

Does life have a purpose?

By Rex Morgan

Is there any meaning to life? It's an age-old question that has exercised the minds of untold numbers of thinking people throughout the centuries.

What is life all about? Should we just live for the moment, or is there much more to it than that? Does each person's life, and the life of humankind as a whole, have a special purpose, an overriding meaning?

"The two most important days in your life are the day you are born and the day you find out why", wrote author Mark Twain. But is there anything to find out? Is there a reason why we were born?

In 1988, American Philosophy professor Hugh Moorhead compiled a book entitled *The Meaning of Life According to Our Century's Greatest Writers and Thinkers*. He asked 250 leading academics to respond to the question: "What is the meaning of life?" and published their replies.¹

The philosophers' answers

Philosopher Carl Jung wrote back: "Really, I don't know what the meaning or purpose of life is, but it looks exactly as if something were meant by it".

Novelist Joseph Heller said he had no answers to the meaning of life "and I no longer want to search for any".

Poet and essayist T.S. Eliot responded that this is a question "which one spends one's whole life in finding the

answer for, and he is sorry he has not yet got to the point where he can sum it all up on a flyleaf".

Many philosophers have tackled this most basic of all questions, but it seems that none of them has yet come up with a widely accepted and truly satisfying answer.

Walter T Stace, former professor of Philosophy at Princeton University, summed up the modern view of the meaning of life in this way: "The picture of a meaningless world and a meaningless human life is, I think, the basic theme of much modern art and literature. Certainly it is the basic theme of modern philosophy. According to the most characteristic philosophies of the modern world from Hume in the 18th century to the so-called positivists of today, the world is just what it is and that is the end of all inquiry. There is no reason for its being what it is".²

Noted palaeontologist Stephen Jay Gould wrote: "We are here because one odd group of fishes had a peculiar fin anatomy that could transform into legs for terrestrial creatures. We may yearn for a higher answer, but none exists".³

Eminent British philosopher Bertrand Russell referred to the universe as "purposeless" and "void of meaning". He said about mankind: "His growth, his hopes and fears, his loves and his beliefs, are but the outcome of accidental collocations of atoms..."⁴

However the universe began, whether with a "big bang", with the development of life through millions of years of evolution, or in some other yet undiscovered way, this

must have all been the result of random chance only, if there wasn't a creative mind behind it. As far as purpose is concerned, in that case we would be no different than bugs which start out as eggs, grow into adults, in turn lay their own eggs and

The world stage

One of "the immortal bard" William Shakespeare's most famous speeches comes from *As You Like It*:

All the world's a stage, and all the men and women merely players; they all have their exits and their entrances.

This is a description of life that makes sense, and has been quoted over and over in the centuries since it was written. But if life is a stage and all people are actors, is there a playwright?

All of Shakespeare's plays were created by the hand of the celebrated "immortal bard". Can it be that life, the greatest play of all, is the one and only play without an author? Is it simply a random sequence of events with each actor unaware of what is behind it all? Or is there a master playwright directing the performance—an overall plan giving it meaning?

Shakespeare, sadly, was as mortal as the rest of us, but is there a truly "immortal" bard behind the scenes of life? The accompanying article examines this question.



Renowned Russian author Leo Tolstoy concluded that God had a purpose in creating life.

eventually are eaten by predators or die of old age, in an endless cycle that repeats itself over and over without any meaning.

But somehow this doesn't seem good enough for us as humans. We have the amazing ability to think and dream and even to ask questions about the meaning of life. We can set goals and struggle to achieve them. Surely we are different to the animals; surely there is meaning, purpose and value to our lives?

In his book, *A Confession*, the renowned Russian author Leo Tolstoy asked: "What is the meaning of my life? What will come of my life? Why does everything which exists

exist and why do I exist?" After spending many years searching for the answer to this quandary, in the end Tolstoy concluded that the solution was found in religion and faith—it had to do with God.

When you think about it, Tolstoy's conclusion makes some sense. If there is a God, surely he would have a purpose in creating life? But in the absence of a God, logic suggests that the only explanation for the universe is that it got here by chance. In that case, it is devoid of meaning or purpose, something that just "happened", nothing more than a serendipitous cosmic "accident".

Celebrated writer CS Lewis touched on this concept with the following

words in his book *Mere Christianity*: "If the whole universe has no meaning, we should never have found out it has no meaning: just as, if there were no light in the universe and therefore no creatures with eyes, we should never know it was dark. Dark would be a word without meaning".⁵

So we are left with just two realistic alternatives. Either the world began by random chance, in which case life has no meaning, or it was brought into being by a God, in which case it would seem likely that he did it for a reason and it does have meaning.

