PUNCTUATING LIFE’S MESSAGE: 
A GRAMMATICAL-PHILOSOPHICAL EXERCISE 
ON THE QUEST FOR MEANING

Marian F. Sia¹, Santiago Sia²

¹Terenure College, Dublin, Ireland
²Milltown Institute, Dublin, Ireland
E-mail: ssia@milltown-institute.ie

The meaning of life has preoccupied the minds of many throughout the ages. In this article, the authors turn to their respective disciplines (literature and philosophy) and provide an interdisciplinary reflection on this fundamental concern. The claim that is made is that life presents us with a challenge: it can become a ‘sentence’ on us or it can be regarded as ‘a series of sentences’ which contain a message. However, just as in grammar, it is necessary to insert the proper punctuation marks to be able to make sense of the grouping of words in a sentence, so in life it is important to create ‘punctuating moments’ to facilitate the reading of life’s message. The paper makes use of lessons that can be drawn from the study of literature and philosophy in understanding and interpreting the human quest for meaning in life. It also shows how religion can have a positive contribution to this task.

Keywords: meaning of life, sentence(s), life’s message, literary-philosophical approach.

doi: 10.3846/coactivity.2010.39

Question and Quest

At a recent interview the question was posed to one of us as to what the most important fact that he had learned about life was. The immediate reply was that “Life is a series of sentences. We need to find the time to punctuate it properly to be able to read its message. Otherwise, life becomes a sentence”. He added that this comment would probably not be regarded as a fact, but that there are innumerable cases that would constitute sufficient evidence for the validity of the claim.

It may strike one that such a claim is merely a play on words; and philosophy, which informs it, is certainly not immune to this criticism. Moreover, to many people it certainly would not sound convincing. For various reasons, they find life meaningless; and the attempt to argue otherwise is futile. Such reactions would certainly be understandable.

Yet it seems to us that something deeply rooted in our nature as human beings grounds this comment. In one form or another our human situation unsettles us, and it is this which leads to the desire, and even a quest, for meaningfulness. If this observation is indeed correct, then that desire is translated in this context into the question as to whether life is after all a sentence passed on us. Admittedly but regrettably, that...
would seem to be the case as experienced by some. The contrary claim that is being made in the reply at the interview is that life's message could be compared to a series of sentences. For it to be properly read — drawing on grammar — it needs the correct punctuation marks. We need, as it were, to punctuate it properly for its meaning to become clearer to us.

This is an assertion that needs unpacking, of course. We propose to do that here. Moreover, there is an assumption in this claim; namely, that life contains a message, a given one, and that the onus is on human beings to make the effort and to take the time to discover the punctuating moments that will facilitate us in our quest for meaningfulness. It is an assumption that would also need to be addressed further.

The Quest for Meaning

The quest for meaning in life takes us in different directions. For some, religion provides the right context, and the answers that the different religious traditions teach enable them to appreciate their present situation and the goal ahead of them. St. