The Meaning of Life

A. J. Ayer

Introduction by Ted Honderich

64th Conway Memorial Lecture
19th May 1988
The Meaning of Life
SOUTH PLACE ETHICAL SOCIETY

South Place Ethical Society has been in existence for almost two centuries. In 1888 its name was changed from South Place Religious Society to South Place Ethical Society. In 1988 it is a centre for the introduction and exchange of fresh concepts and goals.

Its Library and Journal, *The Ethical Record*, are amongst the benefits members (subscription still £4 a year) enjoy. Its meetings every Sunday morning and afternoon are open to all—as is the Annual Conway Memorial Lecture. Concerts every Sunday, and classes on weekdays (themes including Evolution and Controversies in Biology; Philosophy from Hobbes to Humanism; Futures, Utopias, Science Fiction; Radical Writing in London 1930s-1980s; Humanism and the Novel) are further features of the Society’s year.

The Society’s objects (as interpreted by its General Committee in the light of a 1980 Court ruling) are

the study and dissemination of ethical principles; and
the cultivation of a rational and humane way of life, and
the advancement of education in fields relevant to these objects†

†Formally, the objects of the Society are “the study and dissemination of ethical principles and the cultivation of a rational religious sentiment.”

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Preface

Paine, Conway, Ayer

This is the sixty fourth Conway Memorial lecture. Moncure Conway was, like Sir Alfred Ayer, a biographer of Thomas Paine. Indeed, *Thomas Paine* (Secker & Warburg, London 1983) refers to “the South Place Ethical Society which holds its meetings in London in Conway Hall, very suitably named after the American Moncure Conway, to whom . . . we owe so much for our knowledge of the life and works of Thomas Paine.”

Conway’s *Idols and Ideals with an Essay on Christianity* was published in 1877. He remarks: “What a confession of the emptiness of all sectarian religions that at the end of so many ages they have left the educated world without certainty on the very points — God and Immortality — upon which they have concentrated their power! So many million sacrificed, so much wealth diverted from man to God and from the present to the future, only to leave us in scepticism at last.”

Having invited A. J. Ayer, I was told he was “thinking of composing a lecture which might be called ‘The Meaning of Life’, discussing the ways in which life can be meaningful even though there is no good reason to believe either in a deity or in objective values.”

His happy choice of chairman is Professor Ted Honderich of University College, London, who holds the Grote Professorship of the Philosophy of Mind and Logic which Ayer held for thirteen years from 1946. As he states in *Part of my Life*, University College “has never yet had a department of theology”. Life resists compartments. runs the truism: *The Meaning of Life* speaks to all our lives.

Nicholas Hyman
SIR ALFRED AYER was born in 1910 and educated at Eton College and Christ Church, Oxford where he later became a Lecturer and Student in Philosophy. During the war he served in the Welsh Guards and Military Intelligence. He was Grote Professor of the Philosophy of Mind and Logic in the University of London, 1946-59, and Wykeham Professor of Logic in the University of Oxford, 1959-78. His numerous distinctions include honorary doctorates from the Universities of Brussels, East Anglia, Durham, London, Trent (Ontario) and Bard (USA). He has an honorary Fellowship of University College London, is an honorary member of the American Academy of Arts and Sciences, honorary Fellow of Wadham College and New College and honorary Student of Christ Church. He has been a Fellow of the British Academy since 1952, is a Chevalier de la Légion d'Honneur and a member of the Order of Cyril and Methodius, First Class (Bulgaria). He was knighted in 1970.

BY THE SAME AUTHOR

Language, Truth and Logic
The Foundations of Empirical Knowledge
Philosophical Essays
The Problem of Knowledge
The Concept of a Person and Other Essays
The Origins of Pragmatism
Metaphysics and Common Sense
Russell and Moore: the Analytical Heritage
Probability and Evidence
Russell
The Central Questions of Philosophy
Part of My Life
Perception and Identity: Essays Presented to
A. J. Ayer with his replies to Them
Hume
Philosophy in the Twentieth Century
Freedom and Morality
More of My Life
Wittgenstein
Voltaire
Thomas Paine
Introduction

Professor Sir Alfred Ayer is to me, and to very many others, the living exemplar of a philosopher. I take him, among living thinkers, to be the one who has made the greatest contributions to philosophy. There is no need to introduce him. It is an honour for me to give a little testimony as to his achievement.