As a matter of interest, let's follow the latter line of reasoning for a moment and assume that God exists

and the Bible is his revelation to mankind. Is there something in the Bible to indicate God's purpose for making the world and is that purpose something that makes good sense?

The Biblical view

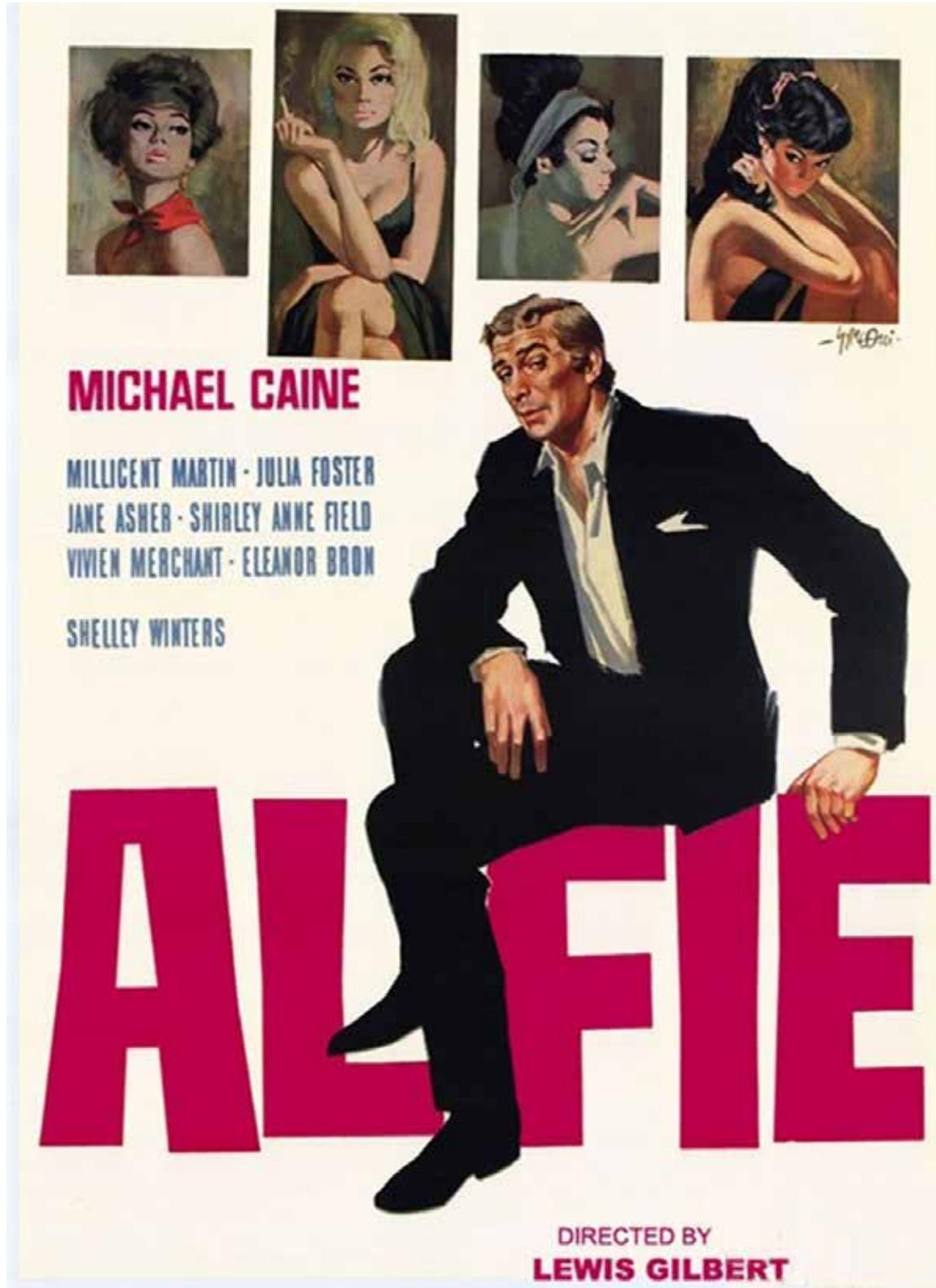
According to the opening passage of the Bible, at the creation of the world God said: "Let us make mankind in our image, in our likeness, so that they may rule over the fish in the sea and the birds in the sky, over the livestock and all the wild animals, and over all the creatures that move along the ground".⁶

So God made man to live on a higher level than the animals. In contrast to the animals, man was made "in the image of God", in other words, possessing godly attributes which weren't given to the animals—things such as the ability to think and reason abstractly, to imagine, to appreciate beauty, to love, and to have a concept of, and even a relationship with, God.

