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Knowledge and the Meaning of Human Life

1. *The role of knowledge*

One of the main aims of this book is to give an answer to the question: What is the role of knowledge in nature? The answer which was given in the preceding chapters is that knowledge has, first, a biological role and, second, a cultural role.

This view, however, may seem reductive. From the antiquity many philosophers have assigned knowledge a higher role: knowledge is the ultimate purpose and meaning of human life.

For example, Aristotle claims that theoretical wisdom, that is, knowledge of the first principles and of what follows from them, “is by nature our purpose” and “is the ultimate thing for the sake of which we have come to be.”¹ This is the highest form of knowledge since it “is knowledge with grounding of the highest things,” for through this kind of knowledge one “not only knows what follows from the first principles,” but also possesses “truth about the first principles.”² Theoretical wisdom must be pursued for its own sake and can make us free, for among the activities of our thought only “those desirable for their own sake are free.”³ Being knowledge of the first principles, theoretical wisdom is knowledge of God, since “God is thought to be among the causes of all things and to be a first principle.”⁴

Similarly, Russell says that “the life of the instinctive man is shut up within the circle of his private interests.”⁵ But, “if our life is to be great and free, we must escape this prison.”⁶ The main way

of doing so is through knowledge, because “all acquisition of knowledge is an enlargement of the Self.”⁷ Through knowledge our mind “becomes capable of that union with the universe which constitutes its highest good.”⁸ Knowledge “makes us citizens of the universe,” and “in this citizenship of the universe consists man’s true freedom, and his liberation from the thralldom of narrow hopes and fears.”⁹ The union with the universe is religious in kind for “religion consists in union with the universe.”¹⁰ Religion “derives its power from the sense of union with the universe which it is able of to give.”¹¹

What Aristotle and Russell propose as the ultimate purpose and meaning of human life is the ideal of self-liberation through knowledge: only through knowledge humans can become really free. This ideal is religious in kind, as it appears from the fact that Aristotle identifies the liberation of humans with the knowledge of God, and Russell identifies it with that union with the universe in which, in his opinion, religion consists.

In addition to Aristotle and Russell, the view that knowledge is the ultimate purpose and meaning of human life has had several other supporters. Nevertheless it is inadequate.

For if, as Aristotle maintains, the ultimate purpose and meaning of human life is knowledge since the knowledge of first principles is knowledge of God, the question arises: does God exist?

To such question Aquinas, for example, answers by his first proof of the existence of God, which is reminiscent of Aristotle’s proof of the existence of the first immovable mover: “It is certain and evident to our senses that in the world some things are in motion. Now whatever is in motion is put in motion by another”, and “that by another again. But this cannot go on to infinity, for then there would be no first mover, and, consequently, no other mover, for subsequent movers move only inasmuch as they are put in motion by the first mover.”¹² Therefore “it is necessary to arrive at a first mover, put in motion by no other; and this everyone understands to be God.”¹³

But Aquinas’ proof is inadequate for it depends on three unwarranted assumptions: 1) It is impossible for a mover to be moved if there is no first mover; 2) Whatever is in motion is put in motion by another; 3) The first mover is God. Now, assumption 1) is already problematic in the case of finite series, but there is no evidence for it in the case of infinite series. Assumption 2) is already

problematic in the case of things of the world, but there is no evidence that it can be extended to the world as a whole. Assumption 3) is problematic for, even allowing that Aquinas' proof really proves that a first mover exists, nothing guarantees that such first mover is the God of theism – a personal being, infinitely powerful, creator of the world out of nothing, who knows everything and is the cause not only of the becoming but also of the being of everything.

Similarly if, as Russell maintains, the ultimate purpose and meaning of human life is knowledge – for it is through knowledge that our mind becomes capable of that union with the universe which constitutes its highest good – this raises the question: Why such union? Russell's answer, that through knowledge man reaches his liberation from the thralldom of narrow hopes and fears, is inadequate because to have knowledge of the universe is not necessarily a liberation. It can make us even more aware of the constraints to which we are subjected.