He is a philosophical exemplar for the reason that he has both defended what can be called right principles of philosophy, and also carried forward the subject magnificently in accordance with them. There is no great difficulty in doing philosophy, where that involves no reflection on what the subject should be like — but merely proceeding with deep thoughts, or flights of fancy, or the devising of intricacy. It is another thing to defend the constraints of clarity and the like that need to be put on philosophy if it is to be any good, and, more than that, to have the intellectual strength to advance the subject while observing them.

His first book, Language, Truth and Logic, whatever reservations may now be had about it, rescued philosophy in the English language from a kind of mauldering. Another, The Problem of knowledge, is the most elegantly enlightening of inquiries into its subject. A third, The Central Questions of Philosophy, establishes him, if a proof is needed, as the evident
successor to Bertrand Russell. There have been many other books. He has recently given a new edge and panache to intellectual biography, most recently with his admirable *Thomas Paine*.

He was lecturer and student in Philosophy at Christ Church, Oxford, and then Fellow of Wadham. He gave its distinction to the Grote Professorship of the Philosophy of Mind and Logic at University College London. He made more celebrated the Wykeham chair of Logic in Oxford. As for the rest of the world, he has lectured anywhere worth lecturing.

His style is perfection. Would that we could emulate it. His independence of mind has been constant, and also contagious. Many of us have caught it from him. I am thus able to say with affection, that in what we are about to hear he touches in passing on what he unkindly calls a superstition, but is in fact a theory which is rare in that, so far, he has not been captured by its unsettling truth.

But no matter — it is not his subject this evening, which carries the title “The Meaning of Life”. It is reassuring to be able to say, finally, since we are about to hear a lecture about life, that he has some knowledge of it, and has been no cloistered don. He is no stranger to its passions and affections, its struggles, its memories and aspirations, its darknesses and its delights. He is “Freddie” to a lot of people, and no surprise.

It gives me the greatest of pleasure now to ask him to give the Conway Memorial Lecture for 1988.

Ted Honderich
The Meaning of Life

A saying attributed to Nietzsche is that since God is dead everything is permitted. I suppose that the assertion that God is dead is not to be taken literally. There have, indeed, been philosophers, as good as A. N. Whitehead and Samuel Alexander, who held that God did not yet exist. In their evolutionary metaphysics, the universe was represented as progressing towards the emergence of a deity. Anthropologists have also described religious rites, supposed by them to be connected with harvests, in which Gods are slain annually, only to be replaced or in some instances reborn. I do not, however, know of any instance in which a deity, conceived as supernatural, is thought simply to have perished, without surviving or reappearing in any form, or leaving a successor.

I may be mistaken on this point and do not attach much importance to it, since its implications do not significantly differ from those of a theory which is known to have been held, that of the Epicureans, who did believe that there were Gods but thought of them as having something better
to do than fuss about human beings. They were credited with living lives of unalloyed pleasure somewhere far out in space, without exercising any control over our world or anything within it. The behaviour of the material atoms by which the course of nature was regulated was not of their contriving and to take any notice of the vicissitudes of human life would only cause them pain.

I shall address myself later on to the general topic of religious belief, in very many of its aspects. The question which I first wish to eliminate is that of the connection, suggested by Nietzsche and still very widely thought to obtain, between religious belief and moral conduct. If what Nietzsche meant by speaking of the death of God was that his audience had mostly ceased to believe in the creation of the world by an omnipotent, omniscient, supremely benevolent, necessary being, his assertion was probably false at the time at which he made it. If he meant that there was no good reason to believe in the existence of any such being. I shall in due course be arguing that he was right. That is not, however, the point at issue here. The point is that even if there were such a being as Nietzsche may be thought to have envisaged, or indeed a deity of any kind, his will could not supply a basis for morality. The reason, which is purely logical, was pointed out by Plato, in his dialogue *Euthyphro*, and has been restated by a series of philosophers down to the present day. It is simply that while moral rules may be propounded by authority the fact that these were so propounded would not validate them. For let us suppose that it is possible for there to be a God and possible that he be good. Even so his goodness could not simply consist of his divinity. For if it did, then in saying that he willed what was good, his votaries would be asserting no more than the tautology that he willed what he willed. They count themselves fortunate in his goodness and regard it as warranting their gratitude, but if all that they meant by ascribing goodness to him was that his wishes were what they were, they
would have nothing to be grateful for. If it were the devil that was in supreme power, what he willed, however diabolical, would have to be reckoned good.

