

Michael RUSE, *A Meaning to Life* (Philosophy in Action).  
Oxford, Oxford University Press, 2019, 216 p., 17,7 × 13,4 cm,  
ISBN 978-0-19093-322-7

Matthew Allen Newland

Volume 74, Number 1, January–April 2022

URI: <https://id.erudit.org/iderudit/1084598ar>

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.7202/1084598ar>

[See table of contents](#)

Publisher(s)

Collège universitaire dominicain, Ottawa

ISSN

0316-5345 (print)

2562-9905 (digital)

[Explore this journal](#)

Cite this review

Newland, M. A. (2022). Review of [Michael RUSE, *A Meaning to Life* (Philosophy in Action). Oxford, Oxford University Press, 2019, 216 p., 17,7 × 13,4 cm, ISBN 978-0-19093-322-7]. *Science et Esprit*, 74(1), 141–143.  
<https://doi.org/10.7202/1084598ar>

Michael RUSE, *A Meaning to Life* (Philosophy in Action). Oxford, Oxford University Press, 2019, 216 p., 17,7 × 13,4 cm, ISBN 978-0-19093-322-7.

Part of the reason for reviewing this book was personal: my 2008 Master's thesis, *God Is Human*, made extensive use of Michael Ruse's 2000 book, *Can a Darwinian Be a Christian?*<sup>1</sup> As a result, Ruse's thoughts shaped my arguments over the course of my research. An atheist, Ruse nonetheless shows a good, impressively nuanced appreciation for the Christian understanding of humankind's Creation, and our place in the world (contrasted with writers such as Richard Dawkins, Ruse's thought is free from exaggeration or misunderstood misrepresentation). Therefore, it was of interest to "check in" on Ruse, especially since his book continues to focus on ideas of great interest to me (namely evolution, human nature, and the links between them).

This volume, *A Meaning to Life*, is a part of Oxford University's *Philosophy in Action* series, and Ruse writes in a personal way, reflecting as much on his own experience as the philosophical ideas that have shaped his understanding of the world. His search for a meaning of life is a surprisingly brief response to such a tremendous question (just 216 pages, with the actual text ending on page 171). Yet Ruse's words are the result of years of reading and wondering about these questions (e.g., of the possibility of God's existence, nature's process, and what counts as a meaningful life). Ruse neatly and concisely sums up his thoughts over the course of four compact, yet deep, chapters. This review will briefly summarize each chapter/discussion, which will then be followed by my thoughts on Ruse's answer to the question of the meaning of life.

In Chapter 1, Ruse discusses "the unraveling of belief," and how the certainty of the Classical and Medieval worlds was gradually eaten away, and demolished, by the "three R's": the Renaissance, the Reformation, and the (scientific) Revolution (pp. 16-17). The last was especially devastating, with Darwinism serving as the final straw: there is no divine hand guiding history or granting humankind's place of prominence—only the blind forces of nature. Hence, any importance we might have imagined for ourselves, or our own individual lives, is mistaken.

Or so it would seem. Rather than accept this, give up the question, and end his book, Ruse decides to consider, one last time, whether the meaning promised by religion still has something to offer. Chapter 2, then, discusses how/whether religion can survive the challenge posed by contemporary scientific discoveries about us and our world, and Darwinism, in particular.

It is in Chapter 2 that Ruse's thoughts become especially personal, as he discusses his own lack of religious faith, his abandonment of Christianity as a young man, and a few of the reasons why he left his faith behind. While Christianity does offer answers to the mysteries which thinkers everywhere have always contemplated ("Why is there something, rather than nothing?"; "Why should we be 'good'?", etc.), Ruse does not find the answers (or the likelihood of Christianity being "true") convincing. For example, Ruse is (very personally) discouraged by realities such as the problem of evil, and ideas such as the atonement (Christ dying as a sacrifice), a notion which Ruse finds "repellant" (p. 50).

---

1. Michael RUSE, *Can a Darwinian Be a Christian?* Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 2000.

Philosophically, Ruse finds the sheer number of religions to be found in the world problematic (especially since geography and circumstance, rather than any objective truth, influence one's religious beliefs more than anything else), and he is unconvinced by Christian philosophy's fusion of Jewish beliefs and Greek ideas (as he finds the two incompatible: the personal God of Judaism cannot be reconciled, let alone identified, with the abstract God of Greek philosophy). Ruse then considers an alternatively religious worldview, that of Buddhism, yet he remains equally unconvinced, for he has no reason to believe that its teachings are true (rebirth, Nirvana, etc.)

Having found religion wanting, Ruse considers (Chapter 3) whether a substitute for religion, perhaps a "naturalistic" one, complete with an objective understanding of the meaning of life, might be found in contemporary science. But while the idea of "progress" has inspired other thinkers to imagine that it can (Ruse mentions the nineteenth century biologist Thomas Henry Huxley, and his grandson, biologist Julian Huxley, among them, pp. 100-102), Ruse remains sceptical: Darwinism is premised not on progress or guided direction, but on the accumulation of mistakes, some of which simply prove to be useful. But there is no actual "progress," and, as a result, no objective meaning either.

