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ORIGINAL ARTICLE

# What if God was all of us? Why the definition of 'God' matters in analytic discussions of meaning in life

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## Abstract

Contemporary analytic treatments of meaning in life in the English-speaking Anglo-American-Australasian tradition have largely proceeded from the atheistic and naturalistic assumptions common to the sciences. With the recent publication of Seachris and Goetz's *God and Meaning* (2016), T. J. Mawson's *God and the Meanings of Life* (2016), and Thaddeus Metz's *God, Soul and the Meaning of Life* (2019), more analytic philosophers might be drawn to (re)examining what role, if any, God might play in life's meaning. But the focus tends to be on 'God' as understood in the Abrahamic faiths. Examining meaning in the light of another concept of God, familiar to billions of individuals in various Eastern religions and intellectual traditions, might offer useful insights. I have two principle aims in this article. First, I describe an ancient Indian concept of 'God', showing how it radically differs from the concept of God currently under examination by philosophers of meaning. Second, I offer a novel case for why and how this concept of 'God' could fruitfully contribute to analytic discussions on God's possible role in life's meaning.

**Keywords:** meaning in life; God; Advaita Vedānta; Indian philosophy; cosmopsychism

## Introduction

Contemporary analytic treatments of meaning in life in the English-speaking world have largely proceeded from the atheistic and naturalistic assumptions common to the sciences. But would it make a (meaningful) difference if God actually existed? Well, as this article demonstrates, it depends on what is meant by 'God'. With the recent publication of Seachris and Goetz's *God and Meaning* (2016), T. J. Mawson's *God and the Meanings of Life* (2016), and Thaddeus Metz's *God, Soul and the Meaning of Life* (2019), more analytic philosophers might be drawn to (re)examining what role, if any, God might play in life's meaning. This should be welcomed by those in the field of meaning in life, but it is not a trivial fact that the extant treatments of the issue generally limit their focus to an understanding of 'God' that is derived from the Abrahamic faiths. Broadening the discussion to include other salient concepts of 'God' might offer valuable insights.

I examine a concept of 'God' most clearly described in the *Advaita Vedānta*[1] school of Indian philosophy, and offer a preliminary case for the claim that those activities we apprehend as 'meaningful' are so in relation to how closely they bring us towards the goal of realizing (and eventually transcending) the cosmic meaning-making structure of

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this 'God'. My discussion will require introducing the field to the outlines of a Dharmic theory of meaning, a key part of which may be called 'meaning-as-remembering' – because, as I discuss, the 'God' of Advaita Vedānta is . . . *you*.

The concept of God found in Advaita Vedānta has been discussed in great depth in various schools of Eastern philosophy over the course of millennia, and is familiar to no less than billions of individuals. On this view, 'God' is *(Nirguna) Brahman*: the (attributeless) Absolute, the inscrutable ground of Being. Crucially, the world as we know it is Brahman manifested as *Ātman*: the all-pervading 'Self' common to all beings. In other words, Brahman is not ontologically distinct from the world – let alone any individual person, mistakenly apprehending him- or herself as an ontologically distinct entity. In short: *you* are Brahman, and the aim of Advaitic practice is to realize this.

I should clarify that although there are six major orthodox schools of Indian philosophy, I limit my discussion to Vedānta, and, more specifically, its most famous sub-school: Advaita Vedānta.[2] Note that I do not attempt to prove that Advaita Vedānta is true; instead, I aim only to show that the view is philosophically interesting in a manner that, I hope, will capture the attention of the field – even if only as an 'intuition pump' (see Dennett 2013).

I should further clarify my strategy here, and the overall aim of this article. For those analytic philosophers of meaning who are interested in exploring theistic approaches to meaning, a natural place to start their investigations would be at the intersection of the fields of meaning in life and the philosophy of religion. There, they will encounter the fascinating, bourgeoning discussion on the axiology of theism (which I draw upon here). But they will not yet find there the extraordinary Indian account of 'God' as Brahman; thus, what Indian philosophy can contribute to understanding life's meaning may continue to be overlooked. I hope this article will help end this long-standing neglect by analytic philosophers of meaning by laying the groundwork for understanding Brahman's possible impact upon their investigations. (For reasons of space, a more direct focus on Brahman's impact upon the axiology of theism discussion will be undertaken in future work.) This overall aim is important because, if one is interested in the possible role God could play in life's meaning, one really ought to pay close attention to how 'God' is defined.

This article is divided into three major sections. First, I discuss how God features in the analytic Anglo-American-Australasian literature on meaningfulness. Second, I discuss how 'God' is understood in the *non-dual/non-theistic* (as I defend it) philosophical system of Advaita Vedānta, appealing to contemporary trends in metaphysics (viz. Perennialism and cosmopsychism) to guide readers. Here, I advance the broad outlines of an underexplored[3] theory of meaning derived from Advaita Vedānta, which I shall call *the Dharmic theory of meaning*. Third, I suggest how views like Advaita Vedānta could advance analytic discussions of meaning in life by challenging certain long-standing assumptions.

## God in the contemporary meaning in life tradition

This section offers a brief overview of how God features in the analytic Anglo-American-Australasian literature on meaningfulness. I will assume that readers are familiar with the way 'meaning' (and related terms like 'meaningfulness' and 'meaning in life') is usually understood in the literature, namely as an ultimately non-instrumental value that is conceptually distinct from happiness or welfare in general.[4] Due to space constraints, I do not aim at a comprehensive overview, instead limiting myself here to a question that has recently gained attention at the intersection of the fields of philosophy of religion and meaning in life, namely the axiological question of how God's existence would or does matter.[5]

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Setting aside for now the esoteric religious traditions, 'God' in the exoteric Abrahamic faiths[6] is traditionally understood as the creator and sustainer of the universe – a perfect being with the classical divine attributes of omnipotence, omniscience, omnipresence, etc. Following the ontological argument offered by Anselm in the *Proslogion* (1077–1078), God in these faiths is most usually defined as 'that than which no greater can be thought'. To be clear, I am referring here to the God of 'classical' or 'traditional theology'. Analytic philosophers of meaning who are interested in how God might impact upon life's meaning are likely to encounter this understanding of God. Limitations of space prevent me from offering an in-depth exploration of this well-known understanding of God, but at least two aspects of it should be kept in mind for our purposes here.

First, it is, on the face of it, dualistic. While some sort of eventual communion with God may be possible, our flesh-bound relationship to Him is thought to be characterized by a fundamental ontological separateness.[7] Second, the divine attributes of omnipotence, etc. – and even the belief that He is perfect – are notably at odds with another very influential understanding of the Absolute, as I will discuss later.[8]

In approaching the aforementioned axiological question, it will be useful to begin by considering the divide between supernaturalists and naturalists.[9] Historically, the former believed that meaning requires something beyond the purely physical – namely, a meaning-conferring spiritual realm. The latter denied that the physical realm necessarily would lack meaning in this way – in other words, meaning still could be possible without the spiritual. Contemporary moderate supernaturalist positions offer a qualified view in which maximal meaning would not be possible without the spiritual (see Williams 2020). Their naturalist opponents, on the other hand, argue that the existence of the spiritual may detract from the meaning available to us (see, for example, Metz 2021). As I discuss shortly, such views can be further refined.

