

[Eckersley, R. What's it all about?, *The Sydney Morning Herald*, 25 March 2000, *Spectrum* section, p. 4; We have know-how, we need know-why, *The Age*, 3 June 2000, *News Extra*, p. 2.]

What's it all about?

In an age of endless options, the choice is yours in the quest for the meaning of life, writes Richard Eckersley

On 20 March 1995, members of Aum Shinrikyo (or Aum Supreme Truth), a Japanese religious sect, carried out a nerve-gas attack on the Tokyo subway, leaving 12 people dead and thousands ill. The sect is one of several 'doomsday cults' linked in recent years to mass murder and suicide. Aum Shinrikyo attracted many highly intelligent and well-educated young people, including chemists, physicists and medical specialists. As the report of the World Commission on Culture and Development observes, these people possessed a formidable mastery of scientific know-how, but not an iota of know-why. 'I did not want my life to be meaningless,' a senior sect member said.

Meaning in life is a crucial aspect of human well-being. For most of our existence as a species, meaning was pretty much a social given. Children grew up in a close network of family and community relationships which largely defined their world - their values and beliefs, identity and place. People knew little of what lay outside that world, of other ways of living (except through the intrusions of trade or invasion).

Beyond the mortal realm, they had a religious faith that gave them a place in the Cosmic scheme of things. Much of life was predictable and what wasn't was explained in terms of the supernatural. The old ways might often have been harsh and oppressive, but they allowed people to make sense of their lives at several levels. As the 19th Century German philosopher, Friedrich Nietzsche, said: 'He who has a *why* to live for can bear with almost any *how*'.

Today, things are different, especially in the West but increasingly elsewhere as well. The speed, scope and scale of economic, social and cultural change have made the past seemingly irrelevant, the future uncertain. Family and community ties have been loosened. We know much more of the rest of the world and how differently others live and think. And while most people today retain some form of religious belief, this is not nearly as absolute and binding as it once was.

Initially, as these changes occurred, we were convinced they represented progress. The old certainties gave way to the exhilarating possibilities of human betterment through economic growth, social reform, scientific discovery and technological development. Even if life's meaning became less clear, life itself became more comfortable, more varied, safer, healthier and longer.

Over the past few decades the faith in material progress has given way to growing doubt. We now live in 'postmodern' times, marked by the end of the dream of creating a perfect social order, the realisation that some of our problems may be unsolvable; despite our efforts, war, poverty, hunger and disease remain with us. Science and technology, intended to give us mastery over the natural and social world, have instead (or, at best, also) created risks on an unprecedented, global scale. The result is a world characterised by ambivalence, ambiguity, relativism, pluralism, fragmentation and contingency. The profound paradox of our situation

is well described by the scholar, Marshall Berman, who said: 'To be modern is to find ourselves in an environment that promises us adventure, power, joy, growth, transformation of ourselves and the world - and, at the same time, that threatens to destroy everything we have, everything we know, everything we are.'

Meaning in life is no longer a social given, but a matter of personal choice; it has to be constructed, or chosen, from a proliferation of options. Some writers celebrate this development as offering unparalleled opportunities for personal growth and development. They say, for example, that the new technologies of cyberspace allow the creation of 'liquid identities' – multiple, flexible selves – which undermine traditional notions of identity as a single, stable entity. Players in multi-user domains or dungeons can move from one computer window to another, changing personas like costumes; 'RL (real life) is just another window', says one.

So it is with values, with what we believe to be right and good. Cultural pluralism and moral relativism, taken far enough, mean values, too, become just a matter of personal choice, requiring no external validation and having no authority or reference beyond the individual and the moment.

Some claim that young people are attuned to this world: adapted to its transience and fragmentation; comfortable with its absence of absolutes and blurred distinctions between real and virtual; equipped for its abundant opportunities, exciting choices and limitless freedoms - and its hazards and risks. They are the first global generation: confident, optimistic, well-informed and educated, technologically sophisticated. They are self-reliant (even self-contained), street-wise, enterprising and creative, fast on their feet, keeping their options open.

There is something in all this. From today's perspective, the conformity and constraints of the past are suffocating (Martin Scorsese's film, *The Age of Innocence*, captures well how thoroughly, and subtly, the lives of the rich in 19th Century New York were ruled by the norms, customs and traditions of their class and times). Yet the celebrations of our situation also reveal a very postmodern quality: the inability to separate reality from fantasy.

Modern Western society is failing to meet human needs in several important respects. The openness and complexity of life today can make finding meaning and the qualities that contribute to it - purpose, direction, balance, identity and belonging - extremely hard, especially for young people, for whom these are the destinations of the developmental journeys they are undertaking. Another vital quality, hope, is also easily lost if life is episodic, and lacks coherence and predictability. In his famous account of life in World War II concentration camps, *Man's Search for Meaning*, the psychiatrist, Viktor Frankl says the prisoner who had lost faith in the future was doomed. With this loss of belief, he also lost his spiritual hold, and went into a physical and mental decline. 'It is a peculiarity of man that he can only live by looking to the future'.

While loosening social ties can be liberating for individuals, and create more dynamic, diverse and tolerant societies, too much cultural flexibility can have the effect of trivialising the convictions and commitments that we need to find meaning, and to control our own lives. Tolerance, taken too far, becomes indifference, and freedom abandonment. Our power as a people comes from a sense of collective, not individual, agency, from pursuing a common

vision based on shared values, not maximising individual choice in order to maximise personal satisfaction.

