

If the religious question is properly interpreted as the existential question about the ultimate meaning of life, one may suggest that there are two distinctly different ways of understanding it, because there are two senses of the phrase, “the meaning of life,” which may be distinguished as its “subjectivist” and its “objectivist” senses respectively.

In its first or subjectivist sense, the meaning of life is understood to depend on the subjective experience—here or hereafter—of those whose life is said to be meaningful. Thus, if one has enough to eat and drink and can enjoy the delights of family and friends, one may be said to have a meaningful life. Or, even if none of these conditions is met, but one can eventually attain the supernatural happiness of the beatific vision, then one’s life can be said to be meaningful, and ultimately meaningful at that; and God, understood as the ground of its meaningfulness, can be properly taken as that Something on which one is uniquely dependent for the attainment of such ultimate subjective satisfaction.

By contrast, life is understood to be meaningful in the second or objectivist sense, however satisfying or dissatisfying it may be subjectively, provided that it becomes part of, or contributes itself to, an objective good or accomplishment beyond itself. Insofar, then, as this good or accomplishment is not merely perishing but imperishable, the life of one who becomes a part of it, or contributes to it, is not only meaningful, but ultimately so; and God, accordingly, may be understood to be that Something on which one is uniquely dependent for one’s life’s having this kind of ultimate objective meaning or significance.

Thus, depending on which of these senses the religious question is taken to have, God will be at least implicitly understood as either simply the ultimate benefactor of life or its ultimate beneficiary as well—either simply the primal source of all things or also their final end.