The question of whether we should *want* God to exist first gained serious analytic attention through the work of Guy Kahane (2011), with a refined taxonomy of possible positions on the goodness of God's existence, or non-existence, emerging in the work of Klaas J. Kraay.[10] I focus on the latter's taxonomy, using it to guide the discussion in the rest of the article. Kraay suggests that there are a number of[11] combinations of *existential* (i.e. positions on whether or not God exists) and axiological positions (i.e. views on what difference God's existence would or does make). Only four will concern us here: theistic pro-theism, atheistic pro-theism, theistic anti-theism, and atheistic pro-theism. I discuss these in turn, setting aside agnosticism, neutralism, and quietism.[12]

On the axiological axis, pro-theism is the view, roughly, that God's existence would make, or does make, things better than if He did not exist. And anti-theism is the view, roughly, that His existence would (or does) make things worse. Let us bring together the axiological and the existential, and consider rough definitions of the four combinations mentioned above:

(a) *theistic pro-theism*: God exists, and things are better for it.
(b) *atheistic pro-theism*: God does not exist, but things would be better if He did.
(c) *theistic anti-theism*: God exists, but things would be better if He did not.
(d) *atheistic anti-theism*: God does not exist, and things are better for it.

Kraay (2018, 2) briefly acknowledges that alternative concepts of God exist, but quite understandably designs this detailed taxonomy of the axiology of theism with 'the enormously influential and important' (Kraay 2018, 2) God of the exoteric Abraham traditions in mind. Let us grant him that those who favour this model of God can fit their views on the axiological question somewhere in this taxonomy. Analytic philosophers of religion and meaning may nevertheless find it interesting that the 'God' of one of the most

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influential non-Abrahamic traditions does not fit neatly into this taxonomy.[13] Specifically, Advaita Vedānta is a non-dual/non-theistic philosophy that nonetheless has immensely important things to offer vis-à-vis the axiological question, and thus the question of 'God's' possible role in life's meaningfulness. I attempt to introduce the field to this area of exploration in the next section by briefly discussing how 'God' is understood in Advaita Vedānta.

## 'God' in Advaita Vedānta

In this section, I discuss some salient aspects of how 'God' is understood in Advaita Vedānta. I cannot attempt a comprehensive overview, so I instead offer a summary of the aspects of the view that are most relevant to the present article. Further, I do not need to present a defence of the view here; I aim only to show that it is philosophically valuable to the field of meaning in life.

As mentioned, the Advaitin concept of 'God' – in contrast to the God of the exoteric Abrahamic traditions – is non-dual, and is arguably best understood as non-theistic. The central conclusion of Advaita Vedānta is that there is one[14] cosmological Absolute – *Brahman* (i.e. 'God', for our purposes) – and 'we' *are* 'It'. Understanding the full import of this for the field will also require a brief discussion of the *Dharma* – understood here as the intelligible, meaning-conferring cosmic moral order.

Advaita Vedānta can be viewed as a synthesis of various schools of classical Indian philosophy, including an adaptation of the cosmological framework of *Sāṃkhya* (Easwaran 1985, 21–30). 'Advaita' means 'non-dual', and 'Vedānta' can be understood as 'the end of the *Vedas*', the ancient Indian scriptures. Vedānta claims to offer the final word on (i.e. *ānta*: 'the final end of') the teachings of the philosophical component of these scriptures, the *Upaniṣads*. Advaita Vedānta is the non-dual interpretation of these teachings,[15] and is prominently associated with its heavily influential eighth-century CE synthesizer and promoter, Ādi Śaṅkara. It is 'non-dual' because it argues that even though we each experience the world from our distinct perspectives, we and *all* such perceivers are the *same* perceiver, *Ātman* ('Self'), encountering the world through manifold sites.[16] Further, this same Ātman *is* Brahman: the Absolute – namely, 'God'. This conclusion is encapsulated in the famous four 'Great Sayings' (*Mahāvākyas*) of the *Upaniṣads*, among them, '*tat tvam asi*': 'that thou art' – that is, *you* are Brahman.[17] Thus, the ultimate aim of the philosophy and practice of Advaita Vedānta is to realize oneself *as* Brahman.

Right away, there is a lot to unpack here. For one, there is of course the unintuitiveness of the view. Our ordinary experience is that of being distinct, embodied individuals, separate from others and the world in some axiomatic sense. Further, those of us with strong theistic orientations may experience a painful separateness from God, and a yearning to be reunited with Him. For the Advaitin, while such experiences and desires are understandable, it is ultimately the consequence of *avidyā*: ignorance of the ultimate nature of reality – that is, one's true nature *as* Brahman.

Indeed, ignorance is a vital concept for Advaita Vedānta: it is the key to breaking through the persistent illusion of both the experience of a 'self' and an external world of pluralities. Nature (*Prakṛti*), and one's individual sense of self in it,[18] should not be mistaken for the cosmic 'witness consciousness' (*Puruṣa*) of Brahman.[19] For the world is like the dream of Brahman, as I discuss shortly. In Advaita Vedānta, 'God' (Brahman) is at once the 'manifested' universe, and the 'Unmanifested' (*Avyakta*), transcendent Absolute. Once we sufficiently remove ignorance and begin to see through the grand cosmic conjuring (*Māyā*) of the world, or so the dialectic goes, we come to realize that the world is an illusory manifestation of our Real, transcendent Self.[20]

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Of course, it is still not clear from the above how the cosmology of Advaita Vedānta can get us to a conclusion about *God's* existence (let alone the axiological question of His goodness). That is to say, it is not clear how 'Brahman' can be understood as even roughly synonymous with the 'God' of the exoteric Abrahamic traditions, or – even if It could – how *we* (in our human forms) could gain any direction or comfort from this sort of 'God'. This subversion of theistic expectations is in fact one of the most notable aspects of Advaita Vedānta.

While the Abrahamic traditions may encourage seeking God's grace, say, to overcome the sufferings of life, and to ultimately bridge the distance between us and Him, no such strategy is available to the Advaitin; for him, self-effort is indispensable.[21] Though there may be myriad deities in exoteric Hinduism that the spiritual aspirant may focus on to better channel his efforts towards dispelling ignorance (as *avidyā*), even these deities eventually must be recognized as part of the grand illusion of the world of plurality. Even *Īshvara* – roughly, 'the personal aspect of the impersonal Brahman' (Sharma 1987, 280), and the only 'God' the limited human mind of even the as-yet-unenlightened Advaitin can apprehend – is yet another aspect of *Māyā*. The figure of the *Guru*, too – the enlightened dispeller of darkness (see Vasudev 2016, x) – can only guide the spiritual aspirant to the edge of awakening; he alone must make the leap.