2. Evolution and meaning of human life

The inadequacy of the view that knowledge is the ultimate purpose and meaning of human life does not mean, however, that knowledge has nothing to say on the subject. Indeed, an important part of our knowledge, the theory of evolution, has something to say about it.

One of the most basic questions humans ask is: Why human life? The answer of the theory of evolution is: Human life exists in virtue of the fact that it is the result of an adaptation.

But, it will be objected, this answer depends on a misunderstanding. What one means by that question is not: In virtue of what human life exists? It is rather: What is the ultimate purpose and meaning of human life?

Actually, the theory of evolution gives an answer also to this question: Human life has no ultimate purpose and meaning. It is, of course, a negative answer, but a clear and neat one. Thus the theory of evolution gives an answer to both senses of the question: Why human life? Human life exists in virtue of the fact that it is the result of an adaptation, and has no ultimate purpose and meaning.

In particular, from the viewpoint of the theory of evolution, the ultimate purpose and meaning of human life cannot consist in progress. Evolution favours those characters which promote the propagation of the genes which originate them, but this is not a progress by any of the moral,

aesthetical, emotional standards by which we consider something as a progress. Even if one is willing to consider the propagation of genes as a progress in itself, natural selection cannot be considered as productive of progress, for an adaptation can be judged good or bad only relative to the environment in which it takes place. Thus it cannot be considered a progress in an absolute sense.

Nor, from the viewpoint of the theory of evolution, the ultimate purpose and meaning of human life can consist in an increase in complexity. Although evolution favours the most complex organisms when they produce greater genetic adequacy, the same holds of the least complex ones. Of course, in a relatively stable environment a species can progressively become better adapted, but this is simply a local progress, not the global one that would allow one to speak of progress in an absolute sense. In any case, it is not a progress in the sense of an approximation to an ultimate purpose.

3. Religion and meaning of human life

However, even if the theory of evolution gives an answer to both senses in which one can mean the question ‘Why human life?’, such answer – that human life exists in virtue of the fact that is the result of an adaptation, and has no ultimate purpose and meaning – will not satisfy many people. Presumably they will consider more satisfactory an answer like that of theistic religions, for which human life exists in virtue of the fact that it has been created by God and its ultimate purpose and meaning is to contribute to the design of God.

This answer, however, presupposes that God exists. We have already considered Aquinas’ proof and found it wanting. Several other proofs have been put forward because, as Dummett says, God’s existence “is considered by most believers a truth attainable by a purely rational reflection.”¹⁴ All such attempts, however, have been unsuccessful, no known proof of the existence of God is generally accepted as proving what it purports to prove.

Against this it might be objected that God must exist otherwise human life would have no ultimate purpose and meaning.

For instance, Wittgenstein claims that “to believe in God means to see that life has a meaning” and “to understand the question about the meaning of life.”¹⁵ For “the meaning of life, i.e., the meaning of the world, we can call God.”¹⁶ Thus “to pray is to think about the meaning of life.”¹⁷

Similarly, Dummett claims that only “religious faith gives a meaning to our life.”¹⁸

But this objection assumes without justification that human life has a purpose and meaning only if it is part of the design of God, specifically, only if it contributes to that design.

Such assumption rises the question: In what sense has the design of God an ultimate purpose and meaning? This results in the dilemma: Either the design of God has an ultimate purpose and meaning as it is part of an even higher design, or it has an ultimate purpose and meaning in itself. Both horns of this dilemma are impossible. The first horn raises the question: In what sense has the even higher design an ultimate purpose and meaning? This results in an infinite regress, in virtue of which the world might exist without presupposing the existence of God. The second horn raises the question: If something can have an ultimate purpose and meaning in itself, why that something could not be human life itself? That is, why the ultimate purpose and meaning of human life might not be located in human life?

Moreover, even admitting that human life has an ultimate purpose and meaning only if it contributes to the design of God, a further question would arise: Once the design of God would have been realized, what ultimate purpose and meaning would remain to human life? There would remain none, for then there would be no further purposes to realize.

4. *Why God?*

Furthermore, even admitting that God must exist otherwise human life would have no ultimate purpose and meaning, the question would arise: Why God?

