

Meaning Without Mandate — 48

Agency, Imposed Purpose, and the Legitimacy of Finite Meaning

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Central claim

The exclusivity claim—that life can be meaningful only through a purpose assigned by the deity specified in Christian theism—confuses a purpose's source with what makes it meaningful. Compared with a value-and-participation account, the fact of assignment supplies no bridge to worthwhile content, agency fit, or participation; a possible non-theistic life can contain those features through love, inquiry, craft, and repair. Divine assignment therefore does not explain meaning by source alone and is not a necessary condition of meaning.

Religious vocation, theism, and ultimate meaning remain open as possible additions rather than exclusive foundations.

Preview:

Exclusivity claim

Missing bridge

Modal counterexample

Rational conclusion

Only a divinely assigned purpose can make a human life meaningful.

Assignment identifies a source; its link to value, agency fit, and participation still needs argument.

A possible non-theistic life can join objective goods to reflective agency through love, inquiry, craft, and repair.

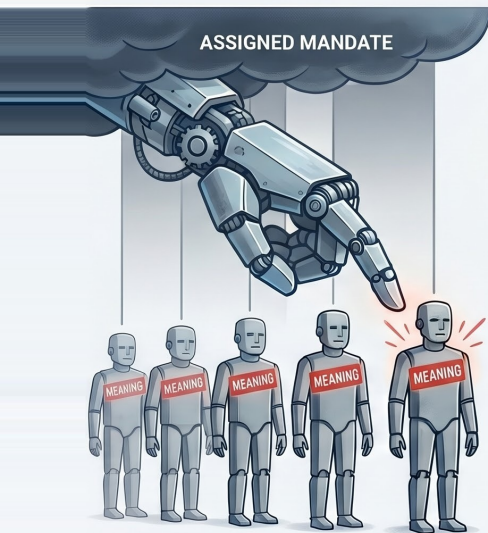
Source alone does not explain meaning, and divine assignment is not necessary; religious meaning remains possible.

The target is divine assignment as the exclusive foundation of meaning, not the broader claim that a religious relationship or vocation can matter deeply.

Visual preview:

Meaning Without Mandate: Reclaiming Agency and Significance

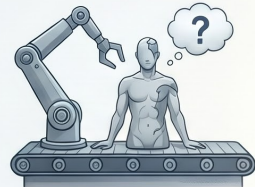
Mandate vs. Significance



Mandate vs. Significance

Meaning is not a 'sticker' placed on existence but an enacted participation in life.

The Creatorhood Critique



Creation implies a creator's responsibility rather than absolute ownership over the created being.

The Arbitrariness Challenge



Commands only create meaning if they connect with value the agent can understand.

The Participatory Model

The Social Texture



Significance is sustained through recognition, shared practices, and collective memory.



The Three-Feature Test

Meaning requires intelligible value, agency integration, and the power to shape a life.

FORMAL LOGIC PROOF (Optional)

Logic Component	Variable	Meaning-Confering Requirement
	$V(p)$	The purpose must be worth caring about.
	$I(a,p)$	The purpose must align with the agent's reasons.
	$C(x,a,p)$	External commands do not guarantee value or integration.

External assignment alone is insufficient for a meaningful life.

The visual contrasts imposed mandate with participatory meaning and connects creatorhood, arbitrariness, love, projects, social recognition, and agency. Its small logic panel is a simplified source-only sketch; Appendix A gives the exact modal and bridge-premise reconstruction. The limited result is that source alone does not explain meaning and a non-theistic case remains possible.

Abstract

Some Christian apologetics claims that human life is objectively meaningful only if its purpose is divinely assigned. This paper rejects that exclusivity inference. It compares a source-only mandate account with a value-and-participation account, on which a purpose contributes meaning when it concerns a worthwhile good, fittingly engages reflective agency, and is met with responsible participation. The comparison exposes a missing bridge: assignment identifies a source but does not by itself establish those meaning-making conditions. A modal counterexample supplies the second result: a coherent possible non-theistic world can contain objective goods, finite agents, and lives of love, inquiry, craft, or repair that satisfy the conditions without divine assignment. Conceptual analysis, ordinary exemplars, and naturalist, hybrid, and theistic scholarship support that possibility. Divine assignment therefore does not explain meaning by source alone and is not necessary for meaning. The argument does not disprove theism, deny that a religious vocation could deepen meaning, or settle whether reality has an ultimate purpose.