But, the Advaitin counsels, this is not the bleak, forsaken conclusion it may initially seem, for we are not leaping into a nihilistic abyss; on the contrary, it is claimed that shedding our many layers of ignorance will move us towards the Ultimate source of meaning, and then the transcending of meaning itself, as we realize that meaning, too, is an illusory aspect of *Māyā*. To invoke a famous analogy: just as we awaken from sleep to discover that we were dreaming, awakening in the Advaitin sense is 'waking up' from the dream of this changing and ultimately unreal reality[22] (*Miṭhyā*) to realize that one *is* the cosmic dreamer, Brahman. I expand upon this specific movement of meaning in the next section. For now, it is important to remember that Advaita Vedānta appeals to the ancient idea of Dharma, which, recall, we will understand here as the intelligible, meaning-conferring cosmic moral order.

Brahman is ultimately without attributes (*Nirguna*), complete (*Purnam*),[23] and Unmanifested (*Avyakta*). Yet 'we' find ourselves in an ordered cosmos[24] – 'the dream of Brahman', as it were – that has attributes, broadly understood: space, time, physical laws, individual blades of grass, etc. To the Advaitin, this cosmos of plurality is 'in' Brahman. To say it with greater refinement, the ordered cosmos is Brahman in his manifested form.

The classical Indian philosophical term for this order was originally *Ṛta*, with Dharma later becoming more common.[25] The ancient Indian philosophers[26] advised that the Dharma is intelligible in ways that can be discovered – as the universe's physical laws, most conspicuously. But the deeper dimensions of its structure, they advised, must be apprehended using such subtle tools as deep meditative states. These philosophers came to believe that the Dharma has meaning-conferring, moral dimensions to it as well. And, they argued, it is through sufficiently respecting all dimensions of the Dharma that one can truly flourish as a human being. What is more, these philosophers came to believe that the universe had two fundamental aspects: order, as mentioned, and sacrifice (*yajna*) (Easwaran 2008, 121–122). Indeed, they cautioned that failures to make the proper sacrifices or to properly orient towards the cosmic order would worsen the sufferings of life.[27] Ancient Indian societies thus aimed to arrange themselves around the Dharma.[28]

I have said that the Dharma can be understood as the 'intelligible, meaning-conferring cosmic moral order'. I have said a little about the 'intelligible' aspect; let me now briefly differentiate the other elements of this definition. First, it should be reiterated that the

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philosophers of ancient India came to believe that this is not some randomly created cosmos with arbitrary laws into which we are thrown, as it were. Rather, it is a manifested realm – and a singular one at that. The bare fact that there *is* an apparent order to the cosmos was not taken for granted by them, nor was the fact that the cosmos appears to have a very specific order to it.

Second – moving on to those specifics – this order appeared to them to be a moral one: morality is woven into it, such that our moral judgements are correct insofar as they accurately reflect this moral dimension of the cosmos. To put it another way, we as human beings do not 'construct' morality. Rather, we can be said to come up against it in the world through our investigations and failings, etc., just as we might come up against the physical aspect of reality.

Third, as with morality, meaning is built into the very fabric of reality. The ancient Indian philosophers did not consider this universe to be indifferent, let alone hostile, to our efforts. According to their view, the meaning-conferring superstructure of the Dharma, as it were, saturates the cosmos with meaning: we are within a meaning substrate – one that both vivifies and responds to our efforts to seek meaning. To see the importance of this, contrast this universe, as just described, with one in which meaningfulness is never possible. Ours is not this Sisyphean hell.

I shall take up Dharma again in the next section, and draw out its implications for the analytic field of meaning in life. So far in the current section, I have been emphasizing big ontological questions from which the answers to big theological questions cannot be straightforwardly derived. It is not self-evident what theistic conclusions can be drawn from a non-dualist ontology. Consider, for example, the fact that panpsychism need not imply pantheism (see Nagasawa 2020). Thus, to better understand the move from the ontological (non-dualism) to the theological (non-theism) in Advaita Vedānta, let us now look directly at some similar theological categories, and thereby draw out the uniqueness of the Advaitin view of 'God'.

If *pantheism* is the view that the universe *is* God, and if *panentheism* is the view that the universe is God, and that He transcends the universe, Advaita Vedānta is the view that Brahman ('God') is both the universe and That which transcends it – *and we are That*. In other words:

*Pantheism*: *All* is God.
*Panentheism*: The world is *in* God.
*Advaita Vedānta*: The world is *in* Brahman, and we *are* Brahman.[29]

The bridge, as it were, between the ontological and the theological here is *consciousness*, for Brahman is *Pure Consciousness*. As a knowledge-based path (*Jñāna yoga*),[30] Advaita Vedānta prioritizes philosophical reflection over the other classical paths.[31] Chiefly, it urges us to look deeper at how consciousness works. As an ancient answer to the modern question of the 'hard problem' of consciousness (see Chalmers 1995), it argues that reality is 'in' the cosmic consciousness (i.e. Brahman). The world – including our experiences as individual selves – is 'in' the Pure Consciousness of Brahman, and Consciousness alone is Real. Here, Advaita Vedānta is in fact significantly similar[32] to a contemporary view – and a non-religious one, at that: cosmopsychism. If panpsychism is the 'bottom-up' view that everything is constitutive of consciousness, then cosmopsychism is the 'top-down' view that everything *is* consciousness.[33]

I conclude this section by saying a little more about the value of these ideas. Cosmogonal and cosmological views similar to Advaita Vedānta have emerged across cultures and periods. On the Graeco-Roman side of things, consider, for example, certain Presocratic philosophers (viz. Anaxagoras, Heraclitus, and Parmenides); Plato himself

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(the Forms, and concepts like *anamnēsis* and *anima mundi*) and Neoplatonism's discussions of the One and the Demiurge. Indeed, various esoteric religious traditions, even within the Abrahamic traditions, display this similarity. Consider 'God' as 'the ground of being', in the philosophy of Meister Eckhart and other Christian mystics, and the concepts of Aeon and the Monad in Gnosticism.

Some readers may be reminded of Aldous Huxley, who championed 'the perennial philosophy': the idea that the world's great spiritual and philosophical traditions come to the same conclusion about the ultimate nature of reality (see Huxley 1947).[34] 'Dharma', too, has analogues in ancient Greek (*Logos*), African (*Ma'at*), Chinese (*Dao*), and Iranian (*Asha*) philosophical traditions, and perhaps others that I have yet to encounter; the fact that such views were, and still are, widespread strongly motivates for them to be seriously considered.

