

# 'In life, the meaning comes in living.'<sup>1</sup> Discuss.

**First Prize: Alex Mace, Ripley St Thomas CE High School**

A meaningful life is one that has significance: one that has point, substance, purpose, quality, value, and direction. The meaning of life is that which gives human life this significance. The American entertainer Danny Kaye (1913 - 1987) said "life is a great big canvas, and you should throw all the paint on it you can." To borrow Kaye's metaphor, life – your stint in existence – is a blank canvas waiting to be painted, and the meaning of life gives us a reason to do so.

There are many different candidates for the meaning of life. At the grim end of the spectrum sits Freud and his belief that death was the meaning of life. According to Freud, the whole intention of the life-instincts, *Eros*, is to return to a death-like state where the ego cannot be harmed.

More cheerfully, happiness is one of the more common answers to the meaning-of-life question. Terry Eagleton, inspired by Aristotle's *Nicomachean Ethic*, describes happiness as "a kind of baseline in human life ... you cannot reasonably ask *why* we should seek to be happy."<sup>2</sup> Happiness appears to be an end for human behaviour to which all else are merely means. For instance, money and power only act as means to allow happiness.

Death and happiness are just two examples. As Eagleton demonstrates, the sheer number of different candidates for the meaning of life is overwhelming: "power, love, honour, truth, pleasure, freedom, reason, autonomy, the state, the nation, God, self-sacrifice, contemplation, living according to Nature, the greatest happiness of the greatest number, self-abnegation, desire, worldly success, reaping as many intense experiences as possible, having a good laugh, and so on."<sup>3</sup> Faced with this vast list of possibilities it is unsurprising that many despair and conclude that the meaning of life is whatever you make it to be. Such a conclusion borders on becoming a most unsatisfactory cliché, leaving a bitter aftertaste. However, James Hemming throws a lifeline to those stuck in this state of indecision. Hemming argues that the meaning of something is derived from our relationships with it and the relevance it has to us. Life is no exception: "its meaning for us lies in the relationships we have established with it."<sup>4</sup> This relationship can be created by interacting with, and getting involved in, life. In other words, by living. Hence, "in life, the meaning comes in living."

With his argument, Hemming moves away from the meaning *of* life to meaning *in* life. The distinction is subtle but significant. The meaning of life is something universal that gives life significance, and it applies to us all regardless of who we are; it is akin to a transcendent meaning of *human* life. If we deny the possibility of this, we are left with meaning in life: there are aspects of each life that give it significance, but these are not the same for everyone. If there is a source of meaning present in every single life, then its universal nature could elevate it to the status of *the* meaning *of* life. Hemming's argument denies the possibility of a meaning of life because no two people will have the same relationship with

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<sup>1</sup> James Hemming, *Individual Morality*, 1969, p.191

<sup>2</sup> Eagleton, Terry – *The Meaning of Life: A Very Short Introduction*, 2008, p.81

<sup>3</sup> *Ibid*, p.88

<sup>4</sup> Hemming, James – *Individual Morality*, 1969, p.180

life (due to free-will, freedom, personality, preference, and the other aspects of individuality). As there is no universal relationship, there is no source of significance that we all share – there is no meaning *of* life. Instead, each life will have its own significance derived from the individual's unique relationship with it.

This approach is very attractive. Instead of simply saying that the meaning of life is whatever you make it to be, it shifts the focus from the yearning for a mystical meaning of life to the apparently more realistic and practical realm of meaning in our individual lives. Hemming shuts the door on a meaning of life.

But is this shift justified? Is it true that there is no meaning *of* life, only meaning in individual lives? This requires deeper understanding of why the meaning or significance of something comes from our relationship with it. Hemming provides us with the explanation: “meaning comes from relationship, and relationship of any depth involves commitment.”<sup>5</sup> In fact, “to be fully committed ... is to get from life the fullness of its meaning.”<sup>6</sup> So for Hemming, meaning comes from commitment.

For the claim that there is no meaning of life but only meaning in life to hold up, there can be no sources of significance or meaning that are universal to us all, as any such source would qualify as a possible meaning of life due to its universal nature. This appears problematic for Hemming. It is reasonable to accept that commitment does produce significance, but commitment is not the only source of meaning. For instance, it can be argued that reason is such a source: the ability to understand life and the world around us using that “God-like light called ‘reason’,”<sup>7</sup> and the opportunity we have to use it, gives life significance without any commitment to actually use the ability. The fact that we have it is enough to make our lives significant. Similarly, it is an aspect of human life that it has great potential to accomplish and achieve great and varied things. This part of our nature gives us significance, purpose, quality and value, without us actually being committed to fulfilling our potential or to doing anything.

Commitment is clearly not the only source of significance for life, while other sources such as reason and potential are universal. This reopens the door to the possibility of a meaning *of* life. Hemming appears to have no way of stopping a meaning of life from casting a shadow over commitment and the relationship found within life. In life, the meaning doesn't just come in living.

This, however, is not the end of the story. Although the claim that there is no meaning of life doesn't work when grounded in Hemming's idea that commitment generates meaning, another basis for the claim is that meaning is a purely subjective concept that is entirely dependent on individual perception and opinion. In the extreme form of this position, meaning boils down to individual opinion and taste, and there can be no universal sources of meaning that could become the meaning of life as meaning is irrational.

This claim is quickly rebutted by pointing out that people's judgements on meaning are informed and created logically, rather than just being random and irrational inclinations. Once meaning is allowed to be rational in this manner, the door swings open for a meaning of life: if, for instance, the argument for happiness being a source of meaning in life is strong enough, and it is accepted unanimously, then it is perfectly possible for happiness to be elevated to *the* meaning of life as opposed to *a* meaning in life.

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<sup>5</sup> *Ibid*, p.181

<sup>6</sup> *Ibid*, pp.188-189

<sup>7</sup> Solomon, Robert – *The Passions: Emotions and the Meaning of Life*, 1993, p.12

Hemming provides a valuable insight into the meaning-of-life question and presents valid ideas about meaning being derived from commitment within relationships. However, his argument does not stand up on its own. It presents a major source of meaning in life, but it fails to either deny the possibility of a universal meaning of life or provide a candidate. Nevertheless, if we alter the quotation to 'in life, the meaning *also* comes in living', Hemming's idea lives on as a vital consideration in the meaning-of-life debate. This alteration allows for meaning to come from elsewhere, while still highlighting an important point: remembering that meaning comes in living provides an anchor for those who risk being caught in the flow of a *raison d'être*. The meaning *of* life is not the totality of meaning *in* life: meaning can and should be derived from a vast range of areas in life, from personal relationships to contributions to a wider cause. Pursuing the meaning of life may be necessary to live a fulfilled life, but what good is this pursuit if you fail to embrace the other more immediate sources of meaning and experiences that life places before you? What good is knowledge of the meaning of life, in other words, if you fail to 'live'?

Returning to our canvas metaphor, there remains the possibility of a meaning of life, something that presents our canvas with significance while inspiring our creative talents, and we should continue to seek it out in order to make the most of the opportunity before us. By amending Hemming's idea slightly, it becomes a warning and serves as a reminder that we must take to heart as we start painting. It allows our great big canvas of life to be transformed into a work of art.