Keywords: meaning in life; purpose; divine mandate; agency; value; participation; theism; religious deconversion

1. The Inference Under Pressure

“Without the divine, life has no meaning” is rarely offered as a detached proposition. It is often spoken at the edge of grief: after belief weakens, after a moral framework shifts, or when death makes every finite achievement look temporary. The claim can therefore carry both an argument and a warning. The argument says that human purposes cannot be genuinely meaningful unless they are assigned by a creator (Craig, 2008). The warning says that losing theism entails nihilism.

The warning deserves compassion, but it does not make the argument valid. A person may lose a cosmic narrative while continuing to love a child, repair an injustice, understand a difficult truth, create something excellent, or keep faith with a friend. The philosophical question is whether those activities merely feel meaningful or can really make a life meaningful in the absence of divine assignment.

The target here is an exclusivity thesis:

A human life can be meaningful only if its purpose is assigned by the deity specified in Christian theism.

By a *God-concept* I mean a specified conception of deity rather than a generic proper name. The God-concept relevant here is the Christian conception of a perfectly good personal creator who can call human beings into relationship and vocation. This charitable specification matters. A random cosmic engineer would not represent the strongest theistic view, and no serious defender need claim that every command by any powerful creator makes a life meaningful.

Even under that stronger conception, however, creatorhood and assignment cannot do the explanatory work alone. A mandate matters only if its content is worthwhile and if the person can enter a fitting relation to it. Those conditions require a bridge from divine source to value and participation. They are also coherent in a possible non-theistic life. The governing result follows: divine purpose may add or deepen meaning, but assignment does not explain meaning by source alone and is not a necessary condition of meaning.

This result is narrower than atheism. It does not establish that no deity exists, that no cosmic purpose exists, or that religious lives are mistaken about their own depth. It separates those questions from a fear-driven inference. If the exclusivity thesis fails, a person may rationally examine theism on its evidence without treating despair as the cost of doubt.

2. Three Questions Hidden in One Word

Discussions of meaning often slide among three questions. Keeping them separate prevents the argument from winning by ambiguity.

1. **Cosmic purpose:** Does the universe or humanity as a whole have an intended end?
2. **Assigned purpose:** Has an authority given a particular person a role or task?
3. **Meaning in life:** Do a person's activities and relationships make that life intelligibly significant or worth living?

An affirmative answer to the first may support the second, and an attractive answer to the second may contribute to the third. But none of those transitions is automatic. A universe could have an intended function that gives no individual a fulfilling role. An authority could assign a role that is degrading or opaque. A person could find and respond to value without knowing whether the cosmos was designed.

Contemporary philosophy of meaning reflects this distinction. Wolf argues that meaning arises when subjective attraction meets objective worth, while Metz develops a naturalist account centered on engagement with the true, the good, and the beautiful (Metz, 2013; Wolf, 2010). Landau likewise argues that imperfect and finite lives can contain real meaning rather than needing perfection to count (Landau, 2017). These theories disagree in detail, yet none identifies meaning simply with receiving an assignment.

The distinction also clarifies what *objective* need mean. A purpose can be more than a private preference if there are reasons to value its object: relieving suffering, understanding reality, sustaining a relationship, or making something excellent. Objectivity in this modest sense requires that the judgment answer to features of the object and to reasons that can be discussed, criticized, and revised. Whether every such reason must ultimately depend on a divine intention is a further metaphysical claim, not part of the definition of objectivity.

That is enough for the present argument. The value-and-participation account offered here is not a complete theory of life's meaning. It identifies three conditions that jointly provide a sufficient contribution to meaning in at least some cases:

- C1. Value.** The project or relationship concerns a good that is not made worthwhile by the agent's bare preference.
- C2. Agency fit.** The agent can understand, endorse, and exercise relevant capacities in pursuing it, without requiring constant enthusiasm or total autonomy.
- C3. Participation.** The agent actually enters a fitting relation to the good—through care, understanding, creation, preservation, repair, or responsible response.

The conditions are plural and defeasible. Meaning can come in degrees, be mixed with suffering, and coexist with moral failure elsewhere in a life. Their role is to show how significance can be real without being imposed.