To summarize, Advaita Vedānta does not fit neatly into the taxonomy of views of meaning discussed in the previous section. It is not clear that Brahman can be understood as analogous to (let alone synonymous with) the way the exoteric Abrahamic traditions understand the term 'God', nor is it clear that the view is a theistic one; indeed, it appears that it is not. In the next section, I discuss the relevance of these matters to the contemporary literature on meaning in life.

## The 'God' of Advaita Vedānta and meaning in life

This section makes clearer why the field of meaning in life should be interested in broadening its scope to include non-theistic, non-dual views like Advaita Vedānta. Such views may stimulate debate around largely unchallenged assumptions in the field (the primacy of meaning; what I shall call 'base nihilism'; the 'cosmic-terrestrial' meaning dichotomy; the 'natural-supernatural' dichotomy), and offer new directions (a responsibility-based route to meaning; the promise of a unified theory of meaning). Below, I touch upon each of these areas listed in parentheses, aiming to show that more detailed explorations are warranted in future work. Much of what I say here is speculative, but, crucially, this speculation is inspired by my investigations into Advaita Vedānta as an analytic philosopher.

### *Interrogating the primacy of 'meaning'*

The field takes 'meaning' to be a good that is distinct from happiness or welfare in general, and whose worth does not merely derive from instrumental value. Further, it finds it sensible to speak of 'great' meaning (see Metz 2011), and, usually when discussing theological matters, 'ultimate' meaning.[35] The latter is usually thought to obtain only if communion with God in an everlasting heaven is possible. In either case, meaning is assumed to be a final value – something to strive towards for its own sake.

My discussion in this article suggests that if the Advaitins and other non-dual non-theists are on to something, then meaning may be better understood as a means than an end. Specifically, it may be a means towards transcending the need for meaning. To put it provocatively, meaning may be a cosmic red herring. On my reading, 'meaning' for the Advaitin is not a synonym for '(the ultimate) purpose (of life)',[36] nor is it a synecdoche for '*the* meaning of life'. Instead, to him, we do not strive for meaning for its own sake; rather, we strive for meaning because the very (Dharmic) structure of the universe reliably rewards certain ways of being in the world. He takes, I might venture to say, a naturalistic stance on meaning. But ultimately, he says, if we yearn to break free from the cycle of birth and rebirth, we must break free from our *attachment* to meaning – for meaning, too, is an illusory aspect of Māyā.

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To be sure, meaning offers essential direction to, say, someone committed to the path of being a householder. But such a path, although praiseworthy, brings with it attachment to worldly desires, and thus suffering. The true aspirant aims at breaking the bonds of suffering by – in terms I have introduced in this article – *remembering* himself as Brahman. And this remembering entails eventually transitioning[37] to *being* Brahman: Pure Consciousness, beyond categories or attachments, and thus beyond suffering. Crucially, Brahman is not associated with 'ultimate' or 'maximal' meaning in Advaita Vedānta, because It is beyond all categories – and, indeed, experience, as I discuss shortly.

The aspirants of this tradition strive towards *Mokṣa*, which can be understood as 'dissolution', 'liberation', 'enlightenment', 'awakening', or 'Brahman-realization' or 'Self-realization'.[38] Mokṣa is described as the dissolution of the persistent, individual sense of self (*Ahaṁkāra*), and escape from the illusion of the world and the cycle of birth of rebirth towards the end of Self-realization. However, it should *not* be understood as synonymous with 'ultimate meaning', as the contemporary, theological discussions of meaning understand it. On the face of it, it is not communion with God in an everlasting heaven, for there is no 'God' to commune with. But, going deeper, it is also *not* entrance into a maximally meaningful experiential realm. For Mokṣa is not an experience; it is, by definition, beyond experience.[39] The 'Pure Consciousness' that the utterance 'Brahman' refers to is beyond the phenomenal dimension – beyond the phenomenon of experience. For, as the logic goes, Pure Consciousness does not 'experience'; rather, experiences are 'in' It.[40] On my reading, then, the Advaitin account of Brahman-realization suggests that it is best understood as beyond meaning, given that meaning is, at least in part, an experiential phenomenon.[41]

The figure of the jīvanmukta – the awakened-while-still-living individual[42] – may help the reader better understanding this view. If meaning can be understood as that which guides us towards objectively valuable ends – an idea I explore below – then the jīvanmukta is the individual who has successfully followed the path of meaning towards the *real* final end of Self-realization, and thus no longer needs meaning to guide him. The jīvanmukta, then, is a post-meaning being.[43] Meaning is thus, in the final analysis, a kind of cosmic red herring. Indeed, in this tradition, it is not uncommon to hear stories of a jīvanmukta entirely losing attachment to the pursuit of meaning in the world, and retiring to some isolated place to spend his days and nights in deep meditation (*samādhi*). To summarize the idea, then, the jīvanmukta is one who has seen through the veil of Māyā, and has understood the futility of finding meaning through continuing to play at being human, and tastes the bliss (*ānanda*) that transcends meaning.

The above description of the ways of the jīvanmukta may seem strange to most Western readers. But it is a very familiar one in traditional Eastern cultures – and has been for millennia. And I submit that it can offer insights to the analytic field of meaning in life. If nothing else, the very idea of there being an end higher than meaning (even the 'maximal' or 'ultimate' meaning of the Abrahamic traditions), or of transcending the need for meaning, should at least pique the curiosity of those working in the field.

At this point, the reader may wonder if the Advatin account of 'God' entails a *decrement* of meaning in life. There is in fact a burgeoning discussion on whether the existence of (the Abrahamic) God would detract from meaning. For example, there are those who believe that God's existence would violate our privacy (Lougheed 2020), or that the possibility of an eternal afterlife in communion with God would detract from the possibility of living a meaningful life in our earthly realm (Metz 2021).[44] On the face of it, the 'God' of Advaita Vedānta undercuts these concerns.

On the Advaitin understanding, *you* are 'God': all of reality is 'in' the Pure Consciousness of Brahman, and *you are That*. There is no realm in which communion with God is to be had – though there is, ultimately, the possibility of remembering that

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you are the Absolute, 'dreaming' reality into existence. Arguably, this does not detract from meaning in life. On the contrary, it affirms both that significant meaning is possible – for life *is* the realm of meaning – and that, joyously, the responsibility for obtaining that meaning ultimately falls upon you.[45]

## Supernaturalism

The instinct to relegate apparently 'spiritual' views of meaning to the realm of the 'supernatural' is common in the field.[46] This practice is arguably not appropriate for non-dual, non-theistic views like Advaita Vedānta. The latter developed in very different social, cultural, and philosophical milieu from the 'spiritual' ideas in Western thought. For the Advaitin, there is no 'spirit' that animates Brahman, Ātman, or the individual *jīva*;[47] there is only consciousness, in which *āvidya* (ignorance) conjures such illusory notions as 'spirit'. Indeed, it has been argued that there is no 'spirit' as such in Indian philosophy in general. Consider P. T. Raju:

