

A MEANING TO LIFE FOR £15
Peter Cave

Peter Cave gets to grips with maths, God and the meaning of life.

I bought a book the other day. It helps to give my life meaning. Is it the Bible, the Koran or the Upanishads? Not at all. Does it recommend meditative techniques or Tibetan chants, chocolate or Tantric sexual techniques? None of these. It is a book on solid geometry.

Before explaining, we should note that, where the meaning of life is in question, there are three distinct concerns. We need to distinguish between

the meaning within a person's life;
the meaning of a person's life;
and the meaning of life in general.

Let us start off with small things first and move on to the great and the good, that is, God or gods, where we shall see that God or gods help not at all with meaning. The life of an atheist and humanist need be no less meaningful than that of a godly believer.

1. The meaning within a life

We return to my book purchase. There would be nothing surprising in my buying a book of philosophy or fiction or paintings or even music — but *Elementary Solid Geometry*, consisting of two hundred pages of diagrams, proofs and exercises? Although I could become interested in solid geometry, having once performed geometrical tricks with cones and cylinders at school thousands of years ago, I doubt if I shall ever get round to reading *Elementary Solid Geometry*, or even trying to read it.

Why did I buy the book? After all, this particular volume is nothing special. It was published in 1926, looks very much like a school textbook of which many copies would have been run

off, and is authored by two Indian mathematics professors, Naik and Bondale, whose names meant nothing to me at all. They still mean nothing. For a little old school textbook, it was expensive — £15. Yet this £15 purchase has imbued my life with a little more meaning (of course, maybe it lacked much meaning beforehand).

A book-plate on the inner cover reads 'Left to the library of New College by Godfrey Harold Hardy'. Hardy was Oxford's Savilian Professor of Geometry in the 1920's. There is also a little handwritten 'With best compliments' signed by the authors, Nail and Bondale; and just visible under the book-plate is Hardy's signature. Hardy was an outstanding pure mathematician, starting out at Trinity College Cambridge, moving to Oxford's New College, returning to Cambridge in 1931, being elected to its Sadleirian Chair.

Why the book contributes meaning within the little life of Peter Cave is because Hardy was connected with philosophers who interest me. Hardy was one of Bertrand Russell's friends, discussing philosophy of mathematics with him, and later with — here Hardy links with particular enthusiasms of mine — John Maynard Keynes, Frank Ramsey and Ludwig Wittgenstein. These figures remind me of pieces I have written on Cambridge's early twentieth century philosophers, leading to reflections on the then intellectual atmosphere at Trinity and King's, which in turn links with the members of the Bloomsbury Group (conjuring up the recent film on Virginia Woolf — and the annoying coughs of audiences). The Bloomsbury group idolized G. E. Moore who, I have since discovered, attended some of Hardy's lectures. And so the interconnections and spreading tentacles, the network of similarities and dissimilarities, overlapping and criss-crossing (itself an expression used, in another context, by Wittgenstein) take one into some new reflections, some remembered ones, and some which had been completely forgotten.

From one little book, a swirl of extended musings fan out, engendering intermeshings and dances further afield — as Proust experienced when being sent off into reveries from the

taste of a *petit* Madeleine cake dipped in linden tea. In other directions, *Elementary Solid Geometry*, being published in Poona and probably signed by the authors when in Poona, conjures up life in India and that country's source of great mathematicians (I won't add, and hence do add: and tourists' diarrhoea), reminding me of a recent acquaintance who bizarrely (or maybe not totally) seemed enthusiastic solely about the Pizza Huts when visiting Bombay. In yet another direction, I reflect on a Hardy anecdote that a close philosophy friend recently related: Hardy was lecturing, the blackboard becoming covered with chalked equations, with Hardy saying that *obviously* this follows from this, and so *obviously* that then follows from that... — then suddenly he stops. 'I'm not sure whether that does follow.' He goes away, thinks about it, and returns, continuing, 'Yes, *obviously* that follows.' Thus we are led to wonder about mathematics' necessities and how they relate to obviousness.

Clouds mean rain; her look means things are getting bad; and the late night party means headaches — or worse — in the morning. Meanings come in different guises, but whatever the guise the meaning of something takes one beyond, into something further. And that is what happens when one's life is filled with meaning; one is led from one happening and reflection to another. *Elementary Solid Geometry* is but an example of mine; many others know well that what gives meaning to their lives is spreading their interests afield to the lives of their children and grandchildren, to their football team's players, and the holidays to come.

Aristotle stressed the curiosity and wonder that feature in human life; and it is a further curiosity about human beings that a causal linkage to things that matter itself can matter. Whether it is this copy of today's *Financial Times* that I buy or that copy (same paper, same date, same edition) is usually of no significance; but with regard to *Elementary Solid Geometry*, for me not any copy will do. Holding this particular copy, the one inscribed in Poona, probably received in Oxford, flicked through by Hardy who discussed philosophy with Ramsey

whom Maynard Keynes brought to King's...., well, it is *this* one — this instance — that grounds the connections, magnifying meaning within my life.

