How to live?

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This paper is not about truth but about consistency. Pointing to inconsistency would be a dry worthless exercise were there not people who are inconsistent in the specific way described and for whom such inconsistency matters. There are those who tell us that life has no value and is pointless, that it is 'absurd', and yet that it matters how we live our lives; in particular that we ought to square up to the truth that life has no value and is pointless. Philosophy and art, especially in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, have often seen this view in the ascendant when they get onto the issue of 'the meaning of life'.

If life is pointless, and everything we do without value, then there can be no more value in a life that faces up to that truth than in one that doesn't. To argue otherwise would be to argue that although nothing has value and no way of living has more value than any other, yet to live an authentic life that faces this truth is a better way of living than an inauthentic way that does not; perhaps because the former is more rational and we should value having rationally-shaped honest lives, and the latter would be intellectual cowardice. But this is clearly inconsistent. One cannot deny all life having value and also suppose a residue of value entailed by saying that living in awareness of the valuelessness of life is a superior way to live. Therefore, there is nothing wrong with getting through life in a manner that minimises the feeling of distress caused by the thought that life is pointless and meaningless, and so arrange things (psychologically and practically) that one ends up as far as one is able living life *as if* life has a point and is valuable. Yet many would regard this as heinous and would berate others for living in this way.

The argument has something in common with Pascal's Wager—but only so far. It isn't susceptible to the criticism Bertrand Russell directed at the Wager, that it was a terrible piece of cowardly intellectual dishonesty. For that to work, it has to be bad to be cowardly and intellectually dishonest. Now one could claim that in the case of Pascal's Wager, because the argument itself allows the notion of the value of intellectual honesty to stand, Russell has a good point, even if the value of such intellectual honesty might

doi:10.1017/S003181910732007X
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https://doi.org/10.1017/S003181910732007X Published online by Cambridge University Press

have to be weighed against the value of perhaps avoiding damnation. But my argument is that if all values are spurious, then there is no greater value in facing up to the truth than not. If there are no values and there is no point to life, and there is no particular way to live your life that is better than any other, then intellectual dishonesty and cowardice don't matter either.

The argument is not meant to persuade anyone whether life has value or not. If it does have value, then we can find out what it is, perhaps. If it doesn't have value, then it doesn't matter how we live our lives, and living life in a way that ultimately doesn't care whether life has value or not is as good as any other way. If it seems to have value, then that's just fine, even if it doesn't. We shouldn't be berated for living that way. Whatever 'gets you through' is all right. Life cannot have no value and be pointless, and it also matter, for some evaluative reason, that we make efforts through examining it to find that fact out and then live heroically under the shadow of its truth. You can't have it both ways.

There is indeed worse to follow. Not only might we conclude that the unexamined life is 'worth living' because that way one may get through it accepting falsehoods that make it seem worth living, but also we may oppose examining our lives because to do so would carry the danger of revealing that life is valueless and pointless, and once this is grasped, there would be no going back to the happy comforting illusions that made life tolerable. If one thinks that life is valueless and pointless, or hard to show not to be so, then one should perhaps encourage people *not* to examine guiding beliefs that would give their life meaning, and let them live by their illusions, their falsehoods, perhaps even their self-delusions, if it makes life more bearable, perhaps even benign. This of course would not be because such a life would be 'better' in an evaluative sense; but there is no reason to suggest, if life is valueless and pointless, that such a life is any worse than any other except, at best, in a pragmatic sense.

A final disturbing thought. If the argument here is sound, then why does its conclusion seem wrong? We tend to think overridingly that it must matter how we live our lives in the evaluative sense regardless of whether life is valueless and pointless—'absurd'—or not.

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https://doi.org/10.1017/S003181910732007X Published online by Cambridge University Press