Like the question ‘Why human life?’, one can mean this question in two senses, that is, ‘In virtue of what God exists?’, or ‘What is the ultimate purpose and meaning of God?’.

It might be objected that, while the question ‘In virtue of what human life exists?’ is legitimate, the question ‘In virtue of what God exists?’ is illegitimate because there must be a first principle in virtue of which every other thing exists, and such first principle is God, otherwise there would be an infinite regress. But this objection does not hold because, even admitting that there must be a first principle in virtue of which everything else exists, there is no evidence that such a first principle should be God rather than, as Russell maintains, the universe.

Similarly, it might be objected that, while the question ‘What is the ultimate purpose and meaning of human life?’ is legitimate, the question ‘What is the ultimate purpose and meaning of God?’ is illegitimate because there must be an ultimate purpose to which all other purposes must be subordinate, and God is such a purpose, otherwise there would be an infinite regress. But this objection does not hold again because, even admitting that there must be an ultimate purpose to which all other purposes must be subordinate, there is no evidence that such ultimate purpose is God rather than the universe. Spinoza too claimed that the ultimate purpose and meaning of human life “is the knowledge of the union that the mind has with the whole nature.”¹⁹

Human life has indeed a meaning, in the sense that each of us, in one way or the other, manages to give one to his own life, but there is no evidence that God exists, nor that there exists a design of God to which humans are called to contribute. Therefore, that human life has a meaning does not imply that it has an ultimate purpose and meaning.

5. Religion and rationality

Of course, the fact that all attempts to prove the existence of God so far have been unsuccessful, does not mean that one cannot believe that human life exists because it has been created by God, and that its ultimate purpose and meaning is to contribute to the design of God. It means, however, that such a belief has no rational ground. What is in question here is not the belief but the ground of the belief.

The belief in God is essentially different from the belief in things that eventually prove to be impossible. For instance, although today humans no longer believe in the Ptolemaic system because the arguments contrary to it are stronger than the favourable ones, humans have believed in it for centuries, and then it was rational to do so because the favourable arguments were stronger than the contrary ones. But, in the case of the belief in God, favourable arguments stronger than the contrary ones have never existed. This has been recognized from the beginnings of Christianity, as it appears from Tertullian’s statement: “Certum est, quia impossibile” [It is certain, because it is impossible].²⁰ Or from the statement of uncertain origin: “Credo quia absurdum” [I believe because it is absurd].

Religions speak to emotions, not to reason. Concerning the question whether there is “a rational ground for believing in the existence of God,” one can believe, as Dummett does, that “we have all the

reasons to consider it possible; perhaps an answer will be obtained within the lifetime of our great-grandchildren,” and “my personal belief is that the answer will be affirmative.”²¹ But such belief has no rational ground, only an emotional one. As Pascal says, when confronted with the question whether God exists or does not exist, “reason cannot make you choose one way or the other,” it “cannot make you defend either of the two choices.”²²

This, however, cannot be used, as Pascal does, “to humble reason, which would like to be the judge of everything,” stating that its incapability to prove the existence of God “proves only the weakness of our reason, not the uncertainty of our entire knowledge.”²³

According to Pascal, there is an alternative way of knowing the existence of God, that is, “the heart,” and “it is on this knowledge by means of the heart” that “reason has to rely, and must base all its arguments.”²⁴ But the heart, that is, emotion, gives us no certainty. To rely on emotion is to project our wishes outside us, taking them for reality. Only reason can give us knowledge, everything else is emotional projection, consolatory fabrication.

6. Religion and morality

No better ground exists for the argument that, “if an infinite God does not exist, then no virtue will hold,” thus “everything is permitted.”²⁵

This argument overlooks that religions without God, such as Buddhism, have been as effective in favouring morally good behaviour as theistic religions, and many non-believers behave in ways which are morally superior to those of many believers in theistic religions. Not to speak of the innumerable people tortured, women burnt, slaughters perpetrated in the name of some God. As Dawkins points out, “Religious wars really are fought in the name of religion,” while “I cannot think of any war that has been fought in the name of atheism,” since one of the motives “for war is an unshakeable faith that one’s own religion is the only true one.”²⁶

The argument that God must exist otherwise there would be no morality, depends on the assumption that ‘morally good’ is what God wants. Such assumption raises the dilemma: Either what is morally good is wanted by God as it is morally good in itself, or it is morally good as it is wanted by God. Both horns of this dilemma are impossible. The first horn implies that the fact that something is

morally good does not depend of God. There exists an higher moral standard to which God must conform. But then it is unjustified to say that God must exist otherwise there would be no morality. The second horn implies that what is morally good is the result of an act of will of God. But then it is arbitrary, God could want something which is not morally good.