One of these remarkable attributes was described by wise King Solomon, when he observed that God had "set eternity in the hearts of men".⁷ That would explain our fascination with the vast and seemingly limitless universe and our ability to grapple with concepts such as infinity and eternity. No wonder we think about the desirability and feasibility of living

forever. God has equipped our minds to deal with these thoughts and concepts, of which animals have absolutely no inkling. The very fact we ask ourselves "What is the meaning of life?" highlights our remarkable capacity to contemplate and explore such intangible things.

Three thousand years ago, King David of Israel recorded his musings on the meaning of life in one of his poems. Referring to God, he said: "When I consider your heavens, the work of your fingers, the moon and the stars, which you have set in place, what is man that you are



The lyrics of 'What's it all about, Alfie?' the hit song from the 1966 movie Alfie, point out that life has no meaning without love.

mindful of him, the son of man that you care for him?"⁸

He went on to boldly respond to the age-old question about the purpose of life: "You made him a little lower than the angels and crowned him with glory and honour. You made him ruler over the works of your hands; you put everything under his feet".⁹

This is a rather grandiose statement, claiming that everything is put under the control of mankind and that we are crowned with glory and honour. But it is obvious that we don't have control of everything that happens around us, not even our own desires and emotions!

Later in the Bible, this statement is expounded with the note that although things aren't fully this way yet, David's poem foreshadowed, or pointed to, what will occur in the

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When I consider your heavens, the work of your fingers, the moon and the stars, which you have set in place, what is man that you are mindful of him, the son of man that you care for him?

future.¹⁰ It goes on to repeat these astounding promises of glory and honour, and of ruling over everything in the universe. It adds that God is “bringing many sons and daughters to glory”.¹¹

Children of God

The Bible refers in a number of places to humanity as “children” of God. For instance, the gospel of John, which speaks of Jesus Christ’s time on the earth says: “Yet to all who received him, to those who believed in his name, he gave the right to become children of God—children born not of natural descent, nor of human decision or a husband’s will, but born of God”.¹²

Writing to the church in the city of Rome, the apostle Paul called the church members “God’s children” and went on to say: “Now if we are children, then we are heirs—heirs of God and co-heirs with Christ, if indeed we share in his sufferings in order that we may also share in his glory”.¹³

In other words, the Bible shows the reason God created human beings is that he is producing a *family*, with whom he is going to share the universe! He is a God of love and wants to share all of his wealth and property with others.

Included in this promise is the opportunity to live forever. One of the most often quoted Bible verses says: “For God so loved the world that he gave his one and only Son, that whoever believes in him shall not perish but have eternal life”.¹⁴

At the very end of the Bible, this amazing plan or purpose of God for mankind is repeated: “Those who are victorious will inherit all this, and I will be their God and they will be my children”.¹⁵

Mankind: worthless or priceless?

One of the greatest astronomers of all time, Carl Sagan, was interviewed by Ted Koppel on the United States *Nightline* TV programme just a few days before his death in 1996. He was asked if he had any final words of wisdom to share with the people of the earth, and this was his answer:

We live on a hunk of rock and metal that circles a humdrum star that is one of 400 billion other stars that make up the Milky Way galaxy which is one of billions of other galaxies which make up the universe which may be one of a very large number, perhaps an infinite number of other universes. That is a perspective on human life and our culture that is well worth pondering.

This perspective places us in a rather insignificant position—just a tiny, inconsequential speck buried in a vast universe.

It is interesting to contrast this view with that held by Christians and Jews, who believe a loving God designed this as a special planet carefully crafted to be a fitting home for the human beings who formed the pinnacle of his creative acts. Christians even believe that God himself stooped down to become a human being and suffered for each person he had created. This means we are so amazingly valuable that the incomprehensibly great God who created us was willing to die to save us! In that case we are priceless rather than worthless!

What a marvellous promise! God is going to share everything he has with the human beings he has created. We are destined to inherit everything he possesses and live in an intimate family relationship with him forever. According to the Bible, that is the purpose of life.

What’s it all about, Alfie?

The 1966 movie *Alfie*, starring Michael Caine, was a resounding success on its release and became a classic, prompting a remake in 2002 with Jude Law in the lead role. Hal David and Burt Bacharach’s catchy tune from the original movie became a hit song that has achieved enduring popularity. Many people can hum the tune and remember the opening words: “What’s it all about, Alfie? Is it just for the moment we live?”

In this song, the character Alfie stands for all of us. We can even change the question by re-arranging two of the letters of his name, to make it: “What’s it all about, a life?”

So indeed, what’s it all about, Alfie? Interestingly, the lyrics of the hit vocal point to the answer we have just seen in the Bible! They include the words: “I believe there’s a heaven above, Alfie” and “I know there’s something much more, something that even non-believers can believe in”. This “something” turns out to be love: “I believe in love, Alfie”.

