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# God and the Meaning of Life: Some Remarks on Toby Betenson's Criticism of William Lane Craig

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**Abstract:** In a very recent essay, Toby Betenson reflects on some statements made by William Lane Craig about God, immortality, and the meaning of life. As a Christian, Craig holds that God and immortality are essential to make life meaningful or not-futile. Betenson tries to demonstrate that Craig falls into contradiction—namely, Craig's statements end up supporting the idea that life is futile if God exists. Here I intend to further explore the way Betenson interprets Craig's statements and develops his own thesis. Whether or not Craig would agree with my remarks, I think that they (my remarks) ultimately take the debate a step further. They show that Betenson's criticism fails, since its logic falls short and the reading of the Christian doctrines it implies is inadequate.

In an intellectually penetrating essay,<sup>1</sup> Toby Betenson (hereafter also 'the author') reflects on some statements made by William Lane Craig about God, immortality, and the meaning of life. As a Christian, Craig holds that God and immortality are essential to make life meaningful or not-futile. For the sake of argument Betenson assumes the position maintained by Craig, and tries to demonstrate that Craig falls into contradiction—namely, Craig's statements end up supporting the idea that life is futile if God exists. Here I intend to further explore the way the author interprets Craig's statements and develops his own thesis. Of course, I do not intend to defend Craig's position in lieu of the American philosopher, which would be utterly inappropriate. Whether or not Craig would agree with my remarks, I think that they (my remarks) ultimately take the debate a step further. They show that Betenson's criticism fails, since its logic falls short and the reading of the Christian doctrines it implies is inadequate.<sup>2</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Toby Betenson, "Fairness and Futility," *International Journal for Philosophy of Religion*, 2015, DOI: 10.1007/s11153-015-9519-0. Hereafter: FF.

<sup>2</sup> In so doing, I shall not argue that Craig's position is true. This would be—as Alvin Plantinga says—"to show that theism and Christianity are true; and I don't know how to do something one can sensibly call 'showing' that either of these *is* true" (Alvin Plantinga, *Warranted Christian Belief* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2000), p. 170).

Following Betenson's line of reasoning, I intend to examine first the arguments and conclusions advanced by the author in the first part of his article, where he presents and develops some working definitions of 'futile life' and argues that Craig's view turns into its negation. Then, I shall take into consideration the way Betenson discusses four possible objections to his own position.

### **Does Craig's view turn into its negation?**

Betenson starts his analysis by proposing a definition of 'futile life' consistent with Craig's statements under consideration. (The author is using audio recordings, and since they do not include the definition at hand, he tries to construct one which Craig might agree on.) The reason for this is that, as I have already said, Betenson's objective is to show the inherent contradiction in the American philosopher's position. Thus, he proposes the following working definition:

(WD): Life is futile unless our actions are causally relevant to events that are ultimately significant.<sup>3</sup>

From this, Betenson reasonably derives two more definitions, which will prove especially relevant to his objective:

(WDa): Life is futile if our actions are causally relevant to something that is ultimately insignificant.

(WDb): Life is futile if our actions are causally irrelevant to something that is ultimately significant.<sup>4</sup>

In all three definitions, 'our actions' stand for acts that, however exemplary they may be, are not considered by Craig to have enough in themselves to render life meaningful or not-futile. The American philosopher mentions "the contribution of the scientists to the advance of human knowledge, the researches of the doctor to alleviate pain and suffering, the efforts of the diplomat to secure peace in the world, the efforts of good people everywhere to benefit the lot of the human race."<sup>5</sup> Craig believes that, if God exists, these actions do contribute to render life meaningful, while if God does not exist, they "come to nothing; in the end, they don't make one

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My aim is only to argue that Betenson's claims fail to demonstrate that the American philosopher's stance is internally inconsistent.

<sup>3</sup> FF, p. 2.

<sup>4</sup> FF, p. 3.

<sup>5</sup> All quotations from Craig are those that Betenson extracted from the audio recordings above mentioned, the list of which was enumerated in FF, footnote 2.

bit of difference.” In other words, if God does not exist, then life is futile, because the actions in question are not ‘ultimately significant’ (more precisely, they “are causally relevant to something that is ultimately insignificant” [WDa], and “are causally irrelevant to something that is ultimately significant” [WDb]). Given God’s existence, on the contrary, life is meaningful and not-futile, because human actions are ‘ultimately significant’ (more precisely, they “are causally relevant to events that are ultimately significant” [WD]). On this view, it is manifest that the notion of ‘ultimate significance’ plays a crucial role and that it clearly depends upon the existence of God. As Betenson points out, the notion in question can be appreciated only from “the point of view of the universe,” that is, a perspective which Betenson thinks of as “more ‘objective’ than our subjective perspective.”<sup>6</sup> But in what exactly does the ‘objective’ perspective at hand—and the connected ‘ultimate significance’ of life—consist according to Betenson’s reading of the stance maintained by Craig? The author refers to the typically theistic conviction that God provides the universe with ultimate justice. As Craig says, “God holds all persons morally accountable for their actions. Evil and wrong will be punished; righteousness will be vindicated.” This is the ‘Good’ that makes the universe ultimately fair and our life ultimately significant. The objective moral values established by God are the source of the ultimate significance, which therefore coincides with the attainment of ‘ultimate justice,’ the satisfaction of the Good, the fact that everyone gets what they deserve. As a consequence, our actions are not-futile. They acquire an eternal value because of their causal relevance to everlasting life. In conclusion, this is the ‘objective’ perspective and the connected ultimate significance of our actions according to Betenson’s reading of Craig’s view.