It is no answer to this argument to protest, as some do, that God’s goodness issues from his nature. For exactly the same considerations apply. A theist is at liberty to include the notion of goodness in the concept of his deity, thereby making it necessary that if there were a God he would be good, but this very manoeuvre illustrates the point that I am making. If our theist did not possess a concept of goodness, which was logically independent of the other predicates which he conjoined with it to identify his deity, the inclusion of it would add nothing to them. From the supposition that an intelligent being created the universe and continues to rule over it, nothing whatsoever follows about his moral character. In supposing this being also to be benevolent, his devotees are assuming that he satisfies their own moral standards. They can indeed argue that he is responsible for their possession of these standards, as he is, in their view, for everything else. The fact remains that the verdicts which they reach in accordance with these standards have no logical connection with the existence or character of the source from which their acceptance of the standards proceeded. To take a less dubious example, those whom we regard as well-brought up children learn from their parents and school teachers how they should behave. It does not follow that their moral sentiments are validated by the fact that they acquired them in this way. Nor does it follow that the teachers are necessarily protected from the moral appraisal of those whom they have taught. The children may find reasons to adopt different standards. More pertinently, they may retain the standards in question and judge that their parents and teachers do not always measure up to them.

I should think myself guilty of labouring the obvious were it not that the simple point at issue has had such diffi-
culty in gaining general acceptance, especially when religion is brought into the picture. Put succinctly, the point is that morals cannot be founded on authority, and here it makes no difference whether the authority be supposed human or divine.

To say that authority, whether secular or religious, supplies no ground for morality is not to deny the obvious fact that it supplies a sanction. There is a great deal to be said about the justification and efficacy of rewards and punishments, but a thorough examination of this topic would take me too far afield, and I shall limit myself, in this context, to a few remarks about the factor of religious belief. My principal reason for singling out religious belief is that it is intimately connected not logically, as we shall discover, but historically, with a question which has a strong bearing upon what I have chosen to call the meaning of life, namely that of the possibility of the continuance of one's existence, in one form or another, after death.

Both the importance attached to the concept of survival and the manner of conceiving it vary to a great extent in different religions. For instance, with the possible exception of some initiates into mystery cults, the worshippers of the Homeric Gods, and indeed their Latin counterparts, took little stock of an afterlife. If they believed that their souls were destined for Hades, it was an abode of shadows, and the prospect of inhabiting it appears to have had next to no effect upon the way they lived. The remark attributed to Achilles that it was preferable to be a slave on earth than a king in the underworld might be taken to suggest that the afterlife figured in Greek mythology as something to be feared, but I think that its implication is not that a shadowy future is unpleasant in itself, but rather that it is not worth considering because of its inferiority in status to even the meanest condition of bodily human life.

The Christian religion, with its view of man's life on earth as principally a prelude to the life to come, lies at the
opposite extreme, but even in Christianity as I have just described it, after the abandonment of the belief in the millenium, inaugurated by the second coming of Christ, as the triumph of Christians on earth, the differences at different periods and among different sects in conceptions of the afterlife and their effects upon conduct are very great. A striking example is the threat of Hell. Nowadays, the belief that those who are divinely adjudged to have been sinners are fated to undergo an eternity of physical torment has been generally abandoned by Anglicans and to a lesser extent by Roman Catholics. Hell fire has been replaced by the mental frustration of being deprived of the sight of God, and even more mildly by the mere lack of this privilege. Nevertheless, I am given to understand that the literal conception of hell fire is still entertained by the growing number of Protestants who answer to the description of born-again Christians and there is no doubt that throughout the Christian era, at least until the present century, it was universally orthodox, promulgated with varying degrees of eloquence by the preachers adhering to different sects and at least nominally accepted by their congregations.

But can the acceptance have been more than nominal in the general run of cases? There is a distinction to be drawn here between applying the doctrine to others and applying it to oneself. The early Christian fathers applied it to Pagans: there is a passage in Tertullian in which he looks forward to the pleasure of occupying a front seat in Heaven, enjoying the spectacle of his opponents suffering in Hell. Are we to assume that it never occurred to him that he himself might be adjudged a sinner?

Evangelical parents tortured their children to rid them of their innate propensities to sin. Were they quite certain that all such propensities had been beaten out of themselves? Yet, if they were uncertain, how could they have faced the future with any equanimity? Dr. Johnson, for all his virtues, was a Christian who believed that he stood