Against this it cannot be objected that God could never want anything of the kind for he only wants what is morally good. This would imply that what is morally good is not so because God wants it but because it is morally good in itself, thus one would be taken back to the first horn of the dilemma. Thus again it is unjustified to say that God must exist otherwise there would be no morality.

7. Evolution and the intelligibility of the world

The inadequacy of the answers of theistic religions to the question ‘Why human life?’ reposes that of the theory of evolution: Human life exists in virtue of the fact that it is the result of an adaptation, and has no ultimate purpose or meaning. Since there seems to be no alternatives, such an answer appears to be the only plausible one.

Dembski criticizes Darwin for “toward the end of his life Darwin would deny design any epistemic force.”²⁷ It was “Darwin’s expulsion of design from biology that made possible the triumph of naturalism in Western culture.”²⁸ But “within naturalism the intelligibility of the world must always remain a mystery.”²⁹

Actually the opposite is true. To begin with, only certain features of the world are intelligible to humans, not all. Such features are intelligible to them because humans have cognitive architectures suitable to comprehend them, and these architectures are a result of evolution. Humans may comprehend only those features of the world which are accessible to the cognitive architectures with which evolution has endowed them. Therefore only naturalism can explain the intelligibility of the world.

8. Meaning of human life from an external point of view

That human life has no ultimate purpose or meaning entails that, although many of the great or little things we do have an immediate purpose, this does not mean that there exists a justification of human life from an external and higher point of view. We all find ourselves with a life to live by the very fact

that we have been born, but, from an external and higher point of view, our life has no ultimate purpose or meaning.

This is implicit in the origin itself of our individual life, which is the result of the fertilization of an egg by a spermatozoon, but several hundred millions spermatozoa intervene in it. Two factors determine which spermatozoon will fertilize the egg. The first is that some spermatozoa find themselves in an optimal position at the optimal moment. The second is that, among them, a more fitted one reaches the egg before the less fitted. Thus, in the generation of an individual human life, only two factors intervene: chance and the survival of the fittest. This implies that an individual life cannot be said to have any predeterminate purpose and meaning.

But there is more. From an external and higher point of view, not only human life has no ultimate purpose and meaning, but has no ultimate importance. However much we may feel that a world without us would lack a crucial piece of it, with respect to the history of the world our existence is a contingent and negligible fact. As Hume says, “the life of a man is of no greater importance to the universe than that of an oyster.”³⁰ Our existence may be very important to the persons to whom we are dear but, with respect to the history of the world, this is a contingent and negligible fact. Our existence, as well as its importance for the persons to whom we are dear, are an inessential aspect of the history of the world.

This gives us a definitely unpleasant feeling, for the idea that our existence is an inessential aspect of the history of the world is difficult to endure. If we could forget ourselves we could perhaps imagine a world without us. But we are incapable of doing that. What we can imagine is only our world, that is, the world as we conceive it, without us in it. But it is again our world, for the subject who imagines the world without us is inevitably us. Thus to leave aside us would mean for us to leave aside the world, not merely to leave aside us within it. Therefore for us, in a sense, to suppose that we had never existed amounts to supposing that the world had never existed.

And yet, however unbearable it may appear to us, we must accept the idea that our existence is an inessential aspect of the history of the world, and hence is a contingent and negligible fact.

