

Review of Tim Mulgan's *Purpose in the Universe: The Moral and Metaphysical Case for Ananthropic Purposivism*

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People get stuck in dichotomies of thought. If you don't like Soviet Communism, you must be in favour of US-style capitalism, right? Well, not if there are political options other than those two (which of course there are). Another dichotomy is that between Abrahamic theism and materialist atheism. If you don't believe in a benevolent creator, then you must think we live in a meaningless universe, right? Whose team are you on, Dawkins' or The Pope's?

It's about time analytic philosophy seriously explored worldviews other than traditional theism and traditional atheism, and Tim Mulgan's book *Purpose in the Universe* is pioneering in this regard. It is a detailed and rigorous defence of *ananthropic purposivism* (AP for short), the view that there is a non-human centred purpose to existence. On Mulgan's view, the universe exists for a reason: it's on its way to realising some higher purpose. But that cosmic drama is not one in which humans play a leading role. Our lives are not cosmically significant.

Mulgan explores two ways of making sense of cosmic purpose. One is very close to traditional theism, involving an omnipotent morally perfect creator and designer. The only difference to the Abrahamic God is that this creator doesn't care about us. We are at best insignificant prototypes that approximate superior creatures – perhaps extra-terrestrials or our digital decedents – who exemplify God's purposes. The second way of accounting for cosmic purpose is the *axiarchic view*, associated in recent times with John Leslie. On the *axiarchic view*, the universe exists for a reason (for Mulgan, a non-human centred reason), but there is no deeper explanation of that fact. Atheists tend to think that the existence of the universe is a brute fact. The *axiarchic view* has a brute fact too, but at one level below: the universe exists for a reason, but it is brute fact that the universe exists for that reason. Mulgan generally talks in terms of the theistic version of his view for the sake of simplicity, and I will follow him in this.

How does Mulgan build the case for ananthropic purposivism? Basically, by defending *both* the familiar arguments for God *and* the familiar arguments for atheism. On p. 1 of the book, Mulgan recounts whilst teaching undergraduate philosophy of religion being struck by the following thought:

Theistic arguments, if they succeed, establish that there is a God *of some sort*.
Atheist arguments, if they succeed, show that there is not a God *of one specific sort*.
So why not cut and paste the positive and negative arguments, and thus end with a God *of a different sort*?

Thus, the first two parts of the book make, in turn, the case against atheism and the case against 'benevolent theism' (the view that there is a God who cares about human beings).

The case against atheism comprises chapters defending a form of the three main arguments used to defend the existence of God in Western philosophy and religion – cosmological, teleological, and ontological arguments – as well as a defence of the rational permissibility of trusting mystical experiences. The case against benevolent theism includes chapters which deploy arguments rooted in the existence of evil and suffering, the immensity of the universe, religious diversity, and a final chapter arguing that benevolent theism requires the metaphysical extravagance of an afterlife (indeed, Mulgan argues that theism requires reincarnation, in order to compensate for injustice within a single lifespan). Part three of the book discusses the ethical implications of AP.

Whilst I don't agree with everything Mulgan says in these early chapters, I think he makes some powerful arguments. It is hard to see how the benevolent theist can account for the terrible suffering humans endure. Why would a God who loves us allow this to happen? On the other hand, it is hard for the traditional atheist to account for the fine-tuning of the laws of physics for life. This is the surprising discovery of recent decades that, for life to be physically possible, certain numbers in physics – such as the strength and gravity and the cosmological constant – had to fall in a certain narrow range. It seems to require explanation why, of all the values these constants might have had, numbers compatible with life turned up. Mulgan's hypotheses aims to account for both of these data-points (among other data-points). Physics is fine-tuned for life because the universe exists for the sake of a certain form of life. But given that we are not the form of life for the sake of which the universe exists, there is no requirement to explain the negative features of human existence.

I think Mulgan is right that the two traditional options of atheism and benevolent theism fall short, and I share Mulgan's desire to find a middle ground. Ultimately, however, I think his ananthropic purposivism does not offer a plausible alternative. Like Mulgan, I think human pain is objectively bad. It is a great tragedy when a child suffers abuse, for example. But on Mulgan's view, there is a morally perfect being who doesn't care about human suffering. I find this hard to make sense of, and am tempted to reject AP with the following argument:

1. Child abuse is objectively tragic.
2. If 1, then a morally perfect being would be motivated to prevent child abuse.
3. If AP is true, then there is a morally perfect being who is not motivated to prevent child abuse.
4. AP is false.

Mulgan is very alert to the difficulty of accounting for the objective badness of human pain. Indeed, much of the book focuses on meta-ethical concerns – Mulgan's primary area of expertise is ethics – and chapter 12 contains some fascinating proposals about how to connect human value to cosmic purpose. Mulgan first outlines the 'two-tier' model, according to which there is a scale of objective value/disvalue but also a 'cosmic threshold' below which instances of value do not concern God. So there is objective value in human intellect and objective disvalue in human suffering, but the former is not good enough to motivate God to promote it and the latter is not bad enough to motivate God to prevent it.