3. Why Assignment Alone Is Not Sufficient

The strongest theistic account is not refuted by observing that arbitrary orders can be cruel. A perfectly good deity, its defender will say, would not issue arbitrary or cruel commands. That reply is important—and revealing. It makes an evaluative bridge explicit: the deity's nature is said to ensure that a vocation is good and fitted to the person. A rich theistic account may defend that bridge, but creatorhood or assignment considered by itself does not supply it.

3.1 The source dilemma

Suppose the identity of the assigner is offered as the complete explanation of meaning. Then the content of the purpose becomes explanatorily idle. If the defender instead says that assignments from the specified deity are meaningful because perfect goodness ensures loving, just, truthful, or otherwise worthwhile content, then a bridge from divine nature to value is doing indispensable work. The assignment may communicate, authorize, or deepen the purpose, but the bare source relation does not explain meaningfulness from nothing.

The source dilemma

Either source is the complete explanation, in which case the purpose's content and the agent's response become idle; or the specified deity's goodness is invoked to connect assignment with love, truth, justice, communion, or another good that the agent can participate in. On the second horn, the evaluative and relational bridge is indispensable. Divine assignment may reveal or deepen meaning, but source alone does not explain it.

This resembles the structure of the Euthyphro problem without assuming that morality and meaning are identical. The question is explanatory: does an assignment have meaningful content merely because of who assigned it, or is it worthy because the specified deity's nature connects the person to something valuable? A sophisticated theist may answer that divine nature and value are inseparable. That answer can avoid crude arbitrariness, but it relies on a substantive account of goodness, relationship, and participation rather than on bare authorship.

3.2 Creatorhood is not ownership

Creation can generate special reasons. Parents have responsibilities toward children; artists have claims concerning their work; designers know what an instrument was built to do. Yet making a person differs from owning an object. Persons are centers of experience and agency. To explain why a creator's intention gives them meaning, one must explain how that intention respects their good, their capacities, and their standing as participants rather than tools.

An artifact analogy therefore proves too much. A hammer's function may be fixed by a maker because the hammer has no point of view. If human purpose is modeled in exactly the same way, agency becomes incidental to meaning. But a life whose subject could neither understand nor participate in its assigned end would be a strange candidate for a meaningful life. The analogy must be supplemented with relationship, recognition, consent, formation, or flourishing. Again, source is no longer carrying the account alone.

Goetz offers a developed theistic account in which purpose, freedom, and perfect happiness are closely connected (Goetz, 2012). Mawson likewise asks what a deity could and could not do to make human lives more meaningful, explicitly allowing that godless lives can have meaning while arguing that divine relationship could add distinctive kinds of it (Mawson, 2016). These positions are stronger than a bare mandate account precisely because they appeal to goods a person can share in, not to authorship as a magic meaning-maker.

3.3 Command cannot replace participation

Even a worthy task does not automatically make the recipient's life meaningful. Imagine someone officially assigned to protect a vulnerable community but who never understands the task, never acts on it, and remains wholly detached from those affected. The mission may be worthwhile, yet it does not thereby animate that person's life. Meaning requires some relation between agent and good.

That relation need not be self-invented. People often discover purposes through need, tradition, accident, obligation, or another person's invitation. Nor must every worthwhile commitment be revocable at will. Parenthood and promises can bind. The point is that a mandate becomes meaning-bearing through the person's understanding, response, and participation. An order printed in the structure of the cosmos but never integrated into a life would be an unrealized possibility, not a complete explanation of that life's meaning. A richer theistic argument can therefore be valid: if every divine assignment is worthwhile, fitted to the agent, and participatorily available, then such assignment can confer meaning. The bridge, however, must be defended rather than hidden inside the word *creator*.

4. Why Divine Assignment Is Not Necessary

The exclusivity thesis is modal: it says that no possible human life is meaningful without divine assignment. Defeating that necessity claim does not require assuming that the actual world is godless. It requires one coherent possible case in which value, agency fit, and participation occur although no deity exists and no purpose is divinely assigned.

Consider such a possible world. Conscious persons can suffer or flourish, propositions can be true or false, and relationships can answer to fidelity, betrayal, care, or neglect. In that world, a person patiently studies a neglected disease and develops a treatment. The project answers to truths not created by preference, benefits people whose suffering matters independently of applause, exercises demanding capacities, and joins the researcher to a good through sustained action. Caring for a frightened child, restoring a damaged habitat, composing music that enlarges emotional understanding, or keeping an honest friendship through illness supply parallel cases. None is meaningful merely because the agent likes it. Each is a candidate because value and participation meet.