I agree with this reading. I also concur with Betenson on the following statement he makes that, given the truth of theism and the fact that the universe is ultimately fair, then “the satisfaction of the ‘Good’ cannot fail to be achieved.”<sup>7</sup> But I no longer agree with the author when he claims that from this it follows that

...nothing I do can affect this outcome. My actions do not “make a difference in bringing about the good”; my actions are utterly causally irrelevant to the satisfaction of the ‘Good,’ and as such my life is rendered futile in a (WDb) sense.<sup>8</sup>

With this thesis Betenson intends to contrast Craig’s view. For the author, the idea that “life is futile if God does not exist” is to be replaced with “life

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<sup>6</sup> FF, p. 4.

<sup>7</sup> FF, p. 6.

<sup>8</sup> Ibid., 6ff.

is futile if God does exist.” However, the way in which Betenson comes to the conclusion just mentioned is not convincing. He says that “the satisfaction of the ‘Good’ cannot fail to be achieved” (and from this he derives that our actions do not make any difference and our life is consequently futile). But he overlooks that ‘the Good’ in question coincides with nothing but the fact that everyone gets what they *deserve*. By definition, this implies that some of us *deserve* eternal life while others *deserve* eternal damnation. And this obviously presupposes that our actions—and our life—are ultimately significant.

### **On Betenson’s discussion of four possible objections**

After having argued his (alleged) confutation of Craig’s statements, Betenson moves on to explore four possible objections to this confutation. Here I intend to show that both the objections and the answers provided by the author are often implausible if not internally inconsistent. According to the first objection,

...perhaps the *ultimate* satisfaction of the Good is beyond our control—it is in God’s hands, so to speak—but that does not mean that our actions fail to causally relate to less significant, yet still significant events. For surely *that there is a Good*, means that our actions can be ‘good’ or ‘bad,’ and as such it is significant whether we do good things or bad things; it ‘makes a difference’ whether we do good things or bad things, not to the overall satisfaction of the Good, but to the satisfaction of the Good *here and now*.<sup>9</sup>

According to the author the objection fails because, while it is intended to defend Craig’s position (like any other objection discussed in this section), it ends up being inconsistent with the American philosopher’s view. For Betenson, Objection 1 is based on the idea that good or bad actions done *here and now* matter, while according to Craig “all that matters, from the point of view of the Good, is that the Good, as a whole, is satisfied.”<sup>10</sup> But the satisfaction of the Good *as a whole*, as I have already pointed out in the previous section, is the satisfaction of the ‘ultimate justice,’ and the ultimate justice is precisely the fact that, given God’s existence, we get what we deserve for good or bad actions done *here and now*. Craig’s idea that such satisfaction of the Good is ‘all that matters’ is therefore fully consistent with the emphasis that the objection at hand places on the significance of the good done here and now. In addition, Betenson does not see that, contrary to what he believes, Craig’s statements ascribe even more importance to

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<sup>9</sup> FF, p. 7

<sup>10</sup> FF, p. 8

actions done here and now than the objection does. In fact, while the objection distinguishes the whole Good from the actions just mentioned, and openly stresses that such actions are ‘less significant,’ Craig’s view implies the idea that the distinction at issue, given God’s existence, does not make sense at all—namely, for Craig the satisfaction of the whole Good is not simply ‘in God’s hands’ but depends also on us, and this grants meaning to our life.<sup>11</sup>

The second possible objection to Betenson’s thesis that life is futile if God exists runs as follows:

Our actions become significant because of the everlasting nature of their repercussions. Put simply, the good go to heaven and the bad go to hell.<sup>12</sup>

For Betenson, this objection fails because it relies “upon something of merely relative significance”<sup>13</sup> that does not matter from the universal point of view held by Craig. According to the author, the objection at issue mistakenly “assumes that it is an ultimately significant event whether *you* get to heaven or not.”<sup>14</sup> More poignantly, “it matters a lot *to us* whether we get to go to heaven, but when it comes to other people, particularly people we do not like, we just want justice to be done.”<sup>15</sup> I find that there are two problems here. First, these remarks are caused by an evident confusion between the theistic stance on which the objection is based and the possible or even frequent, but at any rate not theistically-inspired, shortcomings that can spoil our personal conducts. We might certainly be hostile to other people, and even go so far as wanting them to be eternally damned. But this does not have anything to do with the theistic stance from which the objection moves. Secondly, Betenson looks at the objection at issue as “relying upon something of merely relative significance,” and accordingly ends up ascribing to those who advance this objection, as I have just shown, an egoistic interest in their own salvation. But there is no reason for considering the belief that our actions have everlasting repercussions as merely subjective. As Betenson himself points out in his reading of Craig, the fact that the good go to heaven and the bad go to hell is precisely the ultimate and ‘objective’ satisfaction of the Good. Looking at the belief that