> What is spirit in Indian thought? Of course, since the word has different connotations even in Western thought, it is easy to select a corresponding connotation and say that that is spirit. . . . But most of the Indians who use the word 'spiritual' would say that their activities are not spiritual, because they are not those which are distinguished as spiritual from the non-spiritual. If we take what is essentially spiritual activity and ask what spirit is with reference to that activity or in terms of which that activity is called spiritual, the answer is '*ātman*.' Spiritual activity is the activity of *ātman*-realization, which is translated generally as 'self-realization,' which may convey different meanings to the Indian and the Westerner. (Raju 1954, 195)

Or consider Ariel Glucklich's examination of the 'magical' practices of Indian healers:

> Is a ghost supernatural? Maybe it is by Western standards, where the known laws of nature rule out the possibility of such an entity. But in a culture where ghosts belong on a continuum of embodied existence ranging from gross body to pure soul, there is nothing supernatural about such a being. For many Indians, ghosts represent the same type of relation as a genetic link does for a Westerner. If a boy can have his father's nose for no visible reason (genes are hard to see), then a girl in India can have the spirit of her deceased aunt possessing her body. . . . Attributing supernatural beliefs to other cultures is a very risky business . . . (Glucklich 1997, 11)

What could the field gain through questioning the assumption that 'spirit' or 'the supernatural' are universalizable, transcultural categories? For one, such a move could make certain potentially illuminating views more palatable to naturalist philosophers of meaning who are wary of 'spirituality'. Though the philosophies of the ancient world may be redolent of 'spiritual' musings to (especially secular) Western minds, they are not straightforwardly so – as contemporary 'Perennialist'[48] and 'cosmopsychist' attempts at restatements demonstrate. A lack of recognition of such important nuances may be needlessly handicapping the field.

To be clear, my aim is not to endorse the Indian view of ghosts (etc.); rather, it is to emphasize that axiomatic rejections of the view for ostensibly empirical reasons are often not only too quick – more importantly, they also fail to appreciate that differing ontologies underwrite these philosophical systems. The takeaway is that the Indian view of ghosts (or Ātman, etc.) cannot be properly understood if it is divorced from its embeddedness within a specific ontology. For within that ontology, ghosts are not

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considered 'supernatural' any more than genes are thought to be supernatural from within a materialist ontology. How does this bear upon analytic analyses of meaning? Axiomatic judgement of such matters as 'spiritual' by atheistic and naturalistic analytic philosophers of meaning may bias them against such matters, such that they dismiss too quickly parts of (or whole) philosophical systems before mining such systems for possible insights. (Of course, the ontologies themselves may be indefensible, ultimately; regardless, the philosophical systems they spawn may be of value to, say, atheistic naturalists.)

A second potential boon may be that revisiting assumptions about the nature of consciousness could offer fresh perspectives on the nature of meaning that should at least intrigue both naturalist and theistic philosophers of meaning. Consider the fact that in the Advaitin tradition, at least, what is fundamental is not 'spirit', but consciousness. All the laws of nature – indeed, nature itself – are 'in' consciousness. So, too, is the phenomenon of meaning. Thus, it is sensible to consider whether the view is compatible with naturalism, as contemporary philosophers of meaning understand this term.

To see why this is so, consider naturalistic pantheism, which holds that God *is* the natural universe, and is thus bound by its laws.[49] Similarly, on the Advaitin view, meaning is at once a naturalistic and 'divine' or transcendent(al) phenomenon, as I discuss shortly. And the ultimate destination of meaning is acquired when one awakens to the realization that one is the dreamer of the universe; at this point, meaning has served its mysterious purpose in the dream of life; there is no further 'supernatural' realm or entity to consider: there is only [*Y*]*ou*.

### *The 'cosmic-terrestrial' dichotomy*

When most philosophers in the field of meaning use the term 'cosmic', they mean 'from the (objective) perspective of the universe'. Certainly, this seems to be how David Benatar (2006, 82–83) understands it, and, as is common in the field, he does not think we can sensibly talk about meaning from this perspective.[50] But the Dharmic view suggests that considering meaning from within a 'cosmic-terrestrial' dichotomy is a kind of (cosmic) category error. For, if the world seems to be devoid of meaning, at base, from the 'terrestrial' – that is, human – perspective, this is simply due to something lacking in the perspective of the individual investigator(s). On the Dharmic view, not only is a more-than-human meaning possible, but the only intelligible way to think of the phenomenon of meaning is as a 'cosmic' phenomenon. For, on this view, the cosmos is a bounded realm of intelligibility, morality, and meaningfulness. We as humans do not create meaning; rather, we *discover* it.

Moreover, on the Dharmic view it is not the case that meaning is an exclusively 'human' phenomenon. Rather, the entire universe is evolving towards Self-realization (discussed at length in Aurobindo 2005) – and this movement, this evolution, *is* meaning. On this Eastern understanding of evolution, Consciousness (the capitalization is intentional) manifests as ever more developed lifeforms, 'birth' after 'birth'.[51] The temporary state of 'being human' is but a (late) step on this Dharmic evolutionary journey towards Self-realization.

### *'Base nihilism'*

There is a further consequence to the preceding discussion of (a perceived lack of) cosmic meaning. Much of the field proceeds from what I shall call 'base nihilism'. It is 'nihilism' in that it holds that life is fundamentally meaningless (I draw distinctions between different kinds of nihilism shortly). And I emphasize its quality as 'base', because secular Western

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thought generally takes nihilism as the axiomatic starting point for discussions of meaning. It is important to note that despite life's 'base meaningless', meaning *in* life is nevertheless possible (and desirable) – or, at least, most working in the field have tried to show (acknowledged even by Benatar (2017, 30–33)).[52] But what might it do to our perception of what sort of meaning is possible if we challenge base nihilism?

It goes far beyond the scope of the present article, but, as the likes of such salient commenters as Nietzsche document, the establishment of (base) nihilism in the secular Western tradition does indeed seem to follow inexorably from 'the death of God'.[53] However, as my discussion of Advaita Vedānta shows, 'God' is not dead in other traditions, for they did not undergo the West's nihilistic turn. Nihilism in other traditions is not an established, self-evident conclusion no longer even warranting notice – far from it. Indeed, the presumption is reversed in the Dharmic tradition, which underwrites much of classical Indian philosophy and even contemporary Indian culture. On the Dharmic view, reality, at base, is saturated with meaning: it is the meaning substrate, as it were, into which we find ourselves born. Indeed, reality as we know it *is* the realm of meaning – for it is in this illusory realm of Māyā that the phenomenon of meaning looms large, directing our aims with its superlative attractiveness. In contrast, then, to the *base nihilism* of secular Western thought, it could be argued that the Dharmic traditions proceed from *base meaning*, and, at least in the case of Advaita Vedānta, ultimately motivate for the need to transcend meaning.

