**ayer and the meaning of life**

James Tartaglia

**Abstract**

This article considers Ayer’s two main statements on the meaning of life; the first written in the prime of life, and the second at the end of life. The first, which is the focal point of this article, is heavily influenced by scienticism, and attempts to show that the question of the meaning of life is meaningless, rather as Ayer had earlier tried to show that statements about God, whether positive or negative, are meaningless. I show that Ayer’s argument fails on multiple counts and that, once clarified, lacks all plausibility. Nevertheless, part of his conclusion – that even if there is an all-powerful author of reality, this would be irrelevant to the meaning of life – has been highly influential and remains so; I make a suggestion as to why this might be. I then turn to Ayer’s final statement on the meaning of life, made when scienticism had lost some of its grip on his philosophy, and the strong antipathy he always felt to religion now issued instead in a plausible combination of atheism and nihilism. The intervention of Ayer’s famous near-death experience adds extra interest to these final reflections.

------

A.J. Ayer sat in with the Vienna Circle, and enthusiastically embraced the logical positivism he thereby discovered. The result was *Language, Truth and Logic*, published when he was twenty-five. As becomes clear from the first paragraph, the project that most enthused him was that of discrediting large swathes of the history of philosophy. He wanted to terminate traditional, historically-embedded discourses which he thought would otherwise run on interminably, and thus to his mind, fruitlessly, by establishing ‘beyond question what should be the purpose and method of a philosophical inquiry’. This was feasible, he thought, because, ‘if there are any questions which science leaves it to philosophy to answer, a straightforward process of elimination must lead to their discovery’ (Ayer 1936: 45). Science might *not* leave anything for philosophy, then; it might have all the answers, or at least the resources to provide them – some contemporary physicalists still think it does (Rosenberg 2011). But Ayer left open the possibility of preserving something of the philosophical tradition, and the strand he liked best was the empiricist tradition stemming from Locke, the original ‘under-labourer’ for science. If science did leave questions for philosophy, however, they would have to be answerable in a science-like manner: decisively and through the application of technical apparatus – logic would be philosophy’s substitute for experimental equipment. So legitimate lines of philosophical inquiry were to be closed down with the right answers, and the rest discredited as nonsense. Progress was in the air, and if philosophy was to help science achieve it, its most urgent task was to purge itself.

Ayer’s main tool for this project was his principle of verification, according to which if a proposition is neither a tautology, nor an empirical hypothesis for which there is some possible sensory experience which would be relevant to determining whether it is true, then it is a metaphysical proposition; and all such propositions are literally senseless. Applying this principle allows him to take a uniquely hard line on religion in the sixth chapter, ‘Critique of Ethics and Theology’, which was primarily responsible for the book’s early notoriety. Thus the assertion that God exists is nonsensical because no experience could help determine its truth. But equally, the atheist’s denial of God is nonsensical, as is the agnostic’s refusal to take a positive stance, which presupposes that the question is legitimate (Ayer 1936: 153). Believers, atheists and agnostics are all just talking nonsense.

With this kind of mind-set, it seems obvious what Ayer would have said about the meaning of life; but it is not explicitly addressed. Since the heyday of logical positivism, this thoroughly unscientific and thoroughly natural philosophical issue has been stigmatised as the ultimate embarrassment in the minds of many analytic philosophers. The stigma survived the decline of logical positivism – ‘nearly all of it was false’, Ayer later said[[1]](#footnote-1) – and although the situation has now changed, it is still an issue which puts the wind up the more ardent physicalists and naturalists of today.

But Ayer did tackle the question at two significant junctures of his life.[[2]](#footnote-2) The first was in ‘The Claims of Philosophy’, written around the same time as the introduction to the second edition of *Language, Truth and Logic*, in which Ayer described his classic as, ‘in every sense a young man’s book’ (Ayer 1946: 7) – he was still only thirty-five. He had just successfully made it through World War II – a war he was honest enough to admit that he enjoyed (Ayer 1988a: 194).[[3]](#footnote-3) And it was at this time that he turned to the meaning of life. Although he concludes that the question is nonsensical, he does not simply dismiss it with the principle of verification. Rather, he provides the most concrete argument for stigmatising the question which I know of.

