

A. J. Ayer,

"The Meaning of Life,"

from *The Meaning of Life*

*A. J. Ayer, who died in 1989, was born in 1910. He was the best known and most iconoclastic philosopher of his generation. He brought logical positivism to England in his bombshell book Language, Truth and Logic, published in 1936, when he was only twenty-six, arguing that metaphysical statements are meaningless because they are unverifiable.*

There are many ways in which a person's life may come to have a meaning for him in itself. He may find fulfillment in his work, though this cannot be guaranteed to last until old age. The same is true of the satisfaction which some people find in their domestic lives, with the factor of children and grandchildren playing its part. The English, of all classes, have not been noted in the past for the affection which they have commonly shown towards their children, or indeed received from them, but there have been exceptions and they may be on the increase. There are hobbies, like chess or stamp collecting, which may become a passion. I am not suggesting that these activities are of equal worth but only that they may be equally absorbing. Some people are absorbed in making money, presumably in most cases for the sake of the luxury, prestige, or power that the possession of it brings, but in some cases simply for its own sake; I know of a man who having set himself the goal of making a million pounds by the time he had attained a relatively youthful age could think of nothing better to do than set out to make another. His life might have been more interesting if he had been less sure of success. It lacked the spice which the fear of ruin gives to the life of the gambler. Again, I am not saying that the life of a gambler is morally preferable to that of a shrewd investor but only that it may be a life of greater intensity.

*From The Meaning of Life, by A. J. Ayer, Weidenfeld & Nicolson. Reprinted with permission of the publisher.*

One of the most conspicuous elements in what counts and has long counted in many societies for most people as a meaningful life is the pursuit and still more the acquisition of fame. This has increased its importance in the present century because the improvement of communication, the diffusion throughout the world of many of the same programmes on television and the cinema, has spread fame much more widely. It is also ephemeral. Pop stars drop out of fashion and questionnaires reveal a surprising ignorance of what one might have thought were household names. I wonder, for example, what percentage of Asians could name either the Prime Minister of England, or the President of the United States. I think it might turn out to be surprisingly small.

In general, people who desire fame also wish to be thought to deserve it. They wish that their work should be esteemed by those whom they regard as persons best qualified to judge it, preferably in their lifetime when they can be awarded honour and gratified by praise, but also after their death. Sometimes those who are neglected in their lifetime take consolation in the thought that its merits will eventually be recognized. 'On me lira vers 1880,' said Stendhal in the 1830s and how right he was. Of those who are recognized in their lifetime, I think many attach more importance to the hope that their work will endure and their names be honoured as the authors of it.

Yet there is something irrational about this. It is comprehensible that if one has created an outstanding work of art, of whatever kind, or hit upon an original scientific theory, or written good poetry, or a novel of unusual depth, or even made some contribution to philosophy, one should wish the outcome to continue to be appreciated. But why should it matter that one's name be attached to it, After all one is not going to know anything about it. One runs no risk of suffering the humiliation of Max Beerbohm's Enoch Soames or the triumph that he would have felt if he had found a eulogistic record of his name in the British Museum's catalogue. All the same it does matter. I have the hope that some of my work will continue to be read after my death, perhaps even here and there in a hundred year's time. Yet I do not care at all for the idea that it will be attributed to one of my colleagues, however much I may like or admire him. Perhaps I should prefer that someone else should get the credit for my work, than that it should vanish without trace, but I cannot honestly say that this is a matter of indifference to me. If the work survives, I want my name also to survive

as its author. Yet it is not a pleasure that I shall enjoy. I shall have no means of telling whether it has survived or not.

Nevertheless, my friends and my children and my grandchildren, if I have any, will know that it has survived; and the belief that they will take pride in the fact is a source of satisfaction to me. I think that this is true, though its importance may be overestimated. A childless curmudgeon may equally relish the thought of his posthumous fame. Moreover, it is a motive which does not reach far into the future. I care a great deal for my son, my stepdaughter and her threeyearold child, but the idea that persons in the twentyfourth century will take any pleasure in my being their ancestor carries no weight with me. It is a matter of indifference to me, and I expect to most other people, if they think about it honestly, whether or not their family line continues for another three hundred years.