Indeed, not only our existence is a contingent and negligible fact, but so is the existence of the world itself. Not only it would have made no difference if we had never existed, but it would have made no difference if the world itself had never existed. To think that it has an ultimate purpose and meaning is an illusion. Similarly, it is an illusion to think that human life has an ultimate purpose and meaning. As there is no ultimate purpose of the world, there is no ultimate purpose of human life, meant as an ideal goal to which human life tends and which can be discovered and revealed by some philosopher, religious leader or scientist. Those philosophers, religious leaders or scientists who pretend to have discovered and to reveal it deceive us, and perhaps deceive themselves.

9. Meaning of human life from an internal point of view

That, from an external and higher point of view, there exists no ultimate purpose or meaning of human life and our existence is a contingent and negligible fact, does not mean that human life has no purpose or meaning, if not from an external and higher point of view, at least from an internal one. In fact, it has. Our life has a purpose and meaning for us and for the persons who are dear to us and to whom we are dear.

On the one hand, this must induce us to a form of humility, urging us to recognize that our life has a purpose and meaning only in this relative sense, not in an absolute one. On the other hand, this is no limitation, because for us there is only our world, that is, the world as we conceive and perceive it, and the most important place in it is occupied by us and the persons who are dear to us and to whom we are dear.

Not only this is no limitation, but is the necessary precondition of a life lived to the full.

Russell maintains that theistic religions are based “primarily and mainly upon fear,” which “is partly the terror of the unknown” and partly “the wish to feel that you have a kind of elder brother who will stand by you in all your troubles and disputes. Fear is the basis of the whole thing – fear of the mysterious, fear of defeat, fear of death.”³¹

But even those who don't share this view could recognize that theistic religions consider individual life as something that is not complete in itself but is lived in view of something else – an elsewhere, an afterlife, a reward in the kingdom of God. Theistic religions do so although they are

sometimes ambiguous on the subject, as it appears from Luke's statement: "Behold, the kingdom of God is within you."³²

Considering individual life as something which is to be lived in view of something else, theistic religions prevent us from living life to the full. Only those who do not place the value of individual life in an elsewhere can live a life which is not a wait for something else. Therefore, they will try to fill it with meaning in each moment, aware that individual life can find its accomplishment only in itself rather than in a chimerical elsewhere.

10. *Happiness and meaning of human life*

But what, from an internal point of view, is the purpose and meaning of human life? The most convincing answer remains Aristotle's: the purpose and meaning of human life is happiness.

Aristotle claims that "there is a very general agreement among the majority of men" concerning the purpose of human life, for "both the common people and people of superior refinement say that it is happiness."³³ This is "the purpose of human actions."³⁴ We choose "honour, pleasure, reason, and every virtue" only "for the sake of happiness, judging that it is by means of them that we shall be happy. Happiness, on the other hand, no one chooses for the sake of these, nor, in general, for anything other than itself."³⁵ We "always choose it in itself."³⁶ Therefore "happiness is clearly something final and self-sufficient, and is the purpose of our actions."³⁷ Of course, here happiness means happiness "in a complete life," for as "one swallow does not make a spring," so "too one day, or a short time, does not make a man blessed and happy."³⁸

This answer partially compensates for the unpleasantness of the conclusion that, from an external and higher point of view, our existence is a contingent and negligible fact. We know that everything will come to an end, that our life has no absolute justification, that it has no ultimate purpose and meaning from an external and higher point of view. But the fact that something can make us happy is for us a sufficient purpose and reason to live. It is true that, since everything will come to an end, we will eventually lose the game. But, if something will have made us happy, we will have earned our life.

It is for this reason that, as Rilke says, “again and again, although we know the landscape of love | and the little churchyard with its sorrowing names | and the frighteningly silent abyss into which for the others | it is the end: again and again we return anyway in couples | beneath the ancient trees, we lie down again and again | among the flowers, face to face with the sky.”³⁹

But is the answer that the ultimate purpose and meaning of human life is happiness justified?

Surely it is not justified from the viewpoint of religions, which do not guarantee that the purpose and meaning of human life is happiness. Humans can be unhappy having faith in God and happy not having faith in him, or vice versa. It is not the faith or lack of faith in God that gives happiness. And even if it gave it, one might be reminded of Bernard Shaw’s remark: “The fact that a believer is happier than a sceptic is no more to the point than the fact that a drunken man is happier than a sober one.”⁴⁰

Neither is the answer that the purpose and meaning of human life is happiness justified from the viewpoint of the theory of evolution. The latter does not guarantee that the purpose and meaning of human life is happiness.

