

# Rationalism and the meaning of life

by Ian Robinson

Editor *Australian Rationalist* 1999 - 2002

As Editor of the *Australian Rationalist* and later as President of the Rationalist Society of Australia I was often called upon to justify the rationalist stance on life. It was easy to argue for the importance of only accepting conclusions on the basis of evidence and reasoning, and to extol the merits of those values that make a rational society possible, such as a free, compulsory and secular education system, freedom of speech facilitating unfettered access to information and means of communication, an independent, courageous and accountable media, and an open and secular democracy that strives to provide the fullest extent of individual liberties consistent with social justice.

These were the values that the *Australian Rationalist* strove to advance, and, when violated, it was quick to criticise the perpetrator(s).

We seemed to be on shakier ground, however, when confronted with those who said "That's all very well, but there has to be something more to life than that". It is easy to dismiss such concerns as naïve and unsophisticated but I think they need to be taken seriously. A complete rationalist philosophy must say something meaningful about our place in the world. I have been progressively developing a position on this over the last decade.

If it is true, as it almost certainly is, that, in the words of the English novelist, Julian Barnes: "...life is a matter of cosmic hazard, its fundamental purpose mere self-perpetuation, that it unfolds in emptiness, that our planet will one day drift in frozen silence, and that the human species will completely disappear and not be missed, because there is nobody and nothing out there to miss us", then what is the meaning of it all?

Human life is not intrinsically meaningful. If it is to have meaning, this meaning must be given to it. The atheist or rationalist position is that we each give our own meaning to our lives by an act of will: we decide what the purpose or purposes of our lives will be, we decide its significance. It seems to me that this rationalist answer is far more satisfying than the religious answer, that the meaning of our lives is imposed on us from the outside by a deity, for his or her own purposes. The notion that we are pawns in god's game makes our individual lives less, not more, meaningful.

Nor need the rationalist response be a mere bowing to inevitability. It can be a conscious act of embracing the world --

what Robert Solomon called "the thoughtful love of life". This means consciously and actively embracing one's own life as the fortuitous outcome of 14 billion years of interaction between assorted particles of matter. Accepting death as a natural end to one's life, and not clinging desperately to fantasies about a better life hereafter. Accepting that life can be tragic, that disaster can strike one at any time, and there are no imaginary friends looking after us and protecting us from evil. Seeing oneself as (a small) part of a grand and epic narrative that started with the big bang and progressed down through the formation of the galaxies and stars and planets, to the dawn of self-replicating life, to the blooming of a myriad forms of that life and to the evolution of the human species, celebrating the wonder of our species' survival, and the scientific, artistic and social achievements of human civilisation, without minimising its capacity for destructiveness and the infliction of pain on others. Putting one's trust in the natural world as the only world we have and seeing ourselves as an integral part of it, rather than as a special and favoured case that deserves exceptional treatment. Involving oneself passionately in life and throwing oneself into it with all the mindfulness, and all the enthusiasm, and all the dedication, and all the discrimination, and all the thoughtfulness, and all the joyfulness, and all the care that one can muster.

As Charles Darwin wrote in the concluding sentence of *The Origin of Species*, "[t]here is grandeur in this view of life".

However, no-one is compelled logically to approach life in this way. There are no deductive or inductive arguments why anybody should accept it. But, as the great Cambridge thinker Frank Plumpton Ramsay pointed out in 1925, there may be a good pragmatic reason:

"I find, just now at least, the world a pleasant and exciting place. You may find it depressing; I am sorry for you, and you despise me. But I have reason and you have none; you would only have a reason for despising me if your feeling corresponded to the fact in a way mine didn't. But neither can correspond to the fact. The fact is not in itself good or bad; it is just that it thrills me but depresses you. On the other hand, I pity you with reason, because it is pleasanter to be thrilled than to be depressed, and not merely pleasanter but better for all one's activities."

It's your choice.