



The Flight from Reality

by Michael Ramsden

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It was Woody Allen who quipped: “What if everything is an illusion and nothing exists? In that case I definitely overpaid for my carpet.”

Although written for comic effect, the idea captured by this simple witticism reflects a school of thought whose existence can be traced down through the centuries. Recently I heard a story, told by an easterner, concerning a guru who expounded the “illusion theory” in relation to pain and suffering. Shortly after spouting forth on the subject for several hours, one of the guru’s disciples saw him running for safety while being chased by a wild elephant. After the guru had climbed down from a tree in which he had taken refuge, his disciple asked him why, if pain and suffering were illusory, did he run away? Pausing for thought, the guru replied “The elephant is illusion, my running away is illusion, everything is illusion.”

The attraction of claiming that all is illusion must be that it partly relieves us of the anguish we sometimes feel in trying to make sense of life. If everything is indeed an illusion, then there is no real need to worry, since there is nothing real to worry about. But here lies the problem. An appeal to illusion assumes that there is such a thing as reality, hence allowing us to distinguish between the two. And if there is such a thing as reality, then everything can’t be illusion. It would appear, therefore, that to make such an appeal is to try (ineffectually) to escape from the problem rather than address it. However you approach it, it is difficult to fly from reality.

A consequence of making an appeal to illusion, and perhaps explaining its increasing



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popularity, is that it also addresses a far greater dilemma—that of meaning. If everything is illusion, then it follows that meaning is also illusory. And since for many the search for meaning has been fruitless, the idea that there is no meaning to be found can be strangely comforting. At least we are not missing out on something!

Of course, once life in general is held to be devoid of meaning, it follows that subjects such as history, the record of life’s events, become themselves a meaningless record. In a book entitled *The Search for Meaningful Existence*, the author raises a very good question when he writes:

But we must ask the question, why for this generation of young adults has even history lost its meaning? I doubt that most would be able to provide the reason. As a matter of fact, they would probably suggest that the question itself is wrong-headed, and that the burden of proof lies with those who would claim that history itself is meaningful. It is a rejection in terms of negation. History is eventless and meaningless because it was never eventful and meaningful. You can never lose that which you never possessed.

But can we say with confidence that history never had any meaning to be lost? As soon as we make the claim, the claim itself becomes an historical statement. Even as the sentiment is given expression, it moves from the present to the past. Even the time taken reading this article now belongs to the past. Do we conclude therefore that nothing meaningful took place?

Of course, this makes the problem look a little too crude. Some claim that although historical facts may be ascertained, their interpretation cannot be. Again, this is a startling claim. More than that, as soon as it is expressed, it becomes a startling historical claim! How should we interpret it?

No matter how the problem is addressed, anyone who wishes to advocate this position will find it very difficult to defend.

Maybe what we could say is that ascertaining the correct interpretation of any historical fact is very difficult. But this is not the same as saying that the interpretation is inaccessible to us. It simply means that there is a wide margin for error.

This, of course, raises several immediate questions for the Christian. Christianity does not simply claim to bring some special revelation about God in an abstract way. It claims that a revelation was brought in a very concrete way, in history and ultimately in the person of Christ. How then can the problems involved in understanding history be overcome? How could we gain a meaningful interpretation of it?

Someone once described a historian as a prophet in reverse, and it is the coming together of both of these records, of the prophetic and the historic, that makes up the series of books known collectively as the Bible. This is precisely the claim that the authors of the Gospels make. Descriptions of past happenings, predictions of future events, and the recording of these events “coming to pass” make up the written record of God’s own authoritative interpretation of both the world in which we live and the understanding of our place in it. It is a fantastic claim, and one that I think can be supported by good evidence. Have you taken time to look into it?

And it is this prophetic element that limits the degree of interpretation available to us concerning key events chronicled in the Bible. As a matter of fact, you could even go so far as to say that it prescribes the appropriate interpretation. Interpretation becomes secondary to recognition. We are not only told what events will come to pass, but how and why. Little is then left to interpretation, all that is left is to recognise a course of events when they happen, as the interpretation has already been provided by the God who made the events come about.

Not only does God provide a meaningful framework within which to interpret history, He also provides a framework within which meaning for our own being becomes possible. Which is why one of the early Christians, Paul, said “In Him we live and move and have our being.” Meaning is not illusory because we were created for a

purpose, and purpose is a prerequisite for meaning, and all of this is grounded in the Reality of an ever-present God.

Michael Ramsden has been the European Director of the Zacharias Trust since its foundation in 1997. He grew up in the Middle East, returning to the UK to work investing money for the Lord Chancellor’s Department and to study. While at Sheffield University doing research in Law and Economics, he taught Moral Philosophy and lectured for the International Seminar on Jurisprudence and Human Rights in Strasbourg. Michael is a passionate evangelist and apologist for the Zacharias Trust, and is also honorary Lecturer in Christian Apologetics at Wycliffe Hall, Oxford. Michael travels widely speaking in universities and churches and at conferences. He is married to Anne and they live in Oxford with their three children.

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