The contested premise is that such a non-theistic world is metaphysically possible. It is not proved by imagining the case, but neither is it contradictory by definition. Wielenberg directly defends value, obligation, virtue, and human meaning in a godless universe; Metz develops an objective naturalist theory of meaning rather than reducing meaning to satisfaction (Metz, 2013; Wielenberg, 2005). These accounts may be challenged, but their arguments prevent the exclusivity thesis from simply defining objective value as divinely conferred and declaring every alternative incoherent.

If theism is true, the actual activities just described may stand within a providential order. That possibility does not answer the modal argument. The defender of necessity must show that a non-theistic world containing objective goods is impossible, not merely redescribe actual healing or fidelity as secretly providential. Sartre's emphasis on responsibility supplies a more radically agency-centered route (Sartre, 2007); the present account is deliberately hybrid. The agent does not manufacture value by choosing, but value contributes meaning to a life through agential participation.

This avoids two opposite errors. Pure subjectivism makes any sincerely desired project meaningful, including trivial or destructive ones. Pure externalism lets a valuable project make someone's life meaningful even when the person is alienated from it or never engages it. Value without agency risks conscription; agency without value risks whim. Their conjunction better explains why some finite commitments matter.

5. A Cumulative Case

The conclusion is supported by four mutually reinforcing strands rather than by one decisive intuition.

1. **Distinction strand.** Assigned purpose and meaning in life are distinguishable. The former identifies a source and directive; the latter requires intelligible significance in the life of a subject.
2. **Bridge strand.** A strong Christian account connects divine assignment to goodness, agency fit, and participation. That move may succeed, but it shows that the source relation needs evaluative and relational premises.
3. **Modal strand.** A possible non-theistic life organized around objective goods would satisfy the value-and-participation conditions without divine assignment. Naturalist accounts make this a serious philosophical possibility rather than a verbal stipulation.
4. **Explanatory strand.** Love, inquiry, craft, fidelity, and repair remain intelligible sources of finite meaning when described through value and participation; naturalist, hybrid, and theistic theories all appeal to more than bare external assignment (Landau, 2022; Mawson, 2016; Metz, 2013; Wolf, 2010).

Table 1 makes the comparison precise. The columns represent explanatory structures, not two exhaustive ways people actually live. A religious vocation can satisfy the value-and-participation conditions and thereby

occupy the stronger column.

Table 1: Tests for an account of meaningful purpose. The limited conclusion concerns what explains meaning, not whether a deity exists.

Question	Source-only assignment	Value-and-participation account	Limited conclusion
What fixes worth?	The identity or authority of the assigner.	Features of the good plus reasons responsive agents can assess.	Source does not replace a value explanation.
How does agency matter?	The recipient is principally the bearer of a role.	Understanding, endorsement, and exercised capacities partly constitute meaning.	Persons are participants, not instruments.
What connects agent and end?	Receipt of the assignment.	Care, inquiry, creation, repair, recognition, or other fitting response.	A mandate can remain existentially unrealized.
Can it be criticized?	Criticism risks appearing as resistance to authority.	Claims about value and fit remain open to reasons and correction.	Public assessment need not erase personal depth.
Must it last forever?	Cosmic duration may appear necessary.	Finite goods can matter through what occurs and whom they affect.	Duration can add value without creating it.
Can religious vocation qualify?	Yes, by stipulating source as sufficient.	Yes, when it connects the agent to worthwhile goods in a fitting way.	The richer account includes rather than excludes religious cases.

The two results carry different burdens. The source-only critique asks for a missing bridge: why should authorship or assignment ensure value, agency fit, and participation? The non-necessity argument asks whether one non-theistic case satisfying those conditions is metaphysically possible. Naturalist accounts and ordinary exemplars make that case serious, though they do not deductively prove naturalism. The source dilemma and the modal countercase therefore converge without being the same argument.

This is not a rhetorical victory over religion. It is an invitation to improve the argument. A theist can say that communion with the divine is intrinsically valuable, that creaturely fulfillment includes freely responding to love, or that providence coordinates finite goods into a larger whole. Each claim deserves examination. None is equivalent to “a creator made you, therefore the creator’s assignment makes your life meaningful.” The better accounts succeed, if they do, by becoming relational and evaluative rather than merely authoritarian.