Ayer returned to the question in the year before he died, and given the connection he now made between this topic and the possibility of an after-life, it was thereafter to preoccupy him right until the end, through reflections on the near-death experience which he famously underwent in the interim. By this time, Ayer’s stance on religion had softened, to the extent that he was now happy to call himself an atheist. And his stance on the question of the meaning of life had softened too, for in his final broadcast interview, he said: ‘I hold that life has no meaning independent of the meaning one is able to give it, but it doesn’t follow from this that it’s either nice or nasty’. I agree (Tartaglia 2016a); I would want to qualify talk of ‘the meaning one is able to give it’, but then so would Ayer. Ayer had enjoyed a long and successful life in philosophy, during which he had seen that the definitive answers he wanted in his youth had not been forthcoming; and he must surely have also seen that the answers he had endeavoured to provide were simply his own, contentious contributions to an ongoing historical conversation – an interminable one, I hope. As the anti-philosophy of positivism lost its grip over him, he became more willing to take a stance on two traditional philosophical issues that clearly mattered to him: he was an atheist and a nihilist.

‘The Claims of Philosophy’ is not primarily an essay about the meaning of life, but rather the nature of philosophy; it is interesting to see how he makes the connection.[[4]](#footnote-4) He begins by distinguishing the ‘pontiffs’ and ‘journeymen’ of philosophy, which is a recasting of the distinction in *Language, Truth and Logic* between metaphysicians, and the legitimate philosophy of logical positivism and British empiricism. It is characteristic of the pontiffs to ‘think it within the province of philosophy to compete with natural science’, whereas the journeymen realise that ‘the ideal of a metaphysical system that is anything other than a scientific encyclopaedia is devoid of any basis in reason’ (Ayer 1947: 1-2). The new terminology is revealing: ‘pontiffs’ shows the connection in Ayer’s mind between metaphysics and religion, and the fact that he is prepared to describe even philosophers of the status of Wittgenstein as ‘journeymen’, shows the depth of his commitment to the differential status of philosophers and scientists.[[5]](#footnote-5)

Ayer says that ‘The history of philosophy, as it is taught in the textbooks, is largely a parade of pontiffs’, but that the journeymen have now taken over in England and America (ibid.: 3). What worries him, however, is that they suffer from ‘a certain thinness of material’; the new philosophers were finding ‘an unfortunate disparity between the richness of their technique and the increasing poverty of the material on which they are able to exercise it’ (ibid.: 6). He thinks their salvation might be ‘the reunion of philosophy with science’.

Why he thinks this is unclear to me. Journeymen clear away the linguistic confusions thrown up by the ‘parade of pontiffs’, as well as similar confusions arising from everyday talk, for which Ayer’s examples are the problems of perception and other minds, and determining the significance of moral judgements (ibid.: 3). However, these are traditional problems of philosophy that pontiffs also address, except without the journeyman’s presupposition that they must embody linguistic confusions. This presupposition is made because to acknowledge that the problems might be real, would be to entertain the possibility of a distinctively philosophical way of understanding the world addressed to answering such questions, which Ayer thinks would amount to challenging science. But the traditional problems are not thin unless you suppose they must be merely semantic. If you do, then it is not clear how merging philosophy with science is going to help; even if something distinctively philosophical survived, it is going to be thin if it is not actually science. Ayer mentions ‘formal logic’, ‘the analysis of scientific method, ‘the evaluation of scientific theories’ and ‘clarification of scientific terms’ (ibid.: 3). But even if these tasks could not be performed by mathematicians and scientists, for some reason, they are the very tasks which generate Ayer’s worries about thinness.

With hindsight, there is no detectable problem of thinness within Ayer’s opus; which reflects well on him, but not his pontiff / journeyman distinction. Nevertheless he was worried at the time, having said at the end of *Language, Truth and Logic* that ‘philosophy is virtually empty without science’ (Ayer 1936: 201). There is little science to be found in Ayer, and although he could still cling to ‘logical puzzles which the journeyman, who is relatively ignorant of science, may reasonably be called upon to solve’ (Ayer 1947: 6), the situation, by his own positivist lights, was not sustainable.