So far, I have been speaking about the satisfaction that people receive for the character and conduct of their personal lives. But for the most part when questions are raised about the meaning of life, they do not look for an answer at this level. The problem which is posed is much more general. Does the existence of the universe serve any purpose, and if it does serve a purpose, does the existence of human beings enter into it? There is a tendency to assume that an affirmative answer to the first question entails an affirmative answer to the second, but this need not be so. If any sense can be made of the statement that the universe has a purpose, then the purpose could be one in which the existence of human beings played no part. Admittedly, those who cleave to the superstition of determinism, are committed to holding that the original organization of the world causally necessitates the emergence of human beings, but even they are not obliged to attach value to this outcome. They could regard us as an excrescence on the scheme of things.

Nevertheless the vast majority of those who believe that the universe serves a purpose do so because they take this as conferring a meaning on life. How far down in the scale of organisms are they prepared to go is not always clear. The hymnodist Mrs. Alexander boldly strikes out with 'All things bright and beautiful, All creatures great and small, All things wise and wonderful, the Lord God made them all.' The first and third lines seem to allow for a good many omissions, but perhaps the second line makes up for them. Everything after all must have some size.

We must not overlook the last line of the stanza. Not all theories that the world has a destiny are theistic. There are conceptions of the governance of all things, and of men in particular, by an impersonal fate. Nevertheless, the notion of human life as owing its meaning to its playing its part in a grand design is most commonly associated with the belief that the universe was created by a being of supernatural intelligence, and it is this belief that I now intend to discuss.

Let me begin by saying that I totally reject it. In my youth, when I published my first book, I argued with some force that the concept of a transcendent deity was literally nonsensical. Now I am prepared to be a little more conciliatory. I am, indeed, in doubt, whether the notion of an incorporeal subject of consciousness is logically coherent, but as a follower of Hume I am prepared to envisage a series of experiences which are not linked in the ordinary way with experiences of a physical body. The problem which he and the rest of us have failed to solve is to fashion an adequate criterion of identity for such a series. But let that pass. The hypothesis then would be that the course of nature, including the emergence of human beings and the vicissitudes of their individual lives, was planned by the owner of this disembodied consciousness. There are indeed, difficulties about time, since a series of experiences presumably occurs in time and therefore must be antecedent to whatever our cosmologists light upon as the first physical event, if any. The series of psychical events, if deified, presumably had no beginning, which is not an easy conclusion to accept. But the difficulties of embracing either side of Kant's antinomy that the world had or that it had not a beginning in time are notorious, and they are not lessened by assuming time to start off with the world's alleged creator.

Fortunately, we need not become entangled in them. The hypothesis of there being a creator, even if it is allowed to be intelligible, fails through its being vacuous. To have any content it would need to specify the end for which the world was designed and the way in which various features of it promote this end. But this it does not even attempt to do. The so-called argument from design owed its popularity to the occurrence of teleological processes within the world; the adaptation of animal and human organs, such as those of sight and hearing, to their functions, the pollination of flowers, the dependence of parasites upon their hosts, phenomena now explained, more or less adequately, by the theory of natural selection. What was overlooked, except by some philosophers such as Hume in his *Dialogues Concerning Natural Religion*, was that the analogy of a watch and a watchmaker, or a building

and its architect, apart from its internal imperfections, since neither watchmakers nor architects are incorporeal, simply does not apply to the universe as a whole. From what we know of it, the universe bears no resemblance to a clock or any other artefact. It has some structure, since anything that we are capable of describing must have some structure or other, but not any structure that the hypothesis of a creator prescribes. Whatever happens, the believer in the creator is going to say that that was what was intended. And just for this reason his hypothesis is vacuous.

'It can't all just be a fluke,' a young philosopher said to me the other day. On the contrary a fluke is all that it can be. I do not know how much that goes on is capable of explanation. I suspect rather less than we are apt to assume. But let us be optimistic. Let us suppose that we command a physiological theory which accounts for all the phenomena of consciousness in terms of processes in the central nervous system, and let us suppose that this theory is derivable from some biochemical theory, and so along the line until we come to relativity theory and the subatomic theories of contemporary physics. And let us suppose that we realize Einstein's vision of integrating them. What have we then? A set of formulae that are at best contingently true. They happen to account for the phenomena, as they are so far known to us, and maybe they will continue to do so. Or maybe they will need to be modified, as their predecessors have been. It makes no difference which way it goes. In either case the phenomena are what they are and the theories are adapted to them. Both could logically have been otherwise.

Suppose now, what we have seen to be false, that sense could be made of ascribing these theories to the intentions of a supernatural being. That too would make no serious difference. We should still end up with a fluke. For the fact that the world was ordered in the way it is rather than some other, if not due to the limitation of his capacity, must simply be put down to his whim.

