

Introduction

One of the age old questions is, “What is Life’s Purpose?” In today’s world there are many different answers to that question. Richard Robinson, an Oxford trained philosophy professor in the early part of the 20th century, boldly proposes that there is no purpose in life. This paper seeks to understand carefully Robinson’s argument, point out the elements of truth in it, demonstrate its internal inconsistency, and invite Robinson and those sympathetic to his views to embrace the purpose of life set forth by the Creator of the universe in his word to mankind, the Bible.

Robinson’s Argument

Robinson’s article seeks to demonstrate that life has no meaning and that the situation that mankind finds itself in is indeed a bleak one. Every human is certain to die and it is most likely that the entire human race will one day perish. The insecurity that humanity’s certain demise brings is made worse by the fact that mankind knows so little about the universe. Despite the vast amount of unknown facts, the human can be sure that there is no fact that can be found that will explain the meaning of the universe and give mankind a purpose for living. Mankind is powerless to do anything about his bleak future. Unfortunately, there is not a god who can provide the knowledge or power that humans lack.

Despite the bleakness that the reality of the human situation brings, mankind should be courageous and seek to love each other. Since there is no god to take care of mankind, mankind must take care of each other. Thus, the best ideal to which mankind can aspire is to remain cheerful despite its certain fate and make it a goal to love one another until the inevitable happens.

It is important for those who recognize that life has no meaning to develop ceremonies and symbols that will remind people to be cheerful and loving despite the coming destruction of mankind. Religious ceremonies have worked in the past to encourage those in the midst of trials and tribulations, but it is intellectually dishonest for those who do not believe in a god to resort to religion. Though it is not yet known how to create such non-religious ceremonies, humanity can probably figure something out if it tries hard enough.

Elements of Truth

Because of God's common grace to mankind, even those who openly reject him can sometimes recognize truth or, at least, part of the truth. Four things in Robinson's argument bear some semblance to the truth: the reality of the human condition, the great value of love for one's fellow humans, the importance of intellectual honesty, and the need for outside help in the midst of trials in order for one to hold fast to one's ideals.

First of all, Robinson should be commended for giving a pretty fair assessment of the fragility and weakness of mankind. In an age where many avoid talking about death or try to ignore it through keeping themselves busy with diversions, Robinson forcefully reminds his audience that death is certain for everyone. This is a huge help in thinking rightly about the things of first importance. In addition, he points to the limitedness of mankind's knowledge. Science is sometimes touted in such a way that it sounds like it has all the answers to everything; however, Robinson is honest in pointing out that despite the growth in knowledge that science brings, there is still a lot, including many hugely important things, that mankind does not know. Not only is man ignorant of many things that he needs to know, he is in an even worse situation than just lacking knowledge. Even many of the things that mankind knows, he is unable to do anything about. Much is completely outside of his control.

Next, Robinson is right in calling men and women to care for one another. He makes this call to love not just one thing mankind should do but something that should include everything mankind does. No one wants to live in a society where everyone is only looking out for themselves to the exclusion of the interests and welfare of others. Practically speaking, such a place would not survive long.

Thirdly, Robinson is demanding intellectual honesty. He wants people to think and then live in light of reality. The Christian can only agree that this is a necessity for right thinking and living, for his Lord and Savior is the Truth.

Finally, Robinson rightly recognizes that in the midst of hardship and difficulty, people often give in to despair unless they have the help of others to encourage them to perseverance and hope. He admits that in the past religious ceremonies have often aided suffering people not to give up. Certainly an individual's dependence on other humans must be recognized, for even in the Garden of Eden before the fall when man had unhindered communion with God, God himself said that it was not good for man to be alone. In a fallen world, this is even more so the case.

Internal Inconsistencies

Though Robinson's agenda contains some elements of truth in it, as a whole his argument is internally inconsistent. This is demonstrated in three areas: the inequity of his view of human ignorance with his certainty that God does not exist, the intellectual dishonesty of saying that life has no purpose and then creating one that mankind should live up to, and the groundless call to love one's fellow man when it is claimed that there is no God.

Human Ignorance and God's Existence

As was mentioned in the previous section, Robinson did a fine job of painting the weakness and helplessness of men. He took great pains to underline the fact that mankind's knowledge is very limited and humans need to press on to find out more information, but in the very next breath he makes the unbelievable claim that there is no God. He does not just state that there might not be God or that God probably does not exist, he emphatically states that regardless of whatever new knowledge is gained, this new knowledge will not turn up the existence of God. The question one must ask Mr. Robinson is on what basis he can make such a certain claim when he has just stated that mankind's knowledge is lacking in many respects! He seems to want to "have his cake and eat it too" as regards human knowledge. He wants to say that mankind has insufficient knowledge but at least in this one thing it has absolute and certain knowledge. He cannot logically hold to both statements.

This inequity in Mr. Robinson's argumentation reveals something about him at the deepest level of his thinking. He has a presupposition by which he evaluates every piece of knowledge that he comes across. Regardless of any amount of new evidence that might be produced to support the existence of the Christian God clearly revealed in nature and Scripture, Robinson has already decided beforehand that the evidence will not support any such claims. He will do everything he can to find another explanation for any such evidence, for his presupposition will not allow for a conclusion that results in the existence of God. The reality is that Robinson has encountered more than sufficient evidence that the Christian God exists. There is not a lack of evidence, but Robinson's commitment to his own independent thinking is suppressing that knowledge. Of course, such suppression cannot be consistently maintained, as his illogical claims of both uncertainty and certainty demonstrate. He has no rational grounds

upon which he can reject the existence of the Christian God and the meaning of life that this God has revealed in his word to mankind, the Bible.

Intellectual Dishonesty about the Meaning of Life

Robinson professes that intellectual honesty is a great value to him. In fact, in his strong desire for atheists to develop ceremonies that reinforce their ideals in the midst of suffering, he clearly states that an atheist cannot be intellectually dishonest by reverting to the use of religious ceremonies that have proved so helpful to many in the past. One who does not believe in a god cannot truly be encouraged by a ceremony that relies on the existence of a god for it to provide help! Such intellectual honesty could be applauded if Robinson were consistent in his application of it; however, he is trying to do two mutually inconsistent things in this article: prove that life has no meaning and at the same time provide an ideal that will give meaning! As dogmatically as possible, he devotes the first part of his article to stating that it is certain that mankind will not gain anything in its ever increasing growth of knowledge that will provide meaning for mankind.

If the essay had ended at the point where Robinson had tried to forcefully show that there is no meaning in life, he might at least be considered consistent in his claims; however, the article is only half over at this point. He spends the second half providing a meaning for mankind! This meaning is found in being courageously cheerful despite certain doom and doing one's best to love his fellow mankind. Indeed, he calls this "man's finest achievement," his "dignity," his "virtue," and his "finest occupation." Such appellations enforce the idea that there indeed is a noble purpose for which an individual might live. One must ask Mr. Robinson after such contrasting ideas are presented in the same paper, "Which is it, does life have meaning or does it not?"

It seems that this reveals something quite significant about Robinson's argument: it is unlivable! Robinson knows that mankind cannot just deny any meaning whatsoever to life and go on without giving into despair. This is revealed in the closing part of his article in which he challenges those who embrace his viewpoint to come up with religious-like ceremonies (though certainly not religious) that will help people in the midst of hardship to hold to the purpose for mankind that he has set forth. He seems to know how difficult (one might say impossible) it is for men and women to live without some purpose to their existence. Therefore, Mr. Robinson's ivory tower philosophy will not hold up to the test of day-to-day living, and deep down it seems that even he knows that. One must ask Mr. Robinson, "Who is being intellectually dishonest now?"

The Groundless Call to Love

As has been demonstrated, Robinson has shown that he cannot be consistent in his claim that life has no purpose, for he clearly tries to give one for which mankind is to live. The heart of this purpose that he sets forth is to love one's fellow human beings. He points to the necessity of this because there is no God to care of human beings; thus, human beings must care for one another. One must ask Mr. Robinson the connection between their being no God and life having no meaning to the necessity to love one's fellow human beings. It seems equally viable and perhaps more so that everyone should just look out for their own selfish interests, if there is not a God which provides such moral imperatives for mankind and will not hold them responsible to obey those imperatives.

For one who does not have any hope of existence beyond this life, love is going to prove too costly. Who will want to serve in the military, attempt to quench an angry mob lynching an

innocent person, run into a burning building to save others, or give away one's money to help the poor, if the only value one can have in an purposeless universe is to try to enjoy and preserve one's short life as much as possible? In a world without the Christian God and thus without meaning in life, the human existence becomes survival of the fittest, and the fittest will not be those who are willing to make the sacrifice that love will inevitably demand. Therefore, one cannot logically proceed from the meaninglessness of life to an all embracing imperative to love and care for one's fellow human beings. Such a jump is contrary to sound logic.

An Invitation

Now that it has been demonstrated that Robinson cannot consistently hold to his view that there is no God, that his atheism is intellectually honest, and that his view should lead people to love others, it is desirable to show Mr. Robinson and those sympathetic with his viewpoint why such claims must always be internally inconsistent and to invite them to view the world we live in from the perspective of the One who made it and has clearly revealed his purpose for mankind in the Bible. Indeed the very areas in which Robinson is inconsistent provide the bridge upon which such an invitation can be extended.

The Solid Ground of True Knowledge

Robinson has been taken to task for his contradictory statement that mankind is both ignorant of much in the universe and at the same time can with certainty say that there is no God. Robinson wants to live with some certainties in his life, but the desire to do so is only because he lives in the world created by the Christian God revealed in nature and Scripture. Robinson has to borrow from the biblical worldview in order to espouse certainty about anything. In a world where there is no God who has revealed himself, mankind can never be certain about anything,

for as Robinson himself admits, there is so much that mankind does not know. Only the reality of the Christian God who has clearly revealed himself in nature and, most clearly, in Scripture can provide a world where there is certainty. Robinson and his cohorts are invited to embrace the only rational basis for true knowledge about anything, the self-revelation of the Christian God. In the Christian worldview, the individual can know truly without knowing exhaustively, for those things which God, who always speaks the truth, has revealed can be embraced, even if not everything is known about that which has been revealed. The believer in the Christian God can rest in the certainty that even those unknown facts of the world, of which are legion, are known fully and truly by his God. Robinson must relinquish his certainty about anything (not just intellectually but in the all important test of day-to-day living) unless he embraces the Christian God of the Bible.

The Revealed Purpose of Life

Robinson calls for intellectual honesty in his article, especially that atheists would not participate in religious ceremonies to strengthen their resolve for living when life becomes difficult. It is in this very call to intellectual honesty that Mr. Robinson's intellectual dishonesty is most clearly revealed, for his recognized need for ceremonies that encourage holding to one's ideals of courage and love (i.e. man's purpose in life) demonstrates that he knows that mankind cannot avoid falling into total despair without a reason for living.

Only the Bible can account for why there is a universal desire for men and women to live for something, and this is that mankind was created as God's image bearers who reflect his glory by having dominion over the created order. God made mankind in such a way that we want to give ourselves to the purpose for our existence. Before the fall of mankind into an estate of sin and misery, our first parents gave themselves to glorifying God through joyfully fulfilling the

creation mandate he had given them to have dominion over the earth. After the fall, mankind still gives itself to something but in its willful rebellion against the Creator, it substitutes its own purposes for the one given to it by God. The Bible calls this “idolatry.” However, mankind does not simply choose to live without some meaning to which they can give themselves. They still bear the image of their Creator and it shows in this universal desire for purpose.

God has not left mankind to its substitutes for his purpose for their existence, for he sent his Son, Jesus Christ, into the world to provide a way for mankind to be forgiven of his idolatry and to be restored to once again living for his created purpose: to glorify God in every area of his day-to-day living. Robinson and those of a like mind with him are invited by God himself to once again give themselves to his original purpose for their existence. The only alternative is truly believing and living that there is no purpose to life, and Robinson has demonstrated that this is not an option, despite his loudest protestations to the contrary.

The Only Basis for Love

Robinson demonstrates that he cannot live without a purpose for his existence, so he urges mankind to love one another. It has already been shown that his atheistic world cannot account for such a moral imperative. The very desire for such an imperative does not reside in logical consistency with his own professed worldview but in the fact that he is a creature who bears the image of his Creator. God has written his moral law on the hearts of mankind, and despite the fall this is still present, regardless of how much it often gets warped in the rebellious suppression that fallen man must constantly give himself to in order to deny his obligations to love, worship, and obey his Creator.

Mr. Robinson and those sympathetic with his position are invited to embrace the Christian God revealed in Scripture, for he is the only basis upon which a universal moral

imperative to love one's neighbor can be grounded. Otherwise, each person can posit their own purpose(s) and imperative(s) but they cannot be universally binding to all people. Robinson wants to speak of mankind as brothers with no father, but nature shows that this is an impossibility. Mankind is joined together precisely because they share the same Creator and each individual was made to bear the image of their Maker. In addition, God has given a moral imperative to love one another that he has written on every human heart and with bold letters in the pages of Scripture. Mr. Robinson must embrace the Christian God or give up his call for men to love one another.

Conclusion

One answer to the varied responses to the age old question, "What is life's purpose?" has been examined in this paper. In the process, not only has the atheistic view that life has no purpose been refuted, but so also have all other possible responses that vary from the self-revelation of the Christian God in nature and Scripture. God has revealed that his purpose for mankind is to bear God's image by glorifying him in every aspect of their day-to-day existence, and such a prospect is possible for rebellious sinners only because Christ has come into the world to offer forgiveness and restoration to all those who will turn from their self-made purpose and put their confidence in him to restore them back to their original purpose. Any other alternative is not logically possible.