To summarize, a consequence of my discussions in this article is that nihilism should not be axiomatically assumed; indeed, nihilism in all its guises should be challenged. Consider existential nihilism, which holds that human efforts are ultimately without purpose, or cosmic nihilism, which holds that the cosmos is either entirely indifferent to, or hostile towards, human beings.[54] Both these versions of nihilism appear to want a perspective from outside the observable world. In contrast, on the Dharmic view, reality *is* the condition for the possibility of meaning. Recall that, on this view, the Dharma is observable and testable: one need only aim at living one's life according to its structure, and note what happens. In practice for most people, there need not be any mystical aspect to meaning-making, let alone appeals to faith.

## A responsibility-based route to meaning

On the Dharmic view, the structure of reality is such that meaning is gained not only through accruing certain objectively valuable milestones, but also through one's efforts towards that end. Recall that Advaita Vedānta is a knowledge-based path (*Jñāna yoga*); insofar as it can be said to have a 'practice', it encourages self-effort – for it argues that there is no ontologically distinct 'God' who, through his Will or Grace, will lead you to 'salvation'. Consider what I have called the 'meaning-as-remembering' view, in which meaning of the most superlative sort is acquired the closer one gets to realizing oneself as Brahman (until meaning itself is transcended in Self-realization). Importantly, each individual must make the final leap towards Self-realization. Self-effort, then, is a vital component of this view.

But the Dharmic traditions do not only speak about meaning of this transcendent sort; what I shall call here the 'meaning-as-responsibility' view is also prominent. Consider the concept of *svadharma*, which refers not to the direct path, as it were, to one's own liberation (Mokṣa), but rather, the meaning-conferring responsibility of fulfilling one's unique duty in the world.[55] It is not always clear what fulfilling one's duty entails, though – indeed, a central lesson of the *Mahābhārata* is that morality is messy.[56] Nevertheless, as Krishna famously says to the crestfallen warrior Arjuna in the *Bhagavad Gītā*, '[i]t is better to strive in one's own dharma than to succeed in the dharma of another' (chapter 3, verse 35).[57]

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I do not need to claim here that the Dharmic route to meaning *via* responsibility is the most compelling route of this kind, nor do I even have to claim that it is one of the best. My aim is simply to point out that responsibility is a route to meaning that has been underexplored by the field.[58] Comparative analyses can be insightful – note the primacy of responsibility in the Dharmic worldview – and the field can be enriched by them.

### *The promise of a unified theory of meaning*

I suspect that a decent attempt could be made at crafting a plausible unified theory of meaning through Advaita Vedānta.[59] So far as I can tell, some salient theories of meaning in the field share a unifying aspect – namely, the phenomenon of unification itself!

I cannot hope to satisfactorily represent such a unified theory here, but consider, for example, Robert Nozick's idea of 'organic unity' (Nozick 1981, 574–619), and Thaddeus Metz's arguments for a theory of meaning in which transcending one's 'animal self' is a key feature (see Metz 2013). These and other theories of meaning appeal to the idea of transcending limits to connect with certain objective goods. Metz explicitly appeals to the classic triumvirate of 'the good, the true, and the beautiful' to represent the distillation of these objective goods, thinking of them in naturalistic terms as 'exemplars of meaning for the field more generally' (Metz 2013, 95).

A Dharmic unified theory of meaning would go further. According to it, the classic triumvirate would represent transcendental aspects of the Dharma. That is to say, instances of correct alignment with the most fundamental aspects of the Dharma – Truth, Beauty, and the Good in their ancient, transcendental senses – are what we apprehend as 'meaningful'; the higher the fidelity of alignment, the greater the meaning. Put differently, to align with these fundamental aspects is to taste the manifested nature of the meaning-making dream of Brahman *as* this realm.[60] And thus, as one gets closer to the (ultimately inscrutable) parameters of this dream, one may perhaps 'awaken' from it, and thus transcend meaning.

## Conclusion

In this article, I have shown that the 'God' of Advaita Vedānta does not fit neatly into the recently proposed taxonomy of the axiology of theism, which the analytic field of meaning has begun to explore. For one, the concept of 'Brahman' is radically different from the concept of 'God' in the exoteric Abrahamic faiths. For another, it is not self-evident that Advaita Vedānta can be properly understood as 'theistic' or 'supernaturalism'. I have thus argued that it is more fitting to consider Advaita Vedānta as a form of 'non-dual/non-theism'. Further, I have suggested that contemporary cosmopsychist and Perennialist views may be considered (at least) broadly compatible with it. The view, then, is not some anomaly that can be easily ignored, dismissed, or explained away.

Indeed, my discussion demonstrates that closer engagement with the view may stimulate new ways of thinking about meaning. It, and similar views, should thus receive greater attention from scholars working in the field – the intellectual virtues of curiosity and openness to new ideas compel us to consider them. Thus, philosophers of religion and philosophers of meaning – and those who work at the intersection of these fields – should be excited by the rich new areas of exploration represented by Advaita Vedānta and similar views.

