

Second Place: Sam Dennis, Cockermonth School

*"To be or not to be, that is the question; whether 'tis nobler in the mind to suffer the slings and arrows of outrageous fortune, Or to take arms against a sea of troubles, And by opposing, end them"*ⁱ. Some, notably Schopenhauer, have taken this as questioning whether any meaning can come from living, or if it is better *"not to be"* at all. Others have seen it as a depiction of moral struggle: action versus inaction, acceptance of circumstances or self-will towards something better. We are human *beings*; defined as such by the fact that we exist. Around 100 billion of us have flashed in and out of existence without the universe noticing. So is there any meaning in simply living? Must we instead be human *doings* if we are to matter at all?

On the one hand, if a man were to 'live' in its most basic manifestation- eating, drinking, excreting and sleeping- there is little meaning to his life. Likewise, is there any meaning in the lives of those who are in a permanent vegetative state, who will never speak, think or experience happiness? Yet conversely, those who aspire to live their lives to the fullest may still find themselves landed with the misfortunes and traumas that are so abundant in the world. How is it fair that the life of someone born in the developed world might be worth more than that of someone born into poverty, because their aspirations are more likely to come to fruition? Does 'meaning' in life entail any inherent justice?

Initially, our goal must be to define what we denote by 'meaning' when used in connection with life. When questioned what the meaning of life is to an agnostic, Bertrand Russell replied, *'I suppose it is intended as some general purpose. I do not think that life in general has any purpose. It just happened. But individuals have purposes'*ⁱⁱ. This view is fairly predominant in secular thinking: the writer makes it his purpose to contribute to the cultural tapestry, the health minister to stop us smoking. This is completely amoral as, on the other hand, a terrorist's purpose is to create mass hysteria and serial killers' crimes may constitute the meaning of their lives. Nonetheless, human life seems to have no inherent purpose, save perhaps self-preservation. Humans are an infinitesimally small and unimportant part of the universe as a whole in which even on our own planet, we are one of millions of species, and the most destructive of these at that. Furthermore, that our intelligence offers us awareness of ourselves beyond basic desires of survival and continuation does not accord us any intrinsic purpose beyond these instincts. 'Meaning', it follows, is self-determined. There are two immediate implications of this. First, if meaning is something we acquire through fulfilment of our aspirations, which are self-accorded purposes, then meaning is only attainable if we have the ability to make choices. And second, that meaning in life is bereft of moral imperative. Whilst these propositions are sensible ones, they are in need of a little clarification and expansion. Overall, I wish to maintain the first of these, but to move away from the stark individualism and hedonism inferable from the second.

I want first to tackle the issue of free will in relation to meaning before introducing questions of morality. The ability to imbue our lives with meaning necessarily entails a capacity to make choose our own aims and lifestyle. At its extreme this may once again be illustrated by someone whose only capabilities are confined to those which constitute life in its most basic form, a cycle of eating, sleeping and waking. Say this person exists in total isolation; incarcerated, uneducated and ignored. Here the only function possible is an animal one: to live as long as possible. But like a rock that waits on the shore only to be worn away by the wind and the tide, to live only to die holds no meaning. Nor does it seem

to me to be the case that species continuation constitutes a general purpose, as many people cannot or do not wish to procreate, and procreation in itself may only perpetuate the cycle of living and dying without true meaning. Freedom of choice is therefore a human faculty apparent in virtue of our advanced level of consciousness above rocks, plants and animals. However, we are still left with our earlier conclusion that self-determinate meaning is amoral.

To test this assertion, a brief discussion of semantics will be beneficial. I believe a distinction must be made between the *meaning* of a life and the *value* of a life. We have already concluded that *meaning* is something which we apportion upon ourselves as individuals, a goal or mode of living which we aspire to fulfil. But the *value* of life is what our life means to others, by which I mean society, and so is designated upon us externally. The intrinsic worth of life is that it is a well of potential. It is therefore a moral obligation to preserve life in order to maintain its potential. The actualising of this potential is the *value* of a person's life, measured by his or her impact within their spheres of influence. Someone with positive value may be described as a person of excellence within their chosen field (was so-and-so a good prime minister) and who has contributed to the general good of society to a lesser or greater degree (was so-and-so charitable and loving). Of course, whether or not a life was of positive value to humanity is very much debatable in its application. For instance, how does one judge Hannibal? He was an unparalleled military tactician and reformer in Carthage, but his armies killed thousands and he was forced into exile. Today we may judge him historically great, but whether he promoted the common good of humanity is another question. I do not profess that judging the value of a life is easy or objective. But I do uphold that it is a natural, even necessary process in the functioning of society, because it helps us form collective morality concerning ourselves.

Perhaps then, by talking in terms of both the meaning *and* value of lives we might see a way to restore moral status to the meaning of life. The prevalent view in 21st century western society, which has come to be represented by oversimplified Darwinist and Benthamite ideas of hedonism, competition and individualism, has inadvertently removed much of the moral imperative in the way society conducts itself. However, the terms 'meaning' and 'value' are by no means mutually exclusive within a community of free individuals holding shared values. The most worthy and profitable lives can be led by those who pursue a synthesis of these general aims. Consider the emancipators, the reformers, the magnanimous and the altruistic: people who made improvement, greatness and equality their goals. These are the people who are recognisable as having led lives of heightened meaning. It follows that ensuring the freedom of all becomes a moral imperative, so that all may choose a path to making their lives meaningful.

It is therefore true that 'in *life, the meaning comes from living*'. But by this we should not think merely of survival and success, even to the detriment of others. Instead, we should aim to live our lives with a meaning which is conducive to both ourselves and the community, for only thus can the highest states of life be reached. Obviously, this is not an original idea. In Aristotelian ethics the concepts of *arete* and *ergon* (*excellence* and *function*), together form a general concept of *well-living*, for which there is no adequate English term. Comparable ideas are expressed in Mill's utilitarianism and Kant's concept of the good will, for both emphasise the worth of individuals in the wider context of morality. Moreover, Mill identified the inextricability of the individual from the general ethics of society, whereby freedom is a necessary postulate of morality because it allows blame and praise to be attributed to actions.

In this short space I have attempted to recast traditional ideas in the light of the widely held views of today, namely a general denial of an objective source of moral authority and tendency towards viewing ourselves and the universe as matter-of-fact, rather than fundamentally purposeful or moral. But if we view the meaning of life from the perspective of a society of free individuals, a vision and hope of harmony and fulfilment begins to emerge. It is not a utopian vision, but a progressive and working one where we create our own worth. Where we do not suffer the slings and arrows of outrageous fortune, but take arms against a sea of troubles and by opposing them, end them.

ⁱ From 'The Oxford Shakespeare, The Complete Works', 'Hamlet', William Shakespeare, Clarendon Press, 1995.

ⁱⁱ 'The Basic Writings of Bertrand Russell', Bertrand Russell ed. Robert E. Egner and Lester E. Denonn. Routledge, 1992.