6. Strong Objections

6.1 “Objective value itself requires a deity”

This objection directly denies the modal premise. If objective value is impossible in every non-theistic world, then no non-theistic life can satisfy the value condition. But that impossibility cannot be established by defining *objective* as *divinely conferred*. Wielenberg’s non-theistic moral realism and Metz’s objective naturalism supply developed alternatives that must be answered rather than excluded by vocabulary (Metz, 2013; Wielenberg, 2005).

A related but stronger existential objection distinguishes significance *to someone* from significance *simpliciter*—significance not dependent on any finite perspective. Cottingham argues that a fully meaningful life may require a transcendent orientation that answers a human longing for completion (Cottingham, 2022). The present argument need not show that transcendence adds nothing or that finite meaning is complete. It denies that a cure, a truthful discovery, or fidelity is unreal as meaning unless it is ultimate. Fullness may exceed finite meaning; it does not erase it.

6.2 “Death cancels every finite achievement”

Ending and never mattering are different properties. A conversation can be valuable although it ends; relief from pain matters although the beneficiary later dies. If future nonexistence erased past value, immortality would not help: every completed moment would disappear from the present even in an endless sequence.

Finitude can frustrate desires and limit projects. It may also intensify attention and make opportunity costs morally serious. Landau’s account of meaning in an imperfect world is relevant because it resists the inference from incompleteness to worthlessness (Landau, 2017). Eternity might preserve, extend, or transform meaning. It is not required for any event to have mattered while it occurred.

6.3 “Every worthwhile project is secretly assigned”

If theism is true, a defender may describe every worthwhile actual project as providentially assigned, including projects whose agents understand them in entirely secular terms. That response preserves a possible theistic interpretation of the actual cases, but it does not defeat the modal counterexample. Necessity requires the stronger claim that no non-theistic world containing objective goods is possible. That stronger metaphysical premise needs its own argument.

The response also changes the ordinary idea of a mandate. A purpose an agent could never recognize as assigned may still be divinely grounded, but it is not a received vocation. The paper’s two questions should remain separate: whether a person must recognize a divine mandate in order to live meaningfully, and whether meaning could exist in a world without any deity. Secret providence may answer the first in the negative while leaving the second contested.

6.4 “Divine relationship is not a mere command”

Agreed. A relationship of perfect love, if real and freely reciprocated, could be a profound source of meaning. Mawson’s nuanced theistic account develops exactly the possibility that divine involvement could add meanings not otherwise available (Mawson, 2016). But this objection concedes the paper’s distinction. Relationship, love, recognition, and response explain the meaning; the mere fact of being made and assigned does not.

The conclusion is therefore compatible with the claim that some of the deepest possible meanings are religious. It blocks the further claim that every nonreligious life is meaningless. Addition is not exclusivity.

6.5 “A creator has rights that creatures cannot evaluate”

Authority may create reasons for compliance, but reasons to obey and sources of meaning are not identical. A legal order can impose a duty without making the duty central to a person’s meaningful life. More fundamentally, an appeal to inscrutable rights cannot explain why the resulting purpose is good for, or meaningfully participated in by, the creature.

The Christian God-concept is normally defended as perfectly good rather than merely powerful. That defense invites moral and relational explanation: the purpose is fitting because it expresses love, justice, or flourishing. Such an explanation may succeed, but it again relies on value-laden bridges. Authority is not doing the work alone.

6.6 “Popular apologetics means ultimate meaning, not meaning in life”

Some apologetic presentations do focus on ultimate significance, cosmic justice, and immortality rather than denying every local good (Craig, 2008). That narrower claim should be stated as such. From “without theism there may be no ultimate cosmic purpose” it does not follow that “without theism no life contains meaning.” The first remains a metaphysical question; the second is the exclusivity inference rejected here.

Clarity helps both sides. The non-theist need not pretend that a finite account satisfies every desire for permanence. The theist need not make ordinary love, courage, or understanding unreal in order to argue that transcendence could complete them.

7. Conclusion

The fear that doubt entails meaninglessness rests on a conflation. Cosmic intention, assigned role, and meaning in a life can interact, but they are not the same. To explain why a divine assignment is meaningful, a defender must connect its source to worthwhile content, a fitting relation to the agent, and some form of participation. A rich theistic account may defend that connection. Bare creatorhood does not make the bridge disappear.

