

**"Of Meanings and Meaning:"
A Slightly Bushwhacked Reality
and a Non-Sense of Being
in *Monty Python's The Meaning of Life*
and *Monty Python's Life of Brian*.**

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Monty Python's The Meaning of Life (1983) opens with a somewhat sobering discourse on Being by a school of fish. The dialogue brazenly thrusts the audience into the irony of complacency, of believing we are just as happy as a school of fish. Yet in the accustomed rigor (*mortis*) of their salutations the fish eventually note that something is rather amiss:

First Fish: Morning.

Second Fish: Morning.

Third Fish: Morning.

Fourth Fish: Morning.

Third Fish: Morning.

First Fish: Morning.

Second Fish: Morning.

Fourth Fish: What's new?

First Fish: Not much.

Fifth and Sixth Fish: Morning.

The Others: Morning, morning, morning.

First Fish: Frank was just asking what's new.

Fifth Fish: Was he?

First Fish: Yeah. Uh huh...

Third Fish: Hey, look. Howard's being eaten.

Second Fish: Is he?

[They move forward to watch a waiter serving a large grilled fish to a large man.]

Second Fish: Makes you think doesn't it?

Fourth Fish: I mean... what's it all about?

Fifth Fish: Beats me.

Does it? Does it really make one think? And about what? What is it? Truth is it actually beats all of us who dare to ponder what's it all about. The fish's exchange pointedly scores the meaning of *The Meaning of Life*, and its multiple meanings (if any is to be had). But what is this *it* that we wish to figure out? In essence: Is it Life? Or is it Death? This is not only the motive of the movie but of man's existence per se, as the opening song to *Monty Python's The Meaning of Life* attest to:

Why are we here, what is life all about?

Is God really real, or is there some doubt?

Well tonight we're going to sort it all out,

For tonight it's the Meaning of Life.

What's the point of all these hoax?

Is it the chicken and egg time, are we all just yolks?

Or perhaps, we're just one of God's little jokes,

Well *ca c'est* the Meaning of Life.

Is life just a game where we make up the rules
While we're searching for something to say
Or are we just simple spiraling coils
Of self-replicating DNA?

What is life? What is our fate?
Is there Heaven and Hell? Do we reincarnate?
Is mankind evolving or is it too late?
Well tonight here's the Meaning of Life.

For millions this life is a sad vale of tears
Sitting round with really nothing to say
While scientists say we're just simply spiraling coils
Of self-replicating DNA.

So just why, why are we here?
And just what, what, what, what do we fear?
Well *ce soir*, for a change, it will all be made clear,
For this is the Meaning of Life - *c'est le sens de la vie* -
This is the Meaning of Life.

So many questions. Not many answers, at least no real answer, to any of them. Life and Death. Humanity, since before Darwin's time, and definitively after, hasn't had it so tough. It is not so much that there is no "credible" goal to be attained but that the beginning of it all is somewhat iffy, to say

the least. Whence we came, where we go. These questions underlie the essence of the ever "Why?" And why not? From Creationists to Evolutionists, Science and Faith have battled, sometimes hand in hand, to acquire the knowledge of our beginnings. Philosophers and Cosmologists have pondered our beginnings. Psalmists and Mythologists have pondered our end. Children ask where babies come from and where the dearly departed go to. Adults hide their lack of knowledge with winsome wishes of eternal youth and dire threats of eternal punishment. "So just why, why are we here? And just what, what, what, what do we fear?"

Truth is we just don't know—and sometimes we just don't care, but that is another matter. Or maybe not. Maybe it is the matter at hand, the fact that in the end, when push comes to shove, and one ends up eventually shoved into the coffin, the truth is that we don't really care. And why should we? Nobody else seems to.

We care because we wish to be happy, to traverse this world and reap its bounties, and to spread our (mis)fortunes to others. We sail the seas of discord to pounce upon the hapless Black Knights who ruthlessly dare to impede our destiny. Even so we still dare to ask:

Brian: Have I got a big nose, mum?

Mother: Oh, stop thinking about sex!

Brian: I wasn't!

Mother: You're always on about it. Morning, noon and night "Will the girls like this, will the girls like that? Is it too big, is it too small?"

Leper I: A fish, sir?

