swinburne’s discussion of metaphysically essential relational properties in *The Christian God* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1994), chs 7-8. Regarding (iii), Swinburne’s discussion of freedom, control, and necessary acts (e.g., moral acts, begetting, procession) could be illuminating. E.g., when Swinburne says that God’s freedom means “no causal factors over which he has no control act from without on God” (*The Coherence of Theism*, 148), could ‘without’ here be distinguished from ‘wholly without’ in a way similar to how ‘distinct’ is distinguished from ‘wholly distinct’ above?

*Thanks to Tom Morris, Kevin Corcoran, Stephen Wykstra, Cameron Gibbs, Dennis Jowers, and Dale Tuggy for their helpful comments on this paper.

Appendix:

1. The Mechanics of Endowment

The following possible explanation of how endowment could work is taken from “The Basic Structure of Intentionality, Action, and Meaning,” ch. 2 of John Searle, *Rationality in Action* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press), 33-60. My intention is not expositional, but skeletal. I therefore simply quote what I see as the most succinct and relevant passages for the application to be clear. The interested reader should consult Searle’s book for further details.

1.1. Conditions of Satisfaction

“A belief is satisfied if true, not satisfied if false. A desire will be satisfied if fulfilled, not satisfied if frustrated. An intention will be satisfied if carried out, not satisfied if not carried out” (37).

1.2. Directions of Fit

A *mind-to-world fit* is one where internal states, i.e., beliefs, represent the way the world is. “It is the task of the belief, as part of the mind, to represent or fit an independently existing reality, and it will succeed or fail depending on whether or not the content of the belief in the mind actually does fit the reality of the world” (37). A *world-to-mind fit* is one where internal states, i.e., desires, intentions, represent how we would like the world to be. “It is, so to speak, the task of the world to fit the desire” (37-38).

1.3. Intentional Causation

Intentional causation is where “an internal state [of an agent] either causes its conditions of satisfaction, or the conditions of satisfaction of an internal state cause it” (41).

1.4. Self-Referential Causality

Self-referential causality occurs “where it is part of the conditions of satisfaction of the intentional state in question that it must itself function causally in producing its conditions of satisfaction, if it is to be satisfied” (42). Examples are: perceptual experiences, memories, and intentions. Regarding the former most, “the experience will be satisfied only if the very state of affairs that is purportedly perceived causes that very perceptual experience” (43). And the lattermost, “intentions that are self-referentially caused are ones that world-to-mind direction of fit and mind-to-world direction of causation. That is just another way of saying that the intention is carried out only if the world comes to be the way the intention represents it, and the intention causes it to be that way” (46-47). In cases where intentions are self-referentially caused, “We achieve upward direction of fit only in virtue of downward direction of causation” (47).

2. Application

Endowment can be understood as a case of intentional causation and the endowment of meaning and value cases of self-referential causality. Searle's example of perceptual experience is exactly parallel to the color analogy. The instantiation of color properties, such as *redness*, depends on agents as perceivers, yet agents could not perceive *redness* if the world did not have the sufficient conditions of satisfaction (e.g., the spectra of light reflected off the surface of the object perceived must be about 650 *nm*, etc.). Analogously, the instantiation of meaning and value depends on agents as endowers, yet agents could not endow meaning and value in cases where the "world" resists conditions of satisfaction—namely, the conditions specified by *The Control Thesis*.