



What's it all about, Alfie?

By Rex Morgan

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. The catchy tune of the Hal David and Burt Bacharach hit song of the original movie 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 rearranging two of the letters of his name, to make it, "What's it all about, a life?"

That's a good question. In fact, 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 mankind as a whole, have a special purpose, an overriding meaning?

It's an important question – surely the most basic and foundational question we can ask. A question that is very well worth considering.

In his book entitled *My Confession*, the great 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?" He spent many years searching for the answer to this quandary and in the end could only conclude that the solution was found in religion – 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 what if there is no God, as so many people believe? Logic suggests that if there were no Creator, then the only explanation for the universe is that it got here by chance. In that case, it is devoid of meaning or purpose – it is just something that "happened" – nothing more than a serendipitous cosmic "accident". However the universe began, whether with a "big bang", with the development of life through millions of years of evolution, or in some other way that is yet undiscovered, this has all been the result of a process of random chance, if there wasn't a creative mind behind it.

Renowned palaeontologist Stephen Jay Gould championed this conclusion when he 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."

The Modern View

Walter T. Stace, former Professor of Philosophy at Princeton University, summed up the modern view of the meaning of life in this

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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 eighteenth 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... To ask any question about *why* things are thus, or what purpose their being so serves, is to ask a senseless question, because they serve no purpose at all."

The philosopher Bertrand Russell said about mankind, "His growth,



his hopes and fears, his loves and his beliefs, are but the outcome of accidental collocations of atoms..."

In 1988, Dr Hugh Moorhead, a Philosophy Professor at North-eastern Illinois University, compiled a book entitled *The Meaning of Life According to Our Century's Greatest Writers and Thinkers*. The 250 leading academics interviewed in this survey failed to come up with a viable answer. Many frankly admitted they just didn't have any idea.

Stephen Hawking, widely recognised as one of the foremost intellects alive today, stated in his book, *A Brief History of Time*: "If we find the answer to that (the question of why we and the universe exist), it would be the ultimate triumph of human reason – for then we would know the mind of God."

In other words, Hawking acknowledges that to find the meaning of life is to discover God. It is clear that if there is no God, the universe is a product of chance and therefore has no meaning. 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 eventually are eaten by predators or die of "old age", in an endless cycle that repeats itself over and over without any meaning.

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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

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 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.

them. Surely we are different to the animals; surely there is meaning, purpose and value to our lives?

Noted writer C.S. 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."

So there are two alternatives. Either the world began by random chance, in which case life has no meaning, or it was created 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 that line of reasoning for a moment and assume that there is a God and that 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 sense, that satisfies?

The Biblical View

According to opening passage of the

Bible, at the creation of the world God said "Let us make man in our image, in our likeness and let them rule over the fish of the sea and the birds of the air, over the livestock, over all the earth and over all the creatures that move along the ground" (Genesis 1:26).

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, who said God had "set eternity in the hearts of men" (Ecclesiastes 3:11). 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 an ancient book of poetry. "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? 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" (Psalm 8:3-6).

This is a rather ambitious statement on the meaning of life, claiming that everything is put under the control of mankind and we are crowned with glory and honour. Yet we must admit there is no way we have control of earthquakes, volcanoes and tsunamis, let alone our own desires and emotions!

Later in the Bible, in the book of Hebrews (2:8), this statement is explained to mean that although these things haven't yet happened, David's poem was a prediction of what will occur in the future. The letter to the Hebrews repeats the promises of glory and honour and of ruling over everything in the universe. In speaking of these



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 Program 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, 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 say that God himself stooped down to become a human being and suffered for each person he had created. The implication of this is that 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*!

promises, this section states that God is "bringing many *sons* to glory".

Children of God

The Bible refers in a number of places to humankind as "sons of God" or "children of God". For instance, the gospel according to 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" (John 1:12-13).

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" (Rom 8:17).

In other words, the Bible shows that 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" (John 3:16).

At the very end of the Bible, this amazing plan or purpose of God for

mankind is repeated: "He who overcomes will *inherit all things* and I will be his God and he will be my son" (Rev 21:7).

What a fantastic promise! God is going to share everything he has with the human beings he has created. We will inherit everything he possesses. According to the Bible, that is the meaning of life. What an awesome meaning and purpose it is! God made us to be his family, so he can share everything in the vast universe with us, forever!

So indeed, what's it all about, Alfie? Interestingly, the lyrics of the hit vocal point to the answer given 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 surveyed can be summed up in the word "love" too. God is going to

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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 do they just exist, but suddenly there is a reason, a



Cute and cuddly: *A new life brings with it the hopes and dreams of another set of parents for every success for their child. On the one hand, a baby is almost totally dependent on its parents for even its most basic needs. On the other hand, he or she has a tremendous potential for achievement and accomplishment later in life. But does this life have any overall, lasting value and purpose?*

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" that is even greater than that. People who read the Bible and understand it come face to face with the love of God. When they find that love and see it demonstrated in the way that Jesus died so God can have a family with which to share the universe, they begin to see the real purpose and meaning of life. This changes the way they live.

Indeed there are 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 love, with us. It's quite a contrast, isn't it? What do you think makes the most sense?

If you'd like to read more on this subject, please write to PO Box 2709, Auckland and request our free publications, *Life – whose idea is this?* and *Purpose – more than just a number*.

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