I can kind of make sense of human value not being good enough to interest God. Maybe to God, the things we give Nobel prizes for are as intellectually interesting as watching paint dry. Even then, God seems from our perspective to be an obnoxious elitist, but maybe that's just because it's hard for us to appreciate how objectively unremarkable human achievements are from the cosmic perspective. However, the idea of a morally perfect being who doesn't care at all about certain instances of intense suffering is puzzling. Assuming a fly suffers agony when trapped in spider's web, then that is in some way a concern to me (and I'm not an especially nice person, never mind perfectly good!). If I were omnipotent, I'd do something about fly agony. I'm more concerned about the suffering a human than a fly, but I find it hard to make sense of the idea that a morally perfect being could be totally unmotivated to prevent the intense suffering of any creature, no matter how cognitively unsophisticated that creature is.

Mulgan also considers the possibility that the value of human life is totally independent of cosmic value and purpose, and the view that human life has no value at all. The latter is not going to pacify those with a strong commitment to premise 1 in the above argument, and the former doesn't undermine the plausibility of premise 3. Of course, there's lots to debate here, but I am personally left fairly convinced by the above argument against AP.

Is there an alternative middle way between traditional theism and traditional atheism? It depends in part on which arguments of the traditional arguments we find persuasive. If, for example, we are concerned to explain both fine-tuning and human suffering, one option is a God of limited power (or the axiarchic equivalent, but, following Mulgan, I continue to talk in theistic terms for the sake of simplicity). Perhaps God simply isn't able to create complex intelligent life directly, for example, by breathing spirit into dust as depicted in Genesis. Maybe God can only create from a singularity a universe with the same form of physics as we find in the actual world. In this case, it might well be that the only way God is able to create intelligent life is by bringing into existence a universe with the right values of its constants so that it will eventually involve intelligent life. God knew that this would bring about a great deal of suffering along the way, and if God is morally perfect then that will deeply bother her. But maybe it was either that or not create any intelligent life at all and God judged that intelligent life + pain was the best of her limited options.

Mulgan briefly acknowledges the option of a God of limited power – he calls the view 'finite theism'. He says that his book would be too long if he gave adequate treatment to this position, which is fair enough, but he does briefly raise three concerns with finite theism:

1. 'If God's choices are so constrained why should we be so confident that God has any interest in human beings? Perhaps our existence also reflects God's limited creative options.'
2. '...positing a benevolent finite God *instead* of an indifferent unconstrained God puts undue weight on our evaluation of *our own* cosmic significance. If we must depart from classical BT [benevolent theism], why privilege benevolence *towards humans* over omnipotence?'
3. '...any adequate case for *benevolent* finite theism requires a careful consideration of the best case for AP.' P. 197.

As Mulgan says elsewhere in the book, there isn't a sharp distinction between BT and AP; rather we have a spectrum. In the extreme of BT, human beings are the final stage of creation, at least in some modified post-mortem form. I can't see any philosophical grounds for giving humans such a lofty status. But I can see strong reason to think that a perfectly good God would not be *indifferent* to human suffering, or to the suffering of any creature. As I see it, a limited God would care about our suffering not because we're the most important thing in the universe, but just because, well, suffering is really bad!

Of course, there are other options for tweaking the traditional definition of God. Perhaps God is evil, or at least not perfectly good. These options deserve exploring, but they don't seem to me attractive options. An evil God would face a 'problem of good' mirroring the problem of evil (Law 2010): Why would an evil God create a universe with so much good in it? Perhaps the designer of our universe is a psychopath who likes experimenting with universes to see how they'll play out. This is a coherent hypothesis, but we are now envisaging a designer with a pretty complex and subtle psychology. It seems to me to be a much simpler hypothesis that God is perfectly good but limited in the way outlined above.

Whether the God of limited powers hypothesis is satisfactory depends, in part, on which of the traditional arguments for God we accept. If it turns out that the ontological argument is sound, then this will arguably rule out a limited God, as this argument (if sound) demonstrates the existence of a perfect, and presumably thereby unlimited, being. As for myself, I've never found the ontological argument at all convincing, although there isn't space to go into my reasons for that here.

What about the cosmological argument? Mulgan is attracted to Richard Swinburne's (2004) version of the cosmological argument, according to which the attraction of the God hypothesis is that we end up with an explanatory base which is much *simpler* than the atheistic alternative. According to Swinburne, God is an extraordinarily simple entity, having no physical parts and having all of her qualities 'to the max', rather than to some arbitrary limit. The AP God is a version of the omni-God (omnipotent, omniscient, and perfectly good), and so, according to Mulgan, shares this very simple nature. A limited God would have a slightly more complex nature, given that her powers are limited. That's a cost. In my judgment it is much less significant cost that embracing the existence of a morally perfect being that doesn't care about our suffering.

My disagreement with Mulgan's view does not in any way lessen my admiration for *Purpose in the Universe*. I would strongly recommend it for anyone interested in these fundamental questions of existence.

References

- Law, Stephen (2010) 'The evil God challenge,' *Religious Studies* 46: 3, 353 – 373.
Swinburne, Richard (2004) *The Existence of God*, 2nd edition, Oxford: Oxford University Press.