Beyond the risks of excessive choice and freedom is the evidence that these can be, in any case, illusory. Social constraints remain, and in some cases are increasing, whether these concern sex or cars (both totems of freedom which are highly prescribed by rules and realities), or class and privilege (which still substantially define opportunity). The sociologist, Mark Elchardus, argues: 'There seems to be a growing gap between the cultural emphasis on autonomy and individual choice, on the one hand, and the experienced lack of autonomy, on the other.'

There is more. The postmodern ideal is really a Trojan horse for the social promotion of particular choices and values. Western societies present a façade of virtually unlimited autonomy that disguises a powerful preference. We are told, as part of the new pluralism, that traditional values have passed their use-by date. The values of self-restraint and moderation (and by implication, their converse, social obligation and responsibility) were shaped by scarcity; in a time of plenty, they have become obsolete. And 'plenty' is symbolised by those temples of consumption and self-indulgence, the vast shopping malls, which have replaced churches as the community centres of modern life.

This proposition might seem plausible in a culturally diverse and seemingly abundant world. But it is untenable when considered in a context anchored in psychological, social and environmental realities. That it effectively defines 'the good life' today is a measure of the moral force of the economy, and the fast-paced, high-pressure, hyper-consumer lifestyle which it depends on, even demands. In *Brave New World*, Aldous Huxley foresaw a society in which all strong passions and commitments were discouraged because they interfered with the people's economic duty to consume.

In this historical evolution, we have altered profoundly our notions of the 'self', of what it is to be human. The self of the early Middle Ages was an immortal soul enclosed in the shell of a mortal body. Today, according to the psychologist, Philip Cushman, we have created 'the empty self', stripped of community, tradition and shared meaning. Our era, he says, has constructed a self that is, fundamentally, a disappointment to itself, and must be soothed and made cohesive by being constantly 'filled up' with consumer products, celebrity news, and the quest for self-improvement and personal growth. Martin Seligman, another psychologist, argues that one necessary condition for meaning is the attachment to something larger than the self, and the larger that entity, the more meaning people can derive. 'The self, to put it another way, is a very poor site for meaning.'

Contrasting with the view that young people are adapted to our times is the evidence that rates of psychological and social problems among youth have risen in almost all developed nations over the past 50 years. Highly-publicised problems like youth suicide and drug-overdose deaths are only the tip of an iceberg of suffering among the young, with recent studies showing that a fifth to a third of young people today experience significant psychological distress or disturbance.

Many recent surveys of youth attitudes show that many - perhaps most - young people are uncomfortable with the broader changes they see taking place in society, even if most are, most of time, happy and optimistic about their own personal circumstances. Nor are they

inspired by the visions of the future held up to them by society. Most continue to work within 'the system', but many no longer believe in it or are willing to serve it.

Despite the cultural propaganda of our times, it is clear that constantly filling up an 'empty self' is a poor substitute for the web of meaning provided by deep and enduring personal, social and spiritual attachments. We are told that a highly individualistic, consumer lifestyle is compatible with strong families, social cohesion and equity, environmental sustainability, and a sense of spiritual connectedness to the universe in which we live. It is not.

This critique of our way of life will strike many as exaggerated. But it is an attempt to give a clear definition, a sharp edge, to issues that are, in reality, diffuse, often unconscious, and hard to discern from 'inside' our culture. To argue that Western society is seriously flawed in these ways is not say a meaningful life is impossible, only more difficult. Nor is it to suggest that we return to old ways. Rather, we need to go forward towards new goals, guided by different values.

Given the era we live in, the challenge we face can be framed in terms of individual choice. We can choose to go with the flow of modern Western culture, and pursue a life of personal ambition, distraction and gratification. This can be a pleasant enough existence, particularly if nothing goes wrong and we keep getting what we think we want; but it is a life that lacks depth and resilience and comes at a price to others and at a cost to the future. Alternatively, we can resist the pressures to conform to social expectations, powerful though they are, and choose to find meaning in our lives by focusing on the things that history, religion and science show matter most.

Realistically, the choice is not that stark. What matters is where on the continuum between the two extremes of total acceptance and total rejection we choose to locate ourselves in the quest for meaning - the focal point towards which the 'self' will be drawn even while it is being pushed and pulled about by the demands and temptations of modern life. The research evidence suggests we know in our hearts what is important and what is right. But living by these beliefs can be hard when society appears to operate according to different moral rules.

There has never been a period in human history when so much hangs in the balance between what is and what might be, when so much depends on the choices we make as individuals, when it is so clear that we are, each of us, 'decision-makers' in deciding the destiny of humankind. It is a time, then, that offers so much meaning. And yet, because of the pressures, preoccupations and priorities of life today, we don't sense this significance of the moment - or sensing it, seem unable to hold it and be inspired by it.

This is one of the most profound paradoxes of our times. Recognising this can help us make the right choices - and find more meaning in our lives.

Richard Eckersley is at the National Centre for Epidemiology and Population Health at the Australian National University. This article is adapted from a paper published in AQ (Australian Quarterly), vol 72, Issue 1, February-March 2000, pp. 16-19.