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## Notes

**1.** For scholarly reasons, I provide the romanized Sanskrit for key terms where relevant, presenting them as per the International Alphabet of Sanskrit Transliteration (IAST).
**2.** The other major orthodox schools are Sāṃkhya, Yoga, Nyāya, Vaiśeṣika, and Mīmāṃsā.
**3.** In the Anglo-American-Australasian analytic discussions of meaningfulness, that is. Various schools of Indian philosophy have explored such ideas for millennia.
**4.** It may be useful to lay out the way 'the meaning of' and 'meaning in' life are generally understood in the literature. The former refers to an answer to the question of what would confer meaning (to the universe or simply human existence) from a 'cosmic' or 'holist' perspective, while the latter, 'individualist' perspective refers to what would generally make a person's life more meaningful. These distinctions are discussed further in Metz (2013, 1–13), along with the claim, which I accept here, that much of the field is concerned with 'meaning in' life questions (Metz 2011, 3) – that is, the cosmic question of 'the meaning of' life is largely set aside, except where it is raised as a serious concern to the overall quality of human existence (most notably in the works or David Benatar, as discussed in this article).
**5.** This is a question about whether God's existence would (from an atheistic or agnostic lens), or does (from a theistic lens), make life better for persons or the world. The question is phrased, and answered, in more ways than I can do justice to here. (Notably, a recent collection, Kraay (2018), features eleven original essays on this topic.) The important thing to bear in mind for the present article, though, is that a key aspect of the axiological question is how God's existence would, or does, affect life's meaning (see, for example, the aforementioned Mawson (2016) for an extended pro-theistic answer to the axiological question vis-à-vis life's meaning).
**6.** Though the distinction between 'exoteric' and 'esoteric' predates contemporary Perennialism, it is notable for its use there. See, for example, Aslan (2004, 50) on how this distinction in the 'traditional' sense (understood here as the 'Primordial Tradition' – also known as 'the *sophia perennis*', 'the Perennial Philosophy') manifests in Islam and Judaism.
**7.** See Buckareff and Nagasawa (2016, 2–3) for a brief critical discussion of this aspect of classical theism.
**8.** They are also at odds with the African limited-God thesis. For a recent critical discussion of this prominent African view of God, see Agada (2022).
**9.** These are not intended to refer to metaphysical positions, *simpliciter*; rather, they are understood here as 'accounts of what would manifest a certain sort of value' (Metz 2019, 7) – namely, judgements about meaningfulness.
**10.** See Kraay and Dragos (2013) and Kraay (2018).
**11.** Sixty, to be exact (Kraay 2018, 12)! I lack the space to outline them all, or the further refinements he makes (see Kraay 2018, 11–13). Fortunately, these further considerations will not bear significantly on my discussion.
**12.** For further details, see Kraay (2018, 10).
**13.** Interest in such avenues of exploration are beginning to emerge. For example, Buddhism is examined in light of the axiological question in Lougheed (2020), with the conclusion that the standard categories in the axiology of theism do not seem to apply to it. I lack the space to offer an adequate discussion of the centuries-old debate between the Advaitins and Buddhists on the ultimate nature of the Self. Suffice it to say, the Buddhists favour the 'no-Self' view (*anattā*), according to which there is neither an individual self, nor a transcendent Self. For a contemporary treatment of this view, see Ganeri (2012).
**14.** Though even this is speaking metaphorically, for name, number, and form are ultimately illusory – all aspects of *Māyā*, as I discuss in the main text of this section.
**15.** The non-dualism of *Advaita* Vedānta can be contrasted with the dualism of *Dvaita* Vedānta and the qualified non-dualism of *Vishishtadvaita* Vedānta. Dvaita Vedānta argues that we are ontologically distinct from the Brahman. 'Brahman' here is understood as *Saguna* Brahman – roughly, God *with* attributes (see Rambachan (2006, 84–86) for a critical discussion of the distinction between *Nirguna* and *Saguna* Brahman). *Vashistadvaita* Vedānta argues for a more subtle distinction between us and Brahman, namely that we are *an aspect of* Brahman, like – as a famous analogy goes – the 'blueness' of a blue pot. As I discuss in the main text, Advaita Vedānta is subtler still. It argues that we are ultimately not ontologically distinct from Brahman. Indeed, 'we', the world, and all of existence, are but 'appearances' *in* Brahman. There are ever more startling ways of putting this non-dual conclusion. For example, the 'Doctrine of No-Origination' (*ajātivāda*), famously defended by Gauḍapāda in the sixth century, holds that the world is neither existent nor non-existent – nor both (see Sharma 1987, 242–247).
**16.** In the words of Swami Vivekananda, the famed promoter of Advaita Vedānta in the West in the late nineteenth century:

> You are the veritable Gods of the universe. Nay, there are not two; there is but one. It is a mistake to say 'you' and 'I'. Say 'I'. It is I who am eating through millions of mouths; how can I be hungry? It is I who am

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> working through an infinite number of hands; how can I be inactive? . . . I am beyond all life, beyond all death. (Vivekananda 1999, 114)

**17.** The others are: *Aham Brahmāsmi* ('I am Brahman.'); *Prajnanam Brahma* (roughly, 'The Highest Truth is Brahman'); and *Ayam Atma Brahma* ('This Self [Ātman] is Brahman.').
**18.** In Vedānta, *jīva* refers to Brahman manifested as the individual self.
**19.** Here, Advaita Vedānta repurposes Sāṃkhya's dualistic cosmology. According to Sāṃkhya, *Prakṛti* refers not simply to nature, but, more fundamentally, 'the *potentiality* of nature. . . the uncaused root cause' (Sharma 1987, 152; my emphasis).
**20.** The concept of 'self' (and 'Self') in Advaita Vedānta is more complex than I can outline here due to space. For an extended discussion of the elusive nature of this concept, see Ram-Prasad (2010).
**21.** *Kṛpā* is often translated as 'grace'. While it is an important aspect of the *Bhakti Yoga* (devotional) traditions, it is less common in the Vedic ones like Advaita Vedānta.
**22.** I am using broad brushstrokes here to maintain the flow of my prose, but, technically, the world is neither real nor unreal, nor both, according to the Doctrine of No-Origination (see endnote 15).
**23.** Note that the Advaitin favours 'complete' over 'perfect', for everything is 'in' Brahman, and Brahman thus wants for nothing.
**24.** This locution represents a useful redundancy in this context, for the word 'cosmos' implies 'order'. The word in its current usage is etymologically derived from the ancient Greek *kósmos* (κόσμος): roughly, 'world-order'. (Although there is dispute when the word, originally merely signifying 'order' came to be applied to the universe. See Horky (2019) for an extended discussion.) The Sanskrit equivalent is *Brahmāṇḍa* (ब्रह्माण्ड): the 'cosmic egg' – literally, 'the egg of Brahman'.
**25.** Strictly speaking, 'Dharma' originally referred to proper alignment with *Ṛta*, with the former specifying the normative aspect of (adhering to) the latter (see Badrinath 2019, 5–6).
**26.** I use the term 'philosophers' here; the ancient texts refer to these foundational investigators into the ultimate nature of reality as '*rishis*'.
**27.** For example, one must make sacrifices of time and energy in the present to ensure that the crops are properly tended to, or one will starve in the future.
**28.** An interesting analogue is the successful arrangement of ancient Egyptian society around the principle of *Ma'at* (see Obenga 2004).
**29.** It might be asserted that we could define panentheism as 'The world is in God, and the entities of the world are God', in which case the conceptual distinction between panentheism and Advaita Vedānta would be minimal. I accept that there is room for reasonable discussion and disagreement on this point. Consider, for example, Loriliai Biernacki's view of Hinduism as '[offering] one of the easiest, most fluent representations of a panentheistic worldview anywhere' (Biernacki 2014, 161). I suggest, though, that Advaita Vedānta distinguishes itself by explicitly claiming that 'we' *are* 'God'.
**30.** *Jñāna* means 'knowledge' or 'wisdom'. *Yoga* means to 'yoke' or 'bring together'; thus, in the context of Vedānta in general, a knowledge-based yogic path is one in which you are 'brought back to' knowing that this world is illusory – the cosmic play (*leela*) of Brahman. This is done via appreciating the sort of careful arguments I have been drawing upon in this article, alongside attentively examining the phenomenon of consciousness.
**31.** Namely: devotion (*bhakti yoga*), meditation and mantra (*raja yoga*), or service to others (*karma yoga*).
**32.** Acknowledged in Shani (2015, n. 38) and Shani and Keppler (2018, 403 and n. 6). Note, however, that cosmopsychism and Advaita Vedānta are not identical. As I briefly discuss later, the 'witness-consciousness' (*Sākṣī*) conclusion of Advaita Vedānta comes closer to the 'Perennialist' view.
**33.** Some philosophers are beginning to view cosmopsychism as a superior answer to the 'hard problem' of consciousness than panpsychism. See, for example, Nagasawa and Wager (2017).
**34.** Note also the related idea of religious pluralism, as championed by John Hick (see specifically Hick 2004). For an extended treatment of the links between religious pluralism and Perennialism, see Oldmeadow (2008).
**35.** My discussion here undercuts the view that we should regret the lack of ultimate meaning (see, for example, Weinberg 2021).
**36.** Purpose-based accounts of meaning are controversial in the field – discussed in Seachris (2009) and Metz (2013, 24–28).
**37.** Here, it may be helpful to unpack the difference between *remembering* and *being*. Upon waking (in the everyday, prosaic sense), it often takes us a while to remember basic aspects of our everyday lives: where we are, what we are to do that day, the very fact that we went to bed and fell asleep – and, in a constitutive sense, *who* we are. 'Being fully awake', then, means 'being fully ourselves', and not simply '*remembering* how to fully be ourselves' – the latter is more characteristic of recovering from traumatic brain injury than arising from bed in the morning.