But, even if the answer that the purpose and meaning of human life is happiness is unjustified both from the viewpoint of religions and the theory of evolution, the pursuit of happiness is for humans a powerful impulse which urges them to desire their own survival and to live life to the full. Without that impulse it would be difficult to explain the tenacious will of so many humans to preserve their life beyond any reasonableness, even in the most appalling life conditions.

11. *Happiness and knowledge*

The view that the purpose and meaning of human life is happiness raises to the question: What is happiness? As it was to be expected, philosophers for whom the ultimate purpose and meaning of human life is knowledge answer that happiness consists in knowledge.

For example, Aristotle states that “the theoretically wise is happy in the highest degree.”⁴¹ He lives more happily “who most attains truth. This is the one who is theoretically wise and speculates according to the most exact knowledge.”⁴² Thus “the perfect living is the one which takes place in

these cases and pertains to these men, that is, to those who use theoretical wisdom and are theoretically wise.”⁴³

Similarly, Russell states that “a life devoted to science is therefore a happy life.”⁴⁴ The “desire for a larger life and wider affairs, for an escape from private circumstances, and even from the whole recurring human cycle of birth and death, is fulfilled by the impersonal cosmic outlook of science as by nothing else.”⁴⁵

However, the claim that happiness consists in knowledge is hardly tenable both in Aristotle’s and Russell’s version.

For even admitting that, as Aristotle states, the theoretically wise is happy and even happy in the highest degree, he is not necessarily the only one to be happy. There are also those who are made happy by other things, such as work, love, friendship, the feeling that their life is important to their family and friends. Therefore it is unjustified to say, as Aristotle does, that either one looks for theoretical wisdom or one must “depart from here saying goodbye to life, since all of the other things seem to be a lot of nonsense and foolishness.”⁴⁶

Similarly, even admitting that, as Russell states, a life devoted to science is a happy life, it is not necessarily the only happy one. Russell contrasts it with “the life of the instinctive man,” who is all “shut up within the circle of his private interests,” in which “family and friends may be included, but the outer world is not regarded except as it may help or hinder what comes within the circle of instinctive wishes.”⁴⁷ But there are also those who are made happy by things which come within the circle of their private interests.

Indeed, in addition to knowledge, as a means to be happy Russell indicates to help one’s fellows in the very brief time “in which their happiness or misery is decided,” to “shed sunshine on their path, to lighten their sorrows by the balm of sympathy, to give them the pure joy of a never-tiring affection, to strengthen failing courage, to instil faith in hours of despair.”⁴⁸

12. *The nature of happiness*

Actually the question ‘What is happiness?’ does not admit a unique answer. What makes one happy differs from person to person for it depends on what one wants, which in turn depends on what one is.

Moreover, it changes according to the different ages and conditions of life. For children, what makes them happy depends on their parents. For lovers, the object of their love is everything. Therefore children and lovers have a feeling that everything is within easy reach, that for them it is enough to stretch out their hand and seize it, for parents or the beloved one are the main thing that matters to them, and are a friendly and benevolent will.

Similarly, for the young, what makes them happy is to expand in the world. This seems to them within easy reach because they have a still very limited experience of the human condition. As Russell points out, it is for that reason that, “for the young, there is nothing unattainable; a good thing desired with the whole force of a passionate will, and yet impossible, is to them not credible.”⁴⁹ Nevertheless “to every man comes, sooner or later, the great renunciation.”⁵⁰ By “death, by illness, by poverty, or by the voice of duty, we must learn, each one of us, that the world was not made for us, and that, however beautiful may be the things we crave, Fate may nevertheless forbid them.”⁵¹

That the question ‘What is happiness?’ does not admit a unique answer, does not mean, however, that one cannot state some minimal conditions for happiness.

First of all, happiness is the will to live. An essential condition for a happy life is to have a life and to desire to continue to have it. Therefore happiness is first of all that strong attachment to life, that flame that catches again and again and takes deeper roots after each sorrow. Of course, this is minimal happiness, but is the mother of all happiness.