So the future Sir Alfred Ayer, highly-engaged public intellectual, looks to ‘what the public expects of its philosophers’; and what they expect, he thinks, is to be told the meaning of life – whether by a journeyman or pontiff is inconsequential to them. Ayer’s response is that they are asking the impossible, and that when this is seen, ‘the problem is solved, so far as reasoning can solve it’ (ibid.: 7). To begin to show this, he asks how it is possible for human existence to have a purpose.[[6]](#footnote-6) For an individual, it is to intend to bring about a desired outcome; when thus engaged with our projects, the things we do have meaning for us. Since most of our lives are spent like this, it is only natural that we should wonder what the meaning of the whole thing is. And as Ayer says, a simple answer would be that ‘all events are tending towards a certain specifiable end’ (ibid.: 7). He has two responses. The first is that ‘there is no good reason whatever for supposing this assumption to be true’ (ibid.: 7). I would stop there and conclude that nihilism is the answer to the question of the meaning of life; and from his final broadcast, quoted above, it seems Ayer ultimately came to that conclusion too. But he goes on with a second response, and it is this line of reasoning which has remained influential (e.g. Nozick 1981: 585ff; Metz 2013: chapter 6; Trisel 2017).

He says that even if reality has been arranged to inevitably lead to a certain end, this would not tell us the meaning of life. Why not? Because, ‘the end in question will not be the one that [we ourselves] have chosen’ (Ayer 1947: 7). As such, from our own perspectives, the end will be ‘entirely arbitrary’ and so we will have not been provided with a justification for our existence, only an explanation of the facts of it. It can only be a brute fact that events tend towards this end, since ‘what is called an explanation is nothing other than a more general description’ (ibid.: 8). So since people curious about the meaning of life are asking *why* human beings exist and do the things they do, and want an answer that tells them something other than *how* they exist, the question cannot legitimately be answered.

Ayer now considers the possibility that reality was designed by a god, and that our purpose is to realise this god’s purposes. Reiterating his previous two lines of response, he says, firstly, that there is no good reason to believe this, and secondly, that even though our lives would now fulfil a purpose, it would not be *our* purpose. It would just be a brute fact that the god chose this purpose, so again we would not have a justification, only a description. He then argues that the purpose could be of no practical significance to us. It would either be built into reality, such that we would be working towards it whatever we did; or, if we have a choice, we would have no reason to try to conform ‘unless we independently judge it to be good’ (ibid.: 9). Thus Ayer comes down decisively on Plato’s Euthyphro dilemma: what the gods think on moral matters is totally irrelevant. Religion is generally irrelevant to the meaning of life, in fact, for if a religious hypothesis were true, it would simply mean that different brute facts hold from those the sciences tell us about. We would get a different story about *what we are*, but would learn nothing about *why we are*. So the question of the meaning of life is unanswerable. We should not regret that there is no meaning of life, because ‘it is not sensible to cry for what is logically impossible’ (ibid.: 9). We should not say there is or is not such a meaning, since these are not factually significant statements.

The whole argument turns on the assumption that we would have to choose the meaning of life; were it not our choice, it would be arbitrary and could not justify our existence. But if it has to be something we choose – if this requirement is supposed to be one which people who ask the question would recognise and accept – then the reason for asking, as regards the practical component of the question, must have been that people did not know what to choose. But then, given that the question also has a theoretical component about why we and the rest of reality exist, how could a choice that we make possibly provide the answer? Obviously it could not, so Ayer has prepared his ‘unanswerable’ conclusion from the outset.

However, the argument fails simply in virtue of the practical component, because if the choices we make may or may not be in accordance with the meaning of life, as our wanting to know the answer in order to choose how to live presupposes, then it is not a requirement on the meaning of life that we choose it; for if we might be getting it wrong, this must be in virtue of a meaning of life we are not choosing. It is simply a vacuous requirement on our living in conformity to the meaning of life, if we have a choice in the matter, that in order to do so, we must choose to live in conformity to it. If the meaning of life is X, and X requires me to live life Y, then I may have a choice over Y but not X; it is not a requirement on X that I choose it, but if I do want to conform to it, and I have a choice, then I had better choose Y.

The overall flaw to the argument might be summarised by saying that it would not make enough initial sense, prior to Ayer’s diagnosis of senselessness, for somebody to ask the question of the meaning of life, if in doing so they were presupposing, as the diagnosis demands, that any suitable answer must be one which they themselves choose. I cannot sensibly ask where the cat is, while presupposing that any answer, such as ‘on the mat’, must be an answer chosen by me, rather than determined by the whereabouts of the cat.

