

REFLECTION

The meaning of life



Robbie Young reflects on whether there is a meaning to life...

I **Imagine you were given** this choice: to live in a world where every choice was possible but nothing was meaningful, or to live in a world where no choice was possible but everything was meaningful. Which would you choose? The question is hypothetical but it's not entirely unconnected with our own world. One of the chief characteristics of our age is the ever-increasing expansion of possibilities: you can buy your own mini-submarine, experience a virtual 3-D world, swim with dolphins, change the shape of your nose, add chia seeds, goji berries, spirulina to your smoothie, follow Wiz Khalifa on Twitter. But is any of this meaningful? In fact, could there be a sort of inverse relationship between possibilities and meaning? Think of the child who gets too many presents on his birthday. As he unwraps them, discarding one while opening another, his eyes change from expressing wonder and gratitude to disappointment and boredom.

How does that tie in with a consumer driven economy?

Surely in a market flooded with possibilities things will lose their meaning and people will stop buying them. Not if I believe that my choices have the power to create meaning. Think of a couple who have lots of money to spend. They buy an old house, get rid of the furniture, bulldoze the house, design their new dream home, furnishing it according to their particular taste. For them the house means a lot, but it's a meaning which has not been inherited; instead it lies in its being an expression of their particular choices. Like the gap-year student travelling around the world: the meaning doesn't lie in the places visited but in the choice to go there. The meaning of the 'selfie' is not the picture but 'me' in the picture.

There are those who come straight out and say that there is no meaning in the world and to look for it is foolish sentimentalism. Saul Bellow gives their viewpoint a voice in his novel *Herzog*:

But what is the philosophy of this generation? Not God is dead, that point was passed long ago. Perhaps it

should be stated Death is God. This generation thinks – and this is its thought of thoughts – that nothing faithful, vulnerable, fragile can be durable or have any true power. Death waits for these things as a cement floor waits for a dropping light bulb. The brittle shell of glass loses its tiny vacuum with a burst, and that is that. And this is how we teach metaphysics to each other. 'You think history is the history of loving hearts? You fool! Look at these millions of dead. Can you pity them, feel for them? You can do nothing! There were too many. We burned them to ashes, we buried them with bulldozers. History is the history of cruelty, not love as soft men think.'

To argue the case for meaning in a world where death seems to have the last word requires something more than selfies and designer homes. Think of a phone call from a friend giving you support when you are trying to cope with a disappointment or a family tragedy. The phone call means a lot to you. Or a ring that embodies life-long fidelity. It means more than



any selfies in an exotic location or with a mega-star celebrity. When we are put to the test about whether our lives are meaningful or not it boils down to two stark choices. Either death cancels out all meaning or love is stronger than death. 🍷