In the second place, happiness is to have something: to have some interests, affections, something to do and someone to love. Having them we expand in the world and multiply ourselves in it. It is true that, for some people, the supreme form of happiness consists in stripping themselves of everything. But they do so only to possess what they care for above everything else: to be fully themselves without ties. An extreme form of happiness as renunciation is Paul of Tarsus’ ‘cupio dissolvi’⁵² shared by the great mystics, for whom self-dissolution is the means to get rid of the ties of the body and reach the supreme good of the union with God. However, without going to such extremes, happiness is also to give something to others, for this is a way of feeling that one’s existence is useful to someone else.

In the third place, happiness is the hope that we will have tomorrow what is denied to us today. Happiness and hope are strictly connected. Kant says that “all hope concerns happiness.”⁵³ But one may claim also the converse: all happiness concerns hope. Even if the experience of life tells us that hope is often a fable, we go on telling ourselves that fable and believing it, like children. All children’s fables are similar, as all lovers’ discourses are similar, for they have the colour of hope. Hope is what gives us the strength to face difficulties, and our human condition becomes unbearable when hope fails.

Of course, the rival of hope is fear, and uncertainty between hope and fear is painful. But, as Russell says, uncertainty “must be endured if we wish to live without the support of comforting fairy tales.”⁵⁴ We must learn “to live without certainty, and yet without being paralysed by hesitation.”⁵⁵

13. Seeking happiness in our individual life

In any case, instead of seeking a chimerical ultimate purpose and meaning of human life from an external and higher point of view, we must seek happiness in our individual life. The universe does not care whether our individual life is miserable or marvellous, and no outer and higher entity worries about our happiness. To seek it is entirely up to us.

The fact that human life has no ultimate purpose – meant as an ideal goal to which it tends – and that the meaning of human life consists only in what makes us individually happier, can be depressing to those who draw impulse and justification for what they do from the belief that it is important not only to them but absolutely. Moreover, it can appear cruel that, if we do not have a happy life, a life that is worth living, we cannot even hope, as religions promise, to find a compensation for suffering in another life. But the very fact that we look for a compensation when we do not have a happy life, shows that a happy life is in itself something that is worth living. We may feel defrauded by life if we do not have the goods we desire, or the joys we long for, but we cannot deny that those goods and joys exist. They exist for the very fact that we would like to have them.

Similarly, it can appear cruel that human life is so short. When we are born we suddenly enter a marvellous garden, we walk in its alleys for a short time and then we go out of it in the same sudden way in which we entered it. Therefore it is true, as Russell says, that “brief and powerless is Man’s

life; on him and all his race the slow, sure doom falls pitiless and dark.”⁵⁶ His life is a “march through the night, surrounded by invisible foes, tortured by weariness and pain, towards a goal that few can hope to reach, and where none may tarry long.”⁵⁷ But the very fact that we regret that our permanence in the world is so brief indicates that life, at least a happy life, is worth living. Otherwise we would have no reason to regret its brevity and desire its prolongation.

It is its brevity that gives human life its value and makes it a precious good. This must induce us to avoid wasting it, to make the best use of it we are capable of, to enjoy every moment of it.

13. *Knowledge as a precondition of happiness*

That the question ‘What is happiness?’ does not admit a unique answer, and hence the answer is not necessarily ‘Knowledge’, does not mean that knowledge is irrelevant to happiness. On the contrary, in a sense knowledge is an important precondition of it.

In the first place, an essential condition for a happy life is to have a life, and without knowledge life, biological life itself, would not have existed nor would continue to exist. It is through knowledge that life, from the first unicellular organisms to humans, has been able to exist and to preserve itself. Those primordial unicellular organisms which developed rudimentary sense organs through which they solved the problem of their survival, were the first to discover that knowledge is essential to life.

In the second place, an essential condition for a happy life is to know who are we, and to a large extent we are what we know. We mirror reality, and reality is for us what we have access to and we know. Generally our aspirations, desires, hopes are essentially bound to what we know.