But leaving that aside; suppose it became clear that the gods of Olympus have been ruling over us throughout history. They toy with our lives, and if they do not like what they see, they ensure we come to a sticky end. This would not tell us why there is a reality; but scientific cosmology cannot either, and if the gods seemed to understand, told us this knowledge was forbidden to mortals, and assured us that our lives are being directed in accordance with the meaning of life, then I see little ground for rational scepticism about their testimony. What reason would we have to do what they demanded? To keep them onside if we wanted to achieve our own, independently-conceived goals, since things would not go well for us otherwise; and the same reason for making their goals for us our own. Those goals might jar with our moral reflections, but we would then have good reason to suppose our reflections were faulty; we might stick to our convictions, but a refusal to obey might preserve our consciences only at the cost of more suffering. We trust human experts when we do not personally understand, and we think we should; I imagine we would trust the gods. Only a fool would wantonly sin with the epistemic light shining on such a radical scenario.

As it is, we have no good reason to suppose that our lives are governed by a meaning of life, and we may resent those who think they are, on the basis of scant evidence, when this is used as a platform to undercut moral reflections. Ayer certainly did, and I think a general antipathy to the authoritarianism of religious belief explains the enduring popularity of his hard-line ‘God would be irrelevant anyway’ stance. Religion can easily offend contemporary individualism, as well as democratic pride in our ability to find the best available answers, which, given our actual situation, we must take individual and collective responsibility for. But such sentiments can skew philosophical reasoning and suspend common sense. At the end of his career, Ayer said he did ‘not know whether it has been more of an advantage or a handicap to me as a philosopher that I am entirely devoid of any religious feeling’; that he would even raise this question shows how far he had moved (Ayer 1989: 345). I doubt it was a handicap, but I think his anti-religious feeling was.

Ayer says that the truth of a religious hypothesis could only tell us more about what reality amounts to, and hence could not provide the justification we seek. His reasoning follows Hume’s principle that we cannot derive an ‘ought’ from an ‘is’. But as Searle has argued, within a social setting this is not so obvious: presuppose the institution of promising, and it is quite easy – she uttered certain words, so she ought to pay the money (Searle 1964). Now you might reason that such institutions are merely social constructions within an ultimately meaningless, physical reality, to which the notion of ‘ought’ is alien. But the whole point of the meaning of life idea is that we do not occupy that kind of reality. If there were a meaning of life, this institution would be built into the fabric of reality. It would be a fact that our lives have meaning, within a reality whose nature explained its own existence. Reflecting on the Euthyphro dilemma, Wittgenstein said that the view that things are good because God wills them is ‘deeper’ than the alternative that God wills them because they are good, since the former, ‘blocks off the road to any kind of explanation, “why” it is good; while the second interpretation is the shallow, rationalistic one, in that it behaves “as though” that which is good could be given yet some further foundation’ (Wittgenstein 1930: 115). That seems right. If the meaning of reality is something I could know about, perhaps by emerging at death into a new understanding which encapsulates my present one, then now is not the time to be second-guessing God’s will.

Where is the positive appeal to the idea that we must choose the meaning of life? Well, the idea of slaving away towards a goal that does not readily engage you is not appealing. We do this for money, which lessens the feeling of arbitrariness, but we do not much like the interim; we thank God it is Friday. We like to be easily engaged by our tasks these days, and technology provides more and more easy engagement; so some philosophers try to conceive certain, ‘better’ kinds of engagement as the meaning of life (Dreyfus and Kelly 2011), within a wider culture where the ‘mindfulness’ phenomenon has arisen from the concern that technology has made our engagements too fleeting. In this setting, the notion of a meaning of life, which alone makes sense of the question we inherited, starts to look rather dated. We recoil from a meaning which might keep us away from the activities that really engage us; especially if we cannot take the payday of paradise seriously. However what is not dated about the idea is that it requires us to think beyond even our most distant projects to ask what we are here for. Successfully dispel this kind of natural philosophical curiosity, and the terminus for the journeyman will be sooner than he thinks.

Ayer returned to the topic at age seventy-seven with ‘The Meaning of Life’, in which his heightened sense of mortality is never far from the surface. He says he has ‘chosen to call’ the meaning of life the possibility of an after-life (Ayer 1988a: 180); but he soon comes around to the traditional question. The connection is made through a discussion of how belief in the rewards or punishments of an after-life can affect how believers live; not altogether rationally, he thinks. Nevertheless, he grants that an after-life is possible, if the requirements of a Lockean account of personal identity are met, while still thinking that death leads to non-existence. After rehearsing some reasons for thinking that death is nothing to fear, and that it is generally over-dramatised, he admits he would like an extended life; but only because he belongs to a privileged minority (‘the vast majority of the human race … [lack] a tolerable standard of living for it to be rational for them to wish their miseries prolonged’); and only if he could return to the prime of his life, since in getting older ‘one tends to live with less intensity’ (ibid.: 187-8).