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<sup>11</sup> Christians generally maintain that—in John Paul II’s words—“God’s plan poses no threat to man’s genuine freedom; on the contrary, the acceptance of God’s plan is the only way to affirm that freedom” (Encyclical letter *Veritatis Splendor*, August 6, 1993, n. 45).

<sup>12</sup> FF, p. 8.

<sup>13</sup> Ibid.

<sup>14</sup> Ibid.

<sup>15</sup> FF, p. 9.

our actions have everlasting repercussions as merely subjective is acceptable only to the extent that the personal pronouns used by Betenson (*our* actions, *you* get to heaven, etc.), instead of referring to us or you *as humans*, are intended to exclude anyone except us or you. As a matter of fact, this reading of the way Betenson makes use of the personal pronouns is not ungrounded, since the author does add emphasis to them (emphases in the above quotations from pp. 8 and 9 of Betenson’s essay are his). But it is certainly groundless to believe that, according to the Christian perspective that inspires Craig’s statements, the use of personal pronouns does not have universal meaning, and that consequently Craig refers to the life, the free choices and the eternal destiny of only some of us in passages like the following:

It [theism] invests *our* lives with eternal significance: by *our* free choices *we* determine *our* eternal destiny. Moreover, *we* come into *personal* relation with the supreme good, God Himself.

The third objection Betenson advances reads as follows: “what matters is that *good is done*, irrespective of any potential reward in heaven or relative satisfaction of the Good here and now.”<sup>16</sup> As far as I can see, this objection relies on the idea that our life and our actions are not-futile because they contribute to the satisfaction of the Good through a disposition that amounts—as the author says—“to a statement of ‘duty for duty’s sake.’”<sup>17</sup> Accordingly, such a disposition does not have anything to do with the wish to be rewarded afterlife. For this reason—so I think the objection may proceed—our actions are meaningful although they are not intended to let us achieve any reward afterlife. The author argues in reply that “if all that matters is that good is done—or, rather, if this is sufficient to grant our actions ultimate significance—then there is no need for immortality at all.” In conclusion, “if Objection 3 is correct, then Craig will lose his claim that immortality is a necessary precondition for life’s having meaning.”<sup>18</sup> I find that Objection 3 is caused by a misunderstanding of the Christian theism that is behind Craig’s view—and if so, it cannot consistently be raised in defence of Craig’s point of view. In fact, contrary to the way the objection runs, for Christians there is a strict connection between the Good that is to be done and “any potential reward in heaven or relative satisfaction of the Good here and now.” At least according to the great creeds of the main branches of the Christian tradition, to do the good should itself be considered a reward, since Christians believe that it is God himself who

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<sup>16</sup> Ibid.

<sup>17</sup> FF, p. 10.

<sup>18</sup> Ibid.

grants them the ability to act well.<sup>19</sup> They believe that God grants them love for him, and that this love leads them to behave in conformity with the ultimate justice God has established. On this view, if they do the good, this depends on their wish to be in full communion with him, not only here and now but also in the afterlife.

Objection 4 is intended to strengthen objection 3 which, according to the author, “fails to reinforce Craig’s argument because it loses the requirement for personal immortality.”<sup>20</sup> Objection 4 states that the objective Good might involve our immortality, and this “would save the requirement for personal immortality.”<sup>21</sup> According to Betenson, “if the only way Craig’s arguments can be saved” is by claiming that it is *objectively* good that we live forever, then “there is no longer any consideration of heaven or hell, morally good action, just reward, etc., and there is absolutely no significance granted to our daily lives by these ultimately significant events.”<sup>22</sup> While I agree on the way Betenson argues such a response, I find that the objection is completely unreasonable. As I said in the first section, if the ‘Good’ which Betenson takes into consideration in the course of his article is the ultimate justice, namely, the fact that everyone will get what they *deserve*, then I do not see how this can be compatible with the idea that the ‘Good’ excludes the morality of our actions and the eternal reward they might lead us to achieve.<sup>23</sup>

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<sup>19</sup> The merit of faith, for example, can be thought of as due to charity. For more on this, see R. Di Ceglie, “Faith, Reason, and Charity in Thomas Aquinas’s Thought,” *International Journal for Philosophy of Religion*, 2015, DOI: 10.1007/s11153-015-9513-6.

<sup>20</sup> FF, p. 10.

<sup>21</sup> Ibid.

<sup>22</sup> FF, p. 11.

<sup>23</sup> Warm thanks to two anonymous reviewers for EPS who gave comments on an earlier draft.