

ISSN: 2456-9550
JMC
November 2020

Book Review

A MEANING TO LIFE

by Michael Ruse, Oxford University Press, New York, 2019, pp. 185,
\$21.95, ISBN 978-0-19-093322-7

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Volume 4, 2020

THE JMC REVIEW

*An Interdisciplinary Social Science Journal of Criticism,
Practice and Theory*

<http://www.jmc.ac.in/the-jmc-review/content/>

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A Meaning to Life by Michael Ruse, Oxford University Press, New York, 2019, pp. 185, \$21.95, ISBN: 978-0-19-093322-7.

Reviewed by: Dr. Roshan Praveen Xalxo, Assistant Professor, Department of Philosophy, Jesus and Mary College, New Delhi.

The anxious twenty-year-old's (perhaps a lifelong) search for a 'meaning in life' seems to have come to an end for Michael Ruse in the form of a capstone – *A Meaning to Life* (2019). Ruse has carved a niche for himself among the most eminent philosophers of Biology and historians of ideas. A professor at Florida State University (retired) and author of many well-received books, Ruse in his latest book lucidly explores the possibility of a meaningful life through the allies of theism, non-theism and Darwinism.

The book has four main chapters. The first chapter poignantly unravels the 'God-question' revealing the sense of meaninglessness in religion. The three factors—Renaissance, Reformation and Scientific Revolution chisel down Christian beliefs and help increase the herd of, what Richard Dawkins called, the 'intellectually fulfilled atheist' (1986: 6). Such is the tenor and style of Ruse that he emphatically succeeds at the end of the chapter, in sending a message home that '...in the struggle for existence and natural selection, everything including us humans, is simply the product of blind forces of nature – no rhyme, no reason, no meaning or Meaning' (2019: 53). But this chapter is just a prelude to the main discussion.

Ruse is well-known for the stance that he takes in the second chapter. Adopting a 'Proto-Popperian' approach he illustrates that since science and religion do not enter into mutual discussions, religion can escape the onslaught of science. Science, even inadvertently, does not answer questions on Heideggerian metaphysics, morality or consciousness and meaning in life. Consequently the loss of meaning in religion is not the result of scientific developments but rather an outcome of theological reconstruction inspired by science. Religion is distinct from science as it asks moral, theological and philosophical questions. With his expertise on the Bible and wide range of knowledge of science, Ruse illustrates the apparent nature of the conflict between science and religion. Yet he claims to be a non-believer thanks to his analysis of the methodological problem, the problem of evil and the conception of a pernicious God.

Ruse is cautious enough to bring into his discussion a religion of no-God i.e. Buddhism, and deny its role in bringing meaning to life. Although he places Buddhism at a higher pedestal than Christianity, his conspicuous attack on the concepts of rebirth and karma leads him to believe in the ineffectiveness of Buddhism as a religion to bring meaning in life. Not that he does not respect people who find meaning in religion, he simply doesn't think it is for him. 'My non-belief is mine and mine alone' (ibid.: 96). Nevertheless, he leaves a word of caution to readers saying that Darwinism has opened up the void and religion does not fill it.

In the third chapter, the author analyses an unsatisfactory attempt in history by evolutionists to establish a naturalistic–secular 'religion' inspired by science, especially Darwinism. The search for an objective and secular answer to the question of meaning based on scientific progress of culture and society, aided amply by the Evolutionary theory of Darwin, reaches its completeness in the idea of 'monad to man'. Human being places itself at the apex in the evolutionary process

and therefore quickly realizes the responsibility of creating a meaningful world. The metaphysics of providence in conferring meaning is substituted by science-based metaphysics of progress. Value that remained unmarried to science is now wedded to science thanks to T. H. Huxley, Edward O. Wilson, Herbert Spencer and the influence of Romanticism on them. But Ruse as a hardcore Darwinian encapsulates for the reader the fact that Darwin upon realising the natural selection theory gave up the idea of progress as an inbuilt drive. The relativistic and randomness in the process of natural selection suggested for Darwin some kind of progress to complexity—and is known today as ‘arms race’. Modern evolutionists such as Richard Dawkins, S.C Morris and others exhibited in their own way an upward mobility in evolutionary process.

Ruse is skeptical about this mobility and is not convinced by the arguments. Consequently, when Darwinian ethicists view evolution as value-laden and discover meaning in it for humans, as essentially as they occupy the apex, Ruse has difficulty admitting it. ‘Trying to get meaning out of Darwin’s theory (going for mathematical justification) is a bit like trying to square a circle’ (2019: 125). He points out the fallacies involved in such thinking. David Hume’s ‘is-ought’ dichotomy remains the bone of contention here. However, agreeing to the argument of Philip Kitcher, Ruse considers this dichotomy as irrelevant and recognises the fact that the world is value-laden but not progressive. And hence, extracting objective meaning from Darwinian evolutionary theory is an inefficacious endeavour.

In the last chapter titled ‘Darwinian Existentialism’ Ruse comprehensively builds up the argument for subjective meaning emerging from evolutionary biology. First, through the use of evolutionist narrative he asserts the existence of human nature. For him, human nature is adaptive, variant and culturally influenced. Essence and existence have no privileges over each other; both are symbiotically connected. He further elaborates on the idea of human nature pinning down nature as biologically social. This social aspect of human nature is strengthened by incorporating three factors: reproduction and family, moral behaviour, and creative thinking. Ruse, as an authority on Darwinian evolutionary theory competently conveys that these three factors are results of biological adaptations. Nevertheless, for him this human nature is not undermined by violent expressions of humans in the evolutionary path.

For Ruse, living this social human nature to the maximum is that which gives meaning to life. A content family life, a moral life in society, and a life of creative imagination brings meaning to life. Consequently, the promise of ‘eternal immortality’ and hitching the sense of meaning of life to it fails to bring in meaning for it is shrouded in mystery.

The effort of subjective value ascription to objects in the world at the end of the chapter is a fascinating suggestion arising out of his belief on a kind of panpsychism. Nevertheless, for the science world entities have value ascription without grades. As an agnostic and a member of the Quaker community, Ruse’s final suggestion is intelligently appealing. He writes ‘Don’t spend your life agonizing about this or letting people manipulate you with false promises. Think for yourself ... Life here and now can be fun and rewarding, deeply meaningful.’ The exhortation to live human nature in full as designed by evolution and nature is not only a wise blueprint for a meaningful life, but it also promises a true and fascinating human society.

A Meaning to Life is an appropriate read for any informed seeker searching for meaning in their life. The weaving of arguments between religion, science and biology is excellent. The humour

intelligently infused in the arguments may even undervalue Jimmy Carr. The systematic flow of narration on the one hand and insertion of philosophical as well as Biblical concepts speaks volumes of the expertise of Ruse on the subject. There is just one place, when it comes to Buddhism—accepting it as a ‘Soul-centered theory’ in line with Metz (2013)—that can be taken as a problematic construction. Buddhism as I see is a religion that centers on soullessness – ‘Anatta’. The reader may be in accord with Ruse throughout, for he comprehensibly builds his arguments, until he introduces the notion of panpsychism. The reason behind this departure is the perennial debate between panpsychism and emergentism. Nevertheless what is most striking and lusciously appealing is Ruse’s exposition of the meaning of life. It is a path highly recommended not only for ‘intellectually fulfilled atheists’ but everyone who yearns for meaning in life.