The bounded conclusion is therefore twofold. First, divine assignment does not explain meaning *by source alone*; the evaluative and relational bridge does indispensable work. Second, divine assignment is not necessary: a coherent possible non-theistic world can contain objective goods and agents who participate in them. Naturalist theories and the intelligibility of love, inquiry, craft, fidelity, and repair support that modal counterexample, even though they do not prove that the actual world is non-theistic.

Nothing here disproves theism, rules out an ultimate purpose, or denies that a religious vocation could deepen a life. It removes a coercive shortcut: despair cannot serve as evidence for the specified God-concept, and creatorhood cannot substitute for an account of why a purpose is good. Believer and nonbeliever can therefore ask the same constructive questions: what is worthwhile here, how can a person responsibly participate in it, and what reasons survive honest scrutiny?

A. Formal Reconstruction of the Central Thesis

The central argument has two parts. The first denies necessity through a possible non-theistic case that satisfies the meaning-making conditions. The second identifies the evaluative and relational bridge required for a divine assignment to confer meaning.

A.1 Plain-Language Reconstruction

The argument against necessity is:

- N1.** In every metaphysically possible relevant case, if a purpose concerns a worthwhile good, fittingly engages an agent's reflective capacities, and is met with fitting participation, then it contributes meaning to that agent's life.
- N2.** It is metaphysically possible that no deity exists and that at least one finite purpose has those three features.
- N3.** Therefore, it is metaphysically possible for a life to contain meaning without divine assignment; divine assignment is not a necessary condition of meaning.

The argument against source-only sufficiency is:

- S1.** A source-only explanation treats the fact of divine assignment as enough to establish meaning without a further premise about value, agency fit, or participation.
- S2.** A valid richer argument needs two bridges: divine assignment must entail those meaning-making conditions, and those conditions must entail a contribution to meaning.
- S3.** Therefore, divine assignment does not explain meaning by source alone; a richer theistic account may reach the sufficiency conclusion only by defending the evaluative and relational bridge.

A.2 Symbols

- $M(a, p)$: agent a 's participation in purpose p contributes meaning to a 's life;
- $D(a, p)$: purpose p is divinely assigned to a under the specified Christian God-concept;
- $V(p)$: purpose p concerns a worthwhile good;
- $I(a, p)$: purpose p fittingly engages a 's reflective agency; and
- $R(a, p)$: agent a participates in realizing, understanding, preserving, or responding to the good in p ;
- $\Box$: it is metaphysically necessary that; and
- $\Diamond$: it is metaphysically possible that.

A.3 Symbolic Form

The non-necessity inference is:

$$\begin{aligned} & \Box \forall a \forall p [(V(p) \wedge I(a, p) \wedge R(a, p)) \rightarrow M(a, p)], \\ & \Diamond \exists a \exists p [V(p) \wedge I(a, p) \wedge R(a, p) \wedge \neg D(a, p)], \\ & \therefore \Diamond \exists a \exists p [M(a, p) \wedge \neg D(a, p)]. \end{aligned}$$

The first line treats the value-and-participation conditions as sufficient for a contribution to meaning across the relevant possible cases. The second is the contested modal premise: a non-theistic case can contain objective value, agency fit, and participation. Given both premises, the modal conclusion follows. The inference is valid in normal modal reasoning; its force depends on the substantive plausibility of those premises, especially the second.

The richer sufficiency argument has this form:

$$\begin{aligned} & \forall a \forall p [D(a, p) \rightarrow (V(p) \wedge I(a, p) \wedge R(a, p))], \\ & \forall a \forall p [(V(p) \wedge I(a, p) \wedge R(a, p)) \rightarrow M(a, p)], \\ & \therefore \forall a \forall p [D(a, p) \rightarrow M(a, p)]. \end{aligned}$$

This inference is also valid. Its first premise is the indispensable theological bridge: every divine assignment is said to be worthwhile, fitted to its recipient, and participatorily available. Perfect goodness or divine relationship may be offered in support of that premise. The paper's source-only critique does not assert that the specified deity actually assigns worthless purposes; it shows that the assignment relation cannot explain meaning without the bridge.

The formal result is therefore defeasible at the premise level, not a proof that theism is false. The non-necessity result depends on the contested but independently defended metaphysical possibility of non-theistic objective value. The sufficiency result shows where a richer theistic account must enter. Together the forms preserve the paper's exact conclusion: source alone does not explain meaning, and divine assignment is not necessary.

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