Though they commonly go together, religious belief and belief in an afterlife, not taking the form of reincarnation, are logically distinct. I know of two atheists, both of them Cambridge philosophers, one of whom, J. Ellis McTaggart, was quite certain that he would survive, since he held the strange metaphysical view that everything in the world was a disguised immortal soul, and the other, C. D. Broad, whose interest in psychical research led him to believe that there was about an even chance of his surviving. What is curious about Broad is that he had no wish for this to happen. He thought poorly of this world

and believed that the next world, if there was one, was quite likely to be even nastier.

I cannot claim to have gone deeply into the subject of psychical research, but such evidence as I have seen of what it has yielded has not seemed to be strong enough to overcome the main objections to the idea of one's surviving one's death; first the unsolved logical difficulty of defining personal identity in anything other than physical terms; and perhaps more importantly the abundant evidence which goes to show that all our conscious experiences are causally dependent upon our brains. I have already admitted that we do not have a set of well established psychophysical hypotheses which correlate experiences one to one with states of the brain but the evidence for the overall, dependence of consciousness upon the brain is very strong.

Even if life had a meaning in the sense that we have just been discussing, it would not be known to the persons who had faith in it, nor would they have any inkling of the part that their own lives played in the overall plan. It might, therefore, seem surprising that the question was so important to them. Why should it matter to them that they followed a course which was not of their own choosing as a means to an end of which they were ignorant? Why should they derive any satisfaction from the belief that they were puppets in the hands of a superior agent?

I believe the answer is that most people are excited by the feeling that they are involved in a larger enterprise, even if they have no responsibility for its direction. This is a dangerous propensity since it makes them easier to manipulate, and so facilitates the growth of political and religious fanaticism. On the other hand, it can also serve the promotion of good causes, such as the agitation in favour of the victims of political injustice, or the organization of relief for the inhabitants of areas of famine. The case of war is an interesting example. I can speak, from experience, only of the second Great War, and only from an English point of view. I took part in it first as a soldier and then as a member of departments of intelligence. I suppose that I spent no more than half my time in England but it included the period of the blitz and that in which the V I rockets were replaced by the V 2s. The feature of this war, which concerns my argument, is that the civilian population was involved in it to a greater degree than in any previous war and certainly to a greater degree than they ever will be again, if our present strategy is maintained. As a result, it was apparent that they were living with a greater intensity, and also displaying in

manner and action a greater amount of fellow feeling than they previously had or would have again. It may sound shocking, but I honestly believe that, with the exception of those who suffered personal injury or personal loss, especially in the form of death or maiming of those whom they loved, most English people enjoyed the war.

This is allied to the fact that if we take the intensity with which a life is lived as a criterion of its being meaningful we shall find no very close correlation between meaningful lives and those that we consider morally estimable. The same will be true if we attribute meaning to the lives of those who pass for having been great men or women, especially if their greatness consisted in their power. I do not know whether Lord Acton was justified in saying that great men are almost always bad, but it is certainly not the case that they have always been good. We need only think of Alexander the Great, Augustus Caesar, Jenghis Kahn, Cesare Borgia, Martin Luther, Peter the Great, Catherine the Great, Louis xiv, Florence Nightingale, John Pierpont Morgan, Lord Beaverbrook and David Lloyd George. I have avoided bringing the list up to date with Hitler and Stalin, in order to avoid the question whether we are going so to construe greatness that causing an inordinate amount of evil strips one of the title. There will still be no denying that they were major historical figures and I suspect that, on the whole, they were satisfied with their lives, Hitler at least until his last days and even then he seems to have seen the collapse of his fortunes more as the failure of the German people than his own; Stalin quite probably until the very end, since even if he was poisoned he was not aware of it.

In the realm of the arts, the disparity is not so flagrant, but still there is no positive correlation between being a great artist and an amiable man. Wagner is perhaps the most obvious counterexample. There is little correlation between goodness and happiness. If virtue is said to be its own reward it is because it so often acquires no other. As the Psalmist put it, it is the ungodly whom one sees 'flourishing like a green baytree'. In speaking of the ungodly I am not straying into deism. I am not even thinking of major criminals, who quite often come to grief, but of the multitude of minor villains who appear to have come to the fore in recent years, persons skilled in sharp practice on the stock exchange, hooligans, racists of one or other colour, persons whose principal aim is not merely to keep up with the Jones's but to outstrip them without being too scrupulous about the means.