(Monty Python's Life of Brian[1979])

So I am back to the fishes. But I'll deal with that later. Brian is surrounded by others who were/are marked at one point or other in life by their misfortunes and who deem him their savior. But Brian is not who he seems to be, doubly. First, he is not what others have led themselves to believe he is, from the bumbling Wise Men who happen upon the wrong stable on his birth to the men and women who follow him up to the time he is crucified as the messiah. But Brian knows he is not that person. Secondly, he has also been misled about who he really is. His Mother has hidden the truth about his nose. He knows not his nose. His real fear is not to be who he thinks he is, to be betrayed by what his nose knows:

Mother: Well...you know when you were asking me about your...

Brian: My nose?

Mother: Yes, well...there's a reason it's like it is, Brian.

Brian: What is it?

Mother: Oh, well, I suppose I should have told you a long time ago, but...

Brian: What?

Mother: Well, Brian, your father isn't Mr. Cohen.

Brian: I never thought he was!

Mother: Now none of your cheek! He was a Roman, Brian. He was a centurion in the Roman army.

Brian: You mean...you were raped?!

Mother: Well...at first, yes.

Brian: Who was it?

Mother: Huh...Naughtius Maximus his name was. Hmm...promised me the known world, he did. I was to be taken to Rome, house by the Forums, slaves, asses' milk, as much gold as I could eat. Then he, having his way with me he had; vroom! Like a rat out of an aqueduct.

Brian: He's a bastard!

Mother: Yes, and next time you go on about the "bloody Romans", don't forget you're one of them.

Brian: I'm not a Roman mum, and I never will be. I'm a kike, a jid, a heebe, a hooknose! I'm kosher, mum! I'm a red-sea pedestrian and proud of it!

Brian closing door [Bladonk]

Mother:Huh...sex, sex, sex, that's all they think about, eh? Hm. Well, how are you then, officer?

(Monty Python's Life of Brian)

Well maybe not about that exactly. Yet that is what humanity worries about: their appearances and how they are judged by others (especially of the other sex), and eventually by oneself. Brian is and is not what he puports to be. He is kosher yet not. And that is the essence of his misfortune. He carries Being and Non-being—Life and Death—in his dual nature. And it being unknown to him, and his rejection of it, is in the end his misfortune.

It is the misfortune of all to lose one's identity.

Brian: Did you say ex-leper?

Ex-leper: That's right, sir. Sixteen years behind a bell and fradock, sir.

Brian: Oh...what happened?

Ex-leper: I was cured, sir.

Brian: Cured?

Ex-leper: Yes, a bloody miracle, sir. God bless you!

Brian: Oh, who cured you?

Ex-leper: Jesus did, sir. I was hopping along, minding my own business, all of a sudden up he comes, cures me. One minute I'm a leper with a trade, next minute I'm alive and newsgone. Not so much as a bye or league! "You're cured, mate". Bloody do-gooder.

...

Brian: There's no pleasing some people.

Ex-leper: That's just what Jesus said, sir!

(Monty Python's Life of Brian)

No good deed goes unpunished. The story of Brian and the leper brings to mind that we are here NOT to help others, or better yet, not to help those who do not ask to be helped, or deserve to be helped. But how do we decide who deserves our aide? We don't. We just thrust it upon the hapless dolt one happens to run into. Who favors who? Actually no one. One meddles and muddles the waters of life. And in the end we multiply our bounty upon others. So how should the one feel about one's misfortunes? Are our misfortunes *really* misfortunes? Is life *really* so rotten? Or is it just me? Crucified Brian is cajoled into turning his frowns into smiles by his fellow Crucifies:

If life seems jolly rotten, there's something you've forgotten,
and that's to laugh and smile and dance and sing,
when you're feeling in the dumps, don't be silly chumps,
just perch your lips and whistle, that's the key.

And always look on the bright side of life, *(Monty Python's Life of Brian)*

It's us. We put the frump in our rump and turn our smiles into frowns. By Jove, lift your spirits, and don't be silly, "and always look on the bright side of life" even if you're impaled on a cross.

So why should I care? Really. What is it all about? And more important, what is there in it for me? For as Brian is reminded on the Cross by Crucified Man III:

For life is quite absurd, and death's the final word,
you must always face the curtain with a bow,
forget about your sin, give the audience a grin,
enjoy, it's your last chance anyhow.

