

THE MEANING OR PURPOSE OF LIFE

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If **Word Ways** required abstracts for its articles, this would be an awkward moment. Originally, I intended to write an ordinary book review about an anything-but-ordinary book. Things soon got out of hand, however, resulting in a hybrid article. Flip-and-skim readers may by now have typed it as an instance of the premise-bit sequence, long a standby of Johnny Carson and Ed McMahon on the Tonight Show. Ed: "In that one book is everything you could hope to know about [book topic]." Johnny: "You are wrong, [topic-related adjective]-breath. Our staff has done some research and come up with a list of its own." Ed [astounded]: "There's more?"

Possibly the flip-and-skimmers are right. Section I contains the actual review, a.k.a. premise. Section II takes it from there.

I

The book of interest is The Meaning of Life, collected by Hugh S. Moorhead, Chicago Review Press, 1988, 232 pages, \$14.95 hard-bound. That's right, collected. Dr. Moorhead, who is Professor of Philosophy at Northeastern Illinois University, has a hobby, extending back some four decades. He buys a book, reads it, jots down his comments and mails them with the book back to the author. In each case, he encloses a note requesting that the book be returned, inscribed with the author's answer to the age-old question "What is the meaning or purpose of life?"

The responses he has received are the essence of the Moorhead collection, arranged alphabetically by authors' names. His success rate has been surprisingly high. Out of some 750 attempts, only 50 or so were lost. Over 250 inscriptions are reported in the book, and roughly 350 were inscribed as requested. The other 350-odd volumes contain personal notes or simply autographs. Despite the cost of the postage and books lost in the mails, the return on Professor Moorhead's investment must be handsome indeed by now.

As for the reader's investment, the returns are various. As one might expect, there are many responses from professional philosophers, theologians, and logicians. To name a few: Russell, Moore, Broad, Carnap, Reichenbach, Tillich, Niebuhr, Smullyan and Quine. Then there are the scientists and thinkers whose writings have made it so easy for the rest of us to dine at the feast: Durant, Gardner, Asimov, Sagan, Gould. With impeccable taste, the Moorhead net caught up the three Poets Laureate of the U.S. to date:

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Robert Penn Warren, Richard Wilbur and Howard Nemerov. And there are far too many others to classify concisely. Where else are merged C.G. Jung, Eleanor Roosevelt, Leonard Bernstein, James Thurber, Margaret Mead, Fred Allen, Jonas Salk, Peter Drucker, John Ehrlichman and Dr. Seuss?

II

The reader may now be wondering what special appeal this book could possibly have for the logologist. First, it is a unique anthology of a new art form: single-topic essays written on the fly (naturally, no pun intended). Second, the tiny seed from which it has grown is the simple, pleasantly metrical sentence WHAT IS THE MEANING OR PURPOSE OF LIFE? To some, it may evoke recollections of Robert Southey's opening lines "How does the water / Come down at Lodore?" and all the delightful onomatopoeia that ensued. Others may be enticed, as I was, to seek within its 31 letters an anagrammatic answer to its own question.

The prospects are excellent. There are 13 vowels and 18 consonants, distributed thus: AEEEEFFGHHIIILMNNOOOPRRSSSTTUW. Obviously no palindrome is possible, but it is rich in apposite permutations. Let me present a few of my own findings and then withdraw, inviting those so inclined to extend what one hopes will become a significant collection in its own right.

My first attempt was direct and to the point:

"NO FATE SUPREME" IS A HOPE WORTH FILING

Encouraged by a relevant result with a modest expenditure of effort, I continued to experiment and soon found the following:

HO, A SOFT, POIGNANT WHIMPER. SURE I FLEE!

In the hope of finding something a bit more upbeat, the search went on.

The next anagram had a distinctly personal character:

ME SUPER-FAT? WORSE? FIE, I HOP ALONG THIN

It seemed time to diversify. The next arrangement focused on a pair of nursery favorites:

WINNIE-THE-POOH, SUFFER PIGLET'S AROMA

This behavioral injunction tells us how to form socially stable relationships despite inherently adverse conditions.

All of these had a distinctly occidental flavor. Could universal balance be introduced into the nascent collection through a combination suggestive of the Far East? In due course, an affirmative answer turned up. In sentiment, it is similar to a familiar cookie fortune "Gentle ways are best". With its lack of articles and pronouns, it resembles other cookie fortunes syntactically. Finally, it is the only one formulated conditionally:

IF IS FUTON GAME, NO WHIPS, ROPE, LEATHER