In the final chapter, Ruse offers his inevitable conclusion. Though perhaps it is disappointing, it is also honest: in his view, neither religion nor contemporary science offer any reason to believe our lives have objective meaning, and so it is up to us to decide what matters, how we ought to live, and what we should live for. He offers a personal (and relatable) example: "All books in my world have value, but some are to be valued more than others. Why? Because that is my decision. It is I and I alone who puts my first edition of the *Origin [of Species]* above all others" (p. 168).

Yet Ruse notes, by referring to philosophical and personal examples, that we may look beyond ourselves to get ideas on how to live better, more fulfilling lives: our human nature, as Aristotle once observed, is a social one, oriented toward community and family. Ruse makes fond reference to his wife and his five children, his love for her and the satisfaction he has gotten over the years parenting with her as a "team" (p. 2). While this is partly down to biology ("more little Ruses coming into the gene pool to ensure the future"), there is also a personal dimension to this aspect of his life, and he cannot deny his feelings, nor can he say that moments spent with his family signify nothing. So, Ruse concludes with the suggestion that we can have subjective, personal meaning in our lives, and live those lives well, even in the absence of any larger narratives (for Ruse remains sceptical of both religious providence or scientific progress).

Casual and clear, and always engaging in his writing, whether I can accept Ruse's conclusions is another question. Ruse's relaxed approach to the subject is also somewhat limiting, as it allows him to dismiss ideas he is less than interested in exploring (mostly in the area of religious criticism).

Having (perhaps somewhat stubbornly) clung to my own Christian faith, I did not find Ruse's reasons for rejecting Christianity convincing. While I understand Ruse's distaste for ideas like Original Sin and substitutionary atonement (that God would require a sacrificial offering/appeasement), a distaste which I share, there are certainly ways around both problems. Eastern Orthodox Christianity does not share the Western ideas on either issue, and writings of the early Church, such as those of Saint Irenaeus of Lyons (in the second century AD) are devoid of such ideas (which

developed later; Irenaeus sees Jesus' Incarnation as a means of divinizing the world, rather than saving it.)<sup>2</sup>

On the other hand, whether responding to just these points would have any real effect on Ruse's conclusions is doubtful, as his issues with the problem of evil, scepticism regarding the possibility/the nature of everlasting life, etc., would remain (and rejecting forms of Christianity that hold to these ideas would only reinforce Ruse's point regarding the plurality of world religions, and forms of Christianity in particular).

Ruse also seems less than interested in the question of religious diversity. Other books I have enjoyed, including John Hick's *God Has Many Names*<sup>3</sup> and His Holiness the Dalai Lama's *Toward a True Kinship of Faiths*<sup>4</sup> discuss not only the plurality of human expressions of religion, but also the impact of globalization on religious belief. While Ruse mentions both issues as obstacles to accepting religious faith of any kind, both Hick and the Dalai Lama see each one as an opportunity for enrichment, with the idea that both offer new dimensions of understanding (seeing one's own religion from a different point of view, while understanding other religious perspectives for the first time),<sup>5</sup> while also reevaluating limiting assumptions borne out of ignorance (the idea that one's childhood religion is "best" or superior, or that the followers of other religions besides one's own are simply "wrong") and realizing new ways of understanding religious truth.<sup>6</sup> Though Ruse mentions Hick specifically (as they were both raised in the same community and congregation, pp. 169-170), he is not interested in pursuing this line of discussion; doing so might have added an interesting contribution to his final conclusion.

Finally, I would also suggest the idea that, even with the absence of God or external cosmological-biological narratives making humankind's evolution inevitable, meaning could still be an emergent quality, like the chemical reactions giving rise to life and consciousness. While these things (perhaps) did not exist anywhere until they developed on earth, they certainly exist now, and meaning could be another emergent quality first appearing and taking root on our planet.

Carl Sagan once observed that humankind was "the local embodiment of a Cosmos grown to self-awareness," the moment the "stuff" of the universe began to ponder itself.<sup>7</sup> Perhaps, even if Ruse is correct in his thoughts about religious and naturalistic worldviews, we are nonetheless the creators of meaning—its first arbiters. In that case, Ruse's fine (and thought-provoking) book serves as a preamble to the topic, rather than the final word.

Matthew Allen NEWLAND

*Adjunct Faculty, Humanities Department  
State University of New York at Jefferson*

---

2. Jonathan HILL, *The History of Christian Thought*, Downers Grove IL, InterVarsity Press, 2003, p. 27.

3. John Harwood HICK, Louisville KY, Westminster John Knox Press, 1982.

4. Dalai Lama [Tenzin GYATSO], *Toward a True Kinship of Faiths: How the World's Religions Can Come Together*, New York NY, Three Rivers Press, 2010.

5. See Hick's chapter, "A Christian View," in *God Has Many Names*, pp. 29-39.

6. Dalai Lama [Tenzin GYATSO], *Toward a True Kinship of Faiths*, pp. 1-2.

7. Carl SAGAN, *Cosmos*, New York NY, Ballantine, 2013, p. 286; originally published 1980.