'But, but, but...' some will say, 'What's the meaning of my life in total?'

2. The meaning of a life

This is easily dealt with — for the meaning of an individual's life is what meaning it has for others and for oneself; and that depends on what it means to others and to oneself. Hardy meant and means a lot to many and he has started to mean a little something more to me and, of course, many people recognize the meaning of others in their own lives — be the others children, friends, lovers or the pet cat, dog or even goat. Your life is probably highly meaningful; this is because it figures as highly significant within the lives of, perhaps, your children or parents or close friends; and your recognition of that fact itself contributes to your life being meaningful for you.

'But, but, but...' some will say, 'This smacks of our pulling ourselves up by each other's bootstraps. What's the meaning of *it all*?'

3. The meaning of life

Because some believe that the question 'What's the meaning of it all?' bites and merits an answer they bring in God or gods. The meanings that I find within my life only really count if my life as a whole has meaning; and if we say that my life as a whole has meaning because of its meanings for others and myself, then this only really counts if all lives in total, including the relationships between them, have meaning. For all lives in total to have meaning, well, we need God or gods to give the totality meaning; and, without such meaning, the considerations above about meaning crumble. They need to stand on the bedrock of some ultimate meaning-giver; and that is God or gods. (Hereafter, let us merge gods into the one God, purely for expressive ease.)

In response to this view that requires God for my life to have meaning, there is, of course, the basic question of why ever

believe that there is such a god and, if there is such, why is not the question asked of what makes that existence meaningful? The introduction of God simply delays the bite of the 'What's the meaning of it all?' question. If we let that pass and if, somehow, God does give meaning to lives, this cannot be simply because our interests fan out to God, for the question of what gives meaning to the totality of life including its interests would remain; so, the only alternative here would seem to be that we are, in some way, part of God's meaningful plan. This slides us into divine purposes.

Now, why ever should being part of God's plan help to support the meaning of one's life? Indeed, to be told that we are part of someone else's — God's — overall purpose over which we had no input would, if anything, make many of us wonder about the value of our own interests, choices and purposes, all of which are just what do give our lives meaning, by fanning out into wider arenas, as seen.

Of course, belief in God might help people to find meaning in their lives because they mistakenly believe that there is a God who is required for a meaningful life; but that would be little different from a child finding her life meaningful through her belief in the tooth fairy, Santa Claus or the innate goodness of mankind. Your believing that taking these pills will make you better might make you better, but that does not show that your belief was true; what made you better was the belief (which was false) not the pills.

To return to the idea that being part of someone else's — God's — plan thereby provides the ultimate meaning to our lives, consider the grouse. Are the grouse any better off, with more meaningful lives, given that — on the glorious twelfth — they discover that they are there for a purpose, and are part of someone else's plan about which they were not consulted? Are the lives of chickens any more meaningful for them, given they are part of the commercial operators' design to supply ready-made chicken tikka?

The existence of God — or, indeed, an afterlife — does not solve anything with regard to the ultimate meaningfulness of our lives. Paradoxically put, if religious believers are right in

thinking that God is required for meaningful lives, then (as already implied) they are wrong in thinking that God will do. If meaningful lives need something further outside them, such as God, then that something further itself needs something further. Nothing further is, though, needed. The example *par excellence* of where meaning and purposes reside is in people's lives, whether or not they believe in a god, and whether or not there is a god. Of course, at times many of us lapse into depression, speaking of the futility or meaninglessness or pointlessness of it all, but that should have nothing to do with the coherency of the idea of an external meaning bringing a meaningful light to the totality of things. Just because we can become depressed at failing to achieve impossible dreams this neither shows that such impossible dreams are possible nor establishes that the failure warrants the depression.

Most of the time virtually all human lives contain some meaning; and that there is no meaning to life outside of life (that impossible demand) undermines this not at all. For items to be coloured, there is no (impossible) requirement that the colouring of items itself be coloured; for there to be parts of a whole, the whole need not itself be a part; and for an activity to be meaningful, it does not need to be part of some greater meaning. That we can engage in meaningful activities — from moving the Queen in a game of chess, to planning and delighting in a Bangkok holiday, to gazing at Cassiopeia in the sky — does not depend upon the chess game itself, the Bangkok holiday, and the gazing upon the stars themselves all possessing meaning or purposes. That would be odd indeed.

And that discovering *Elementary Solid Geometry*, published in Poona, generates an arborescence of meanings within my life does not require that there be some further meaning to support that arborescence.

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