

Third place: Joshua Brown, University College School

The meaning of life has been a recurrent theme in philosophy for millennia. The issue arises implicitly in much of philosophical discourse; from the virtue ethics of Aristotle to the hedonism of Bentham. But the concept of meaning, and the view of what is required for its fulfilment, has undergone fundamental change. Meaning is an intrinsically human concept; no longer should it be seen as prescribed or objective. Living – in other words, experience – is fundamental to the concept of meaning, but is not sufficient. It is the grappling with existence that creates meaning; the ability to face absurdity, and defeat it with purpose.

The question, ‘Why are we here?’ raises two fundamentally different issues; firstly, it addresses our origin; in other words, the existence of a deity. Secondly, it questions our purpose; what we should live for. For much of European history, philosophical discourse was dominated by the view that the two questions were intrinsically linked, if not the same. It was the existence of god that provided meaning; his being gave to the human sphere an importance it could otherwise not have had. Without god, all was futile. This view was not significantly challenged until the 19th century, and it was not until even the 20th century, through the existentialist school, that ‘meaning’ could truly be separated from the idea of a deity. Origin and meaning are two entirely different concepts; it is possible to believe in the existence of god, whilst having little idea of our purpose, or meaning. Indeed, deists fall into this precise category; the belief that a non-intervening god exists only takes one so far.

The first issue that must be addressed, therefore, is that of an intervening deity. A human’s understanding of the world comes from experience. The passage of time, the existence of various life-forms, a human’s own ability to alter nature – all of these become known to us through our observation and interaction with the world. Even morality, as Hume suggested¹, is based on pleasure and pain; one disapproves of murder because one comprehends the pain resulting from it, and that pain is only known through experience. It follows from this, that we cannot claim to know that which we have not experienced; indeed, whenever one tries to explain a belief, the explanation is empirically based. One might believe in UFOs, for instance, having seen a strange object in the sky. But from where arises a belief in a deity? It comes from a collection of different sentiments; fear of nothingness, and hope, which are in turn based on our experience of loss and mystery. The traditional view of god as perfection is clearly an extrapolation of human qualities; the quality of goodness is infinitely expanded, just as negative human traits are forgotten – god is not seen as a murdering brute, for example. It thus appears that we have, on all accounts, no *evidence* that god exists; and we certainly have no idea as to what a deity would be like; for humans are themselves responsible for the one to which Europe was so long accustomed.

Where does this leave our quest for meaning? Having established that empirical evidence is essential for claims of knowledge, it is clear that we cannot be aware of an objective meaning. We do not access objectivity by looking at the stars, or gazing into a stream. The bible, in which so many have put their faith, is in reality the product of man; indeed, it was written over the course of more than a millennium, and edited several times. Where lays any firm evidence, that this is the word of god? The impact of cultural practice at the time of its writing is self-evident; misogynistic claims, such as ‘The birth of a daughter is a loss’² clearly highlight the man-made nature of the text. Indeed, we have no access to objectivity

¹ *Treatise of Human Nature*, David Hume.

² Ecclesiastics 22:3

merely by virtue of the fact that we are human. It is not possible to break out from the confines of human subjectivism and discover objective meaning. The barriers which prevent us from such discovery thus lead to the ultimate conclusion that meaning must come from within a person, not from an objective reality.

Meaning is itself a human concept. It is only because humans have the ability to reflect on the world, and consequently change their behaviour on their own initiative, that meaning exists. Free will allows us to formulate our aims; we grapple with existence by forging our own paths in it. This is essentially what meaning is – the utilisation of one's free will to give oneself a purpose. The crucial remaining question, is how does one create meaning in a seemingly meaningless world? For as has been said, we have no access to objectivity; we are, as it were, blind as to our purpose. This, as Camus pointed out³, is the absurdity of existence; the lack of objective meaning combined with a human's desire for meaning creates a void, giving rise to the absurd. Meaning is created by challenging this absurdity, through active rebellion against it. To achieve this, an individual must create his own purpose; his own *meaning* in life, in other words, to fight against absurdity. The fact that we inhabit only one of billions of planets is frequently used to support the claim of meaninglessness. How can it be that humans, who fill so apparently small a place in the grand scheme of things, have meaning? The answer, again, is free will. Whatever the size, scale or depth of the universe in which we exist, the individual is equally free to pursue meaning, simply because it comes from within, not from outside the human realm.

The importance of free will in the creation of meaning cannot be overstated. Animals do not have the capacity of free will; thus, the term 'meaning' cannot be applied to them. A fish cannot fight against the absurd by forging its own path through a period of reflection. It simply abides by biological impulses; being dominated by them, it lacks the ability to give itself meaning. For meaning is not simply the execution of impulses; if it were, one would have to ascribe meaning to the most basic life-forms. On this basis, bacteria could be said to have meaning, in the sense that they fulfil their biological purpose. But such an analysis misses the fundamental point – meaning, as a concept, must be guided by the individual, for in the absence of free will, action is devoid of purpose. An individual's profession – whether in drama, philosophy, philanthropy or any other realm – can provide this meaning, so long as it is motivated by freedom of will, and gives an overarching sense of purpose.

Just as an animal guided by biological impulse is incapable of creating its own meaning, individuals who do not face up to absurdity cannot succeed. There is evidently a gulf in the meaningfulness of different lives. Can it seriously be supposed that a man who indulges in animalistic activity, never questioning his aims or ambitions, has as meaningful a life as one who reflects on his position in the world and acts with a sense of purpose? There is a clear difference: in the case of the former, he has succumbed to the constraints of absurdity; the latter has succeeded in creating meaning. Humans have a universal set of needs; regardless of culture, we need security, basic levels of welfare, and an element of interaction with other members of society. The fulfilment of these needs, whilst not in itself sufficient to provide meaning, is necessary for such an achievement. For without these basic requirements, a person does not have the ability to search for meaning; if one is consumed by starvation, one cannot go through the process of reflection and action that is required. Once these basic needs have been satisfied, meaning can be pursued.

³ *The Myth of Sisyphus*, Albert Camus

Meaning is thus the ultimate pursuit of a human being. Through freedom of will, individuals can guide their own lives, creating meaning for themselves. Reflection, followed by action, appears the route to such an end, although the means are left to the individual; one can find meaning in an infinite number of ways. The vital aspect of such a challenge is to recognise absurdity, but not to succumb to it. Rather, meaning comes from its active, continuous rejection.