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And thus, while meaning may be of utility in remembering ourselves as Brahman, Mokṣa (here, 'dissolution') does not occur until one *is* Brahman: Pure Consciousness, undifferentiated, complete, and without attributes.

**38.** The concept of *Nirvāṇa* is favoured in Buddhist traditions – a consequence of the 'no-self' view. See Siderits et al. (2011).

**39.** To be clear, the *path* to Mokṣa is said to have experiential elements – chiefly, the ultimate trauma of ego death – but the *attainment* of Mokṣa is, by definition, beyond experience.

**40.** That is, when It manifests as this phenomenal world. Theoretically, every individual 'dreamer' could awaken, and the cosmos would thusly dissolve – ending the collective experience of this realm.

**41.** Although not all meaningful aspects of your life are experienced by *you*, of course. For example, your efforts can be experienced as meaningful by others after your passing.

**42.** Also known as 'embodied' or 'living liberation' (see Rambachan 2006, 101–102).

**43.** But he is not an amoral, treacherous being oriented towards the grotesque. This is because he has *compassion* for ordinary human beings who, like his former self, are suffering (*duḥkha*) in the unreality of Māyā, and may be drawn to compassionate service (Rambachan 2006, 107–108).

**44.** A critical notice of the pro-theistic Williams (2020).

**45.** As Rambachan (2006, 97) puts it in a contemporary, and more positive, spin on the value of Creation for Brahman: 'The purpose of human life, then, is to participate in the celebration of existence by knowing the nature of the one who has brought all things into being, whose nature infuses everything and whose fullness we share.'

**46.** See, for example, Metz (2013, 78; chs 5–8).

**47.** The 'jīv' in 'jīva' means 'to breath' or 'to live'. While English translations of 'jīva' often define it as 'the individual soul', this is perhaps done as an aid to Western readers; the word has no English equivalent.

**48.** Miri Albahari (2020) casts the 'Advaitic/Perennialist' position as superior to cosmopsychist and idealist views. Albahari draws upon Aldous Huxley's discussion (1947) of 'the perennial philosophy' underwriting salient philosophical and religious views, according to which a non-dual, non-theistic conclusion – explicitly linked to Advaita Vedānta's – is reached.

**49.** Leftow (2016) is a recent critique of this view.

**50.** I remind the reader that I have been taking aim in this article at the dominant atheistic and naturalistic assumptions underwriting analytic discussions of life's meaning – assumptions Benatar and many others in the field accept. For a very recent critique of Benatar's appeals to cosmic meaning from a fellow atheistic, naturalistic philosopher of meaning, see Metz (2022). (See Benatar (2022, 128–131) for a direct response.) See also Landau (2017, 98–99). These criticisms of Benatar still seem to accept the cosmic-terrestrial distinction, though; in this section, I suggest that the Dharmic view offers reasons to think this distinction should collapse.

**51.** Gauḍapāda famously argued that even reincarnation is an aspect of Māyā. On his view, there have never been any lives; there has never been a world. Pure Consciousness never manifested as the universe, let alone each individual life – for the experience of the world is but a Divine dream. (See also endnote 15.)

**52.** Recall that the Dharmic view of meaning appears to undercut this distinction (see 'Interrogating the primacy of "meaning"', above).

**53.** The point is not that many Westerners believe that God is dead because of Nietzsche's pronouncement (nor is it that they are even directly aware of Nietzsche's views). For Nietzsche himself viewed his discussion of the death of God and the resultant nihilism as a diagnosis of an existing problem in Western culture of which many were unaware. This problem is explicitly accepted and discussed primarily by philosophers from the (so-called) Continental tradition. The literature on this is too voluminous to discuss here, but see, for example, Van Tongeren (2000 and 2018). For a recent work that shares my assumptions about nihilism underwriting much of the analytic tradition of meaning, and which explicitly ties together the death of God and Benatar's concern about a lack of cosmic meaning, see Zandbergen (2021).

**54.** These two (along with moral, epistemological, and political nihilism) appear as part of a taxology of nihilism posited in Crosby (1998).

**55.** I set aside the (mis)use of this concept among certain quarters of Indian society to justify, say, impeding upward social mobility.

**56.** I must sweep past these very important aspects of morality vis-à-vis Dharma for reasons of space. An extended treatment of these matters can be found in Das (2009).

**57.** I use Eknath Easwaran's translation (1985).

**58.** Attempts have been made outside academic philosophy. See, for example: Ventegodt (2003); Ventegodt et al. (2003); and Scheper-Hughes (2008). Moreover, there appears to be tremendous interest among the general public in responsibility-based routes to meaning – note Peterson (2018, 2021). There is thus sufficient evidence that such routes deserve more attention within academic philosophy – whether or not it is done via a Dharmic route.

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59. My talk here of a 'unified theory' should not be taken to suggest that I think Advaita Vedānta is a 'perfect' theory. After all, it has faced centuries of robust criticism by Buddhist philosophers. I do not have space to adequately discuss Advaita Vedānta's numerous critics, but, for an extensive contemporary critique, see Rao (2011).
60. The dream metaphor may be useful in understanding how the Advaitin can reconcile a doctrine that includes reality as we know it (in which Dharma reigns) and the Ultimate Reality (i.e. the transcendent, ineffable Brahman). While there is no Dharma from the transcendent perspective of Brahman, Dharma appears as a fundamental aspect of *this* 'world' – namely, 'Brahman's dream'. Consequently, we (as Brahman's 'dreamselves') cannot 'escape' Dharma, any more than, say, we can escape the four fundamental forces of nature. Even the jīvanmukta, when awakened from deep meditative states, must contend with this reality.

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