In going on to discuss what would nowadays be called meaning *in* life – glossed as ‘the satisfaction that people receive for the character and conduct of their personal lives’ (ibid.: 190) – intensity of engagement with our projects is at the forefront of his mind. He points out that there is no intrinsic connection between living a socially meaningful life and living one that is morally worthy – bad people have lived intense and significant lives – and he concludes that, ‘there is no general answer to the question what constitutes a meaningful life’, both because it will depend on the culture you live in, and because subjective criteria concerning engagement need not coincide with objective criteria (ibid.: 196). I think he was right, but much of the recent literature on this topic has been premised on the possibility of a general account. It has presupposed that a socially meaningful life must be positive, morally or otherwise; it has ignored cultural differences; and it has appealed to both subjective and objective criteria – in one prominent case, by trying to combine them (Wolf 1997). However ‘for the most part’, Ayer says (op. cit.: 190), the question has been directed to the meaning *of* life. On this, he says that even if there is one, those with faith in it cannot have known; so why does it matter to people? Because ‘most people are excited by the feeling that they are involved in a larger enterprise’ (ibid.: 193). Thus he comes back to intensity, and it is in this context that he mentions having enjoyed WWII.[[7]](#footnote-7)

Not long afterwards, Ayer had his near-death experience. When he regained consciousness, he spoke of trying to cross ‘the river’ – the Styx on the way to Hades, he later presumed. He was unable to recall the crossing episode, but the part of the experience he did recall, about a light which was ‘responsible for the government of the universe’, was clearly a powerful hallucination, the verisimilitude of which shook him (Ayer 1988b: 200). In his subsequent reflections, he can be found lingering over the fact that C.D. Broad believed there was a good chance of an after-life: Broad was an atheist, he did not want an afterlife, and he was a great philosopher – some would say better than Wittgenstein (ibid.: 203). Ayer concluded that, ‘My recent experiences have slightly weakened my conviction that my genuine death, which is due fairly soon, will be the end of me, though I continue to hope that it will be’; there was no prospect of technology bringing him back to the prime of life now, so he wanted an end to it (ibid.: 204). Ayer subsequently tried to backtrack on that sentence with evident embarrassment (Ayer 1988c), but there was no need. Die with a coin for the ferryman, so long as you do not publicise the fact as a lesson.

1. He said this in a broadcast interview. My references to Ayer’s broadcasts are taken from A.C. Grayling’s programme for BBC Radio 4, ‘The Meaning of Life according to A.J. Ayer’. It is available online at: http://www.bbc.co.uk/programmes/b05pw9tw [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. It also came up briefly in the interim (Ayer 1973: 233-5), but I will focus on the two main statements. [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. He says most English people who did not experience great loss did, but the implication seems clear enough, and is amply borne out by his personal war story; see Rogers 1999. [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. For my view on the connection, see Tartaglia 2016b. [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
5. Wittgenstein was offended by the discussion of his work in this essay, and broke off all relations with Ayer; see Honderich 1990: xii. What did the damage, apparently, was Ayer saying of Wittgenstein that ‘the effect of his teaching upon his more articulate disciples has been that they tend to treat philosophy as a department of psychoanalysis’ (Ayer 1947: 5) – it is noteworthy that this particular ‘journeyman’ is said to have had ‘disciples’. [↑](#footnote-ref-5)
6. Ayer hones straight in on the question, but some philosophers now take it to be thoroughly obscure (e.g. Mawson 2016). I do not think the meaning of life would have to ascribe a purpose to human existence, as Ayer would later agree (Ayer 1988a: 191), or indeed any purposes at all. But the possibility that is does is nevertheless a large part of what interests us; see Tartaglia 2016a: introduction. [↑](#footnote-ref-6)
7. In the terminology of this paragraph, his 1947 argument conflates the meaning *of* life with meaning *in* life, and presupposes a general account of the latter in terms of subjective engagement. [↑](#footnote-ref-7)