The Bible verses we have just looked at can be summed up in the word “love” too. God is going to share the universe with his children because he loves them. The reason God is having a family is no different from the reason we humans have families—because of love.

As another famous song accurately puts it: “Love makes the world go round”. Love is what makes life worthwhile and meaningful.

Hal David’s lyrics continue with the sentiment: “Without true love we just exist, Alfie”. When people find true love, it gives wonderful new meaning and purpose to their lives. No longer

“Everything is meaningless”

Believe it or not, a passage in the Bible says “Meaningless, meaningless. Everything is Meaningless.”¹ The writer goes on to say that there is no meaning in wisdom, wealth or pleasure, because ultimately it all ends in death. You wouldn’t expect to find statements like this in the Bible!

The writer, King Solomon, a man highly respected for his wisdom, wrote these words out of frustration after spending a huge amount of time and resources in search of the purpose of life, and how to find true happiness. Solomon was an extremely wealthy king, and had plenty of resources to call on. So he was able to throw everything at this problem. He built mansions, gardens, parks and vineyards. He bought more animals than anyone else in memory, had numerous slaves serving him, amassed piles of gold and silver, and even took on a harem, consisting of hundreds of women. “I denied myself nothing my eyes desired”, he said. Yet when he surveyed all of this, he concluded that it was all meaningless, and hadn’t brought happiness and fulfilment.²

So why is this story in the Bible? What can we learn from this experience?

There is one vital key at the end of this account that puts it all in perspective. The author begins to sum up: “Now all has been heard, here is the conclusion of the matter.”³ Then he brings God into the picture, and declares that the whole duty of humans is to honour their heavenly father.⁴

The lesson is clear: apart from God, everything is meaningless. But with God in the frame, everything is full of meaning and life has a wonderful purpose after all.

Notes

¹ Ecclesiastes 1:2.

² Ecclesiastes 2:10–11.

³ Ecclesiastes 12:11.

⁴ Ecclesiastes 12:13.

Christians are encouraged to find that God assigns special meaning to each and every individual life.¹⁹

In summary, we have two choices set before us. Either the universe and life appeared by blind chance and life is meaningless, or God created us through his love, for the tremendous purpose of sharing the universe and his boundless love with us forever. It’s quite a contrast, isn’t it? What do you think makes the most sense?

Notes

¹ http://articles.chicagotribune.com/2002-06-03/news/0206030147_1_mr-moorhead-philosophy-answer.

² Walter T. Stace, “Men Against Darkness”, *The Atlantic Monthly*, Sept 1948.

³ David Friend and the Editors of *Life*, “The Meaning of Life, Reflections in Words and Pictures on Why We Are Here”, 1991, p. 3.

⁴ Bertrand Russell, *Why I Am Not a Christian*, Touchstone Books, New York, 1957, pp. 106–107.

⁵ C.S. Lewis, *Mere Christianity*, Collins, Glasgow, 1978, p. 42.

⁶ Genesis 1:26.

⁷ Ecclesiastes 3:11.

⁸ Psalm 8:3–4.

⁹ Psalm 8:5–6.

¹⁰ Hebrews 2:8.

¹¹ Hebrews 2:10.

¹² John 1:12–13.

¹³ Romans 8:17.

¹⁴ John 3:16.

¹⁵ Revelation 21:7.

¹⁶ 1 John 3:1; 4:9–11; Romans 5:8.

¹⁷ Ephesians 1:11 (*The Message*).

¹⁸ Romans 8:29 (*New Living translation*).

¹⁹ Psalm 139:13–14; Matthew 10:29–31.

do they just exist, but suddenly there is a reason, a meaning, for life.

The song continues: “Until you find the love you’ve missed you’re nothing, Alfie”. In other words, life has no meaning and we are of no value without love. The reference here is to love on the human level, which is vitally important, but the Bible talks about a “love that we’ve missed” which is even greater than that. People who read the Bible and understand it come face to face with the love of God. When they see that love demonstrated by the sending of Jesus into our world as a human being to die for us so that we can live forever as his brothers and sisters,¹⁶ they begin to see a wonderful new meaning and purpose for their lives.

In the light of Mark Twain’s comment on the importance of the day you find out why you were born, it is pertinent to note the Bible’s statement: “It’s in Christ that we find out who we are and what we’re living for”.¹⁷

When Christians come to appreciate the importance of Jesus Christ there is a major change in the way they live, because they now understand why they were born. They now know the purpose of life, and have a personal relationship with the one who created them. They discover that “God chose them to become like his Son, so that his Son would be the firstborn among many brothers and sisters”.¹⁸ Even better than appreciating the meaning or purpose of human life as a whole,



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