So, always look on the bright side of death. (*Monty Python's Life of Brian*)

So, why bother? What is it all about? What do we get out of all this suffering and caring? Pascal's wager comes to mind, but with a grim twist (of fate and faith [or lack thereof])

I mean, what have you got to lose? You know, you come from nothing, you're going back to nothing, what have you lost? Nothing! (*Monty Python's Life of Brian*)

Nothing. Just a song and a dance and if we are lucky we can trade our harps and wings for the Pythonesque heaven where every day is Christmas. But is this it? Are we to be consumed by Being in a never ending Las Vegas review? Do we really want it to be Christmas every day, for ever and ever and ever, and... . Well you get the idea. Is this really all we have to look forward to? Then, again, maybe not. The Pythons, as well as life itself,

don't give up in their quest to stick it to you. And so we have a revisionist theory of *it*. Of what *it* is really all about:

Lady Presenter[Michael Palin, in drag]: [briskly] Well, that's the End of the Film, now here's the Meaning of Life.
[An envelope is handed to her. She opens it in a business-like way.]

Thank you Brigitte. [She reads.]... Well, it's nothing special. Try and be nice to people, avoid eating fat, read a good book every now and then, get some walking in and try and live together in peace and harmony with people of all creeds and nations. And finally, here are some completely gratuitous pictures of penises to annoy the censors and to hopefully spark some sort of controversy which it seems is the only way these days to get the jaded video-sated public off their fucking arses and back in the sodding cinema. Family entertainment bollocks! What they want is filth, people doing things to each other with chainsaws during tupperware parties, babysitters being stabbed with knitting needles by gay presidential candidates, vigilante groups strangling chickens, armed bands of theatre critics exterminating mutant goats - where's the fun in pictures? Oh well, there we are - here's the theme music. Goodnight.

(Monty Python's The Meaning of Life)

It is about as complicated as it is simply put above. It is about what it should be and what it is. And it doesn't bode well. The envelope contains simple rules of living, a do good and fare well simplicity that in all sense should be easy peasy. But then the presenter pulls the rug on the goody-two-shoe ideals and spills the beans. We don't want to really know what it is all about. And even if we did we don't want to hear it. We want sex, violence, drugs and to be blown out of our minds with gratuitous images blasted into our minds. We want psychedelic images that rock our senses out of the doldrums of life. Life is a bore, and death is a non-entity (at least for the living). Just blow our socks off with magnificent explosions and lots of gore. With promises of better and bigger spectacles that confound all imagination in 3-D, Smellovision, shake-your-bootie megacomplexes of total

debauchery. Hell, let the innards fly! Ahem. Yes, it is about entertaining the naughty in us via a somewhat aseptized media. For this media only appears to be, but is not, in essence, it. It is a protective film, a rubber of a sort, through which we see (and feel) what titillates our senses without becoming a part of it. We feed our base needs without becoming impregnated by them. Our mores swell, not our wombs, we are free to promiscuously explore without the repercussions of the physical act. For there is no act, only illusion.

Well, maybe it is not all that it was cracked-up to be, hey guv? Kind of a letdown, you know? But what did you expect? It is Python, and after all it is only a movie. It is the course of our Being, and somewhat of our Un-Being, that we are essentially the arses that we pretend to be. Life is jaded. So is Death. And so is the rest of the minutiae that make up our Being. How prophetic these words were/are to our sorry existence. We care not. We only want instant gratification, and then—Poof!—it's gone. We can't seem to get enough. In fact, we can't seem to get any(thing). Nudge. Nudge. Wink. Wink. Know what I mean? That Life is devoid of Being. That Being is nonsensical, and we are just going along for the ride. But there is no ride. We do not go along any-thing. There is no "Why" because there is no it. This is our fear.

Cheer up, you old bugger! Come on! Give us a grin! There you are! See? The end of the film. Incidentally, this record is available in the forehands.

(Monty Python's Life of Brian)

And what about poor Howard? You didn't think I would forget what motivated this rambling excuse of a proposal now, did you? Now. Now. Don't you fret. That's right. It is a piece of shit, and then we die—or in Howard's

case one becomes another's grilled entry. And there is nothing one can do about it. Go figure, ol' chap. We've been screwed by the all mighty joke of existence. But don't you fret. Just clear your throat a bit—beware of the bones—and join Brian and me (and the rest of humanity) in song, for Howard hey?

Life's a piece of shit, when you look at it,
life's a laugh, and death's a joke, it's true.
You'll see it's all a show, people laughing as you go,
just remember that the last laugh is on you!
And always look on the bright side of life

(Monty Python's Life of Brian)

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