The obvious disparity between virtue and prosperity in this world

troubled the philosopher Immanuel Kant. He believed that there ought to be another world in which this balance would be redressed and thereby discovered a motive for believing in a God who would bring this about. I use the word 'motive' rather than 'reason' because, much as I dislike Kant's moral philosophy, I have too much respect for his intelligence to suppose that he regarded his pious hope as a serious argument. After all, it was Kant who first demolished the tricky ontological argument for the existence of God, the surprisingly durable pretence that the existence of a necessary being can be established by smuggling the factor of necessity into some grandiose concept, and went on to dispose with equal ease of the argument from design and the argument to a first cause.

My reasons for disliking Kant's moral philosophy are not only technical, inasmuch as he never succeeds in finding a way to bring his goodwill into action, but also moral. I do not care for the supremacy which he accords to the sense of duty over every human sympathy or principle of altruism. In his theory, indeed, it is only the sense of duty that counts. This is because he believed, mistakenly, that to act or fail to act in accordance with it lies in our power, in a way that the possession of the motives for other forms of action and our responses to them do not. In fact, actions done from a sense of duty are no less subject to causal conditioning than any others. Does the extent to which our actions are causally conditioned rob them of their moral value? I think not. I think that acts of cruelty or kindness are ugly or attractive in themselves, irrespective of their being correlated, in some measure, with states of our central nervous system, or explicable, however vaguely, in terms of our genetic endowment and the stimuli to which we have been subjected. This question is more difficult when it is directed towards the agent. Our ordinary moral judgments imply that he could not only have acted but in many cases chosen otherwise and it is not entirely clear to me what this means. I am inclined to think that the concept of desert which is included in our notion of moral responsibility is incoherent, but this is not a question into which I can enter here.

If I say that there are no such things as objective moral values, this is not to be taken as a profession of moral nihilism. I am not endorsing any moral principle that anybody happens to hold, still less alleging that all actions are morally neutral. On the contrary, I have strong moral sentiments and am anxious that other people should share them and act upon them. In saying that moral values are not objective, I am

maintaining only that moral terms, while as it were, commenting on natural features of the world, do not themselves describe them. One consequence of this is that moral argument, in so far as it is not a dispute about some matter of fact, say, an agent's motive or the physical character of his action, is possible only on the basis of some common sentiment. For this reason, it is commonly *ad hominem*. One endeavours to convince one's opponent that his standpoint commits him to endorsing a course of action of which one is sure that he cannot honestly approve.

Evidently, there is no general answer to the question what constitutes a meaningful life. A life lived in one culture at a given social and economic level which satisfies one person might well fail to satisfy another who dwelt in a different or even in the same environment. Treating the question subjectively one can say, platitudinously, that it is a matter of the degree to which one achieves self fulfilment. Treating it objectively, it is a matter of one's standing in one's society and the historical influence, if any, that one exerts. We have seen that the results of these different viewpoints need not coincide either with each other or with what we humane and liberal persons would regard as morally commendable.

I conclude with a question to which I do not know the answer. How far should our judgment of the worth of a person's life be affected by the fact that we take it to be based upon an illusion? Let us take the example of a nun, belonging to a strict order, leading a life of austerity, but serene in the performance of her devotions, confident that she is loved by her deity, and that she is destined for a blissful future in the world to come. If this example is considered to be too subjective, we can allot her a position of authority in the convent and locate her at a time and place when abbesses were historically important. It makes no difference to the problem. The question is whether it matters that the deity in whose love she rejoices does not exist and that there is no world to come.

I am inclined to say that it does matter, just as G. E. Moore in the last chapter of *Principia Ethica* goes so far as to say that 'a merely poetical contemplation of the Kingdom of Heaven would be superior to that of the religious believer, if it were the case (as he in fact thought it was) that the Kingdom of Heaven does not and will not really exist.' I suppose that he was and I am yielding to what he called 'a strong

respect for truth'. But what is our argument? It is not as if there were some end that the nun's life is failing to achieve. So far as one can survey the Universe sub *specie aeternitatis* one has to agree with Macbeth. It is 'a tale, told by an idiot, full of sound and fury, signifying nothing'. What is wrong with this quotation is its aura of disillusionment. It is not that we are sentenced to deprivation. It is open to us to make our lives as satisfying as our circumstances allow. But to return to the nun. It would indeed be terrible for her to discover that the point of her life was nonexistent. But *ex hypothesi* this is something that she will never know.