In the third place, a condition for a happy life is not to be paralyzed by the fear that originates from prejudice, and many prejudices arise from lack of knowledge. Not only the latter promotes prejudice but generates superstition, and prejudice and superstition are the causes of so many fears and human sufferings. This has negative consequences even from a biological viewpoint, for those who act on the basis of prejudices or moved by superstition diminish their ability to interact with the environment in an effective and optimal way.

This allows me to answer my original question: What is the role of knowledge? Knowledge does not only play a biological role, it is not only sought as a means to satisfy that basic necessity of life

that is survival, nor has it only a cultural role. Knowledge is sought also as it is a precondition of that state of emotional well-being that we call ‘happiness’. In these three roles – biological, cultural and as a precondition of happiness – knowledge shows its nature and finds its reason, its purpose and its accomplishment.

Notes

- ¹ Aristotle, *Protrepticus*, 17 Düring.
- ² Aristotle, *Ethica Nicomachea*, Z 7, 1141 a 17-20.
- ³ Aristotle, *Protrepticus*, 25 Düring.
- ⁴ Aristotle, *Metaphysica*, A 2, 983 a 8-9.
- ⁵ Russell 1997a, p. 157.
- ⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 158.
- ⁷ *Ibid.*
- ⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 161.
- ⁹ *Ibid.*
- ¹⁰ Russell 1985, p. 104.
- ¹¹ *Ibid.*, p. 121.
- ¹² Tommaso d’Aquino, *Summa theologiae*, I, q. 2, a. 3.
- ¹³ *Ibid.*
- ¹⁴ Dummett 2001, p. 45. I translate from the Italian for Dummett’s English text has not been published.
- ¹⁵ Wittgenstein 1979, p. 74.
- ¹⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 73.
- ¹⁷ *Ibid.*
- ¹⁸ Dummett 2001, p. 48.
- ¹⁹ Spinoza 1925, II, p. 8.
- ²⁰ Tertullian, *De Carne Christi*, V, 25-26.
- ²¹ Dummett 2001, p. 152.
- ²² Pascal 1995, p. 153.
- ²³ *Ibid.*, p. 35.
- ²⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 36.
- ²⁵ Dostojevskij, *Brother Karamazov*, Book XI, Ch. 8.
- ²⁶ Dawkins 2006, p. 278.
- ²⁷ Dembski 2002, p. 80.
- ²⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 14.
- ²⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 230.
- ³⁰ Hume 1998, p. 100.
- ³¹ Russell 1957, p. 16.
- ³² Luke 17: 21.
- ³³ Aristotele, *Ethica Nicomachea*, A 4, 1095 a 17-19.
- ³⁴ *Ibid.*, K 6, 1176 a 31-32.
- ³⁵ *Ibid.*, A 7, 1097 b 2-6.
- ³⁶ *Ibid.*, A 7, 1097 b 1-2.
- ³⁷ *Ibid.*, A 7, 1097 b 20-21.
- ³⁸ *Ibid.*, A 7, 1098 a 18-20.
- ³⁹ Rilke 1998, p. 881.
- ⁴⁰ Shaw 2008, p. 92.
- ⁴¹ Aristotle, *Ethica Nicomachea*, K 8, 1179 a 32.
- ⁴² Aristotle, *Protrepticus*, 85 Düring.

- ⁴³ *Ibid.*
- ⁴⁴ Russell 1994, p. 60.
- ⁴⁵ *Ibid.*
- ⁴⁶ Aristotle, *Protrepticus*, 110 Düring.
- ⁴⁷ Russell 1997a, pp. 157-158.
- ⁴⁸ Russell 1994, p. 18.
- ⁴⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 14.
- ⁵⁰ *Ibid.*
- ⁵¹ *Ibid.*
- ⁵² Paul of Tarsus, *Epistle to the Philippians*, 1.23-24.
- ⁵³ Kant 1900-, III, p. 523 (B 833).
- ⁵⁴ Russell 1991, p. 14.
- ⁵⁵ *Ibid.*
- ⁵⁶ Russell 1994, p. 18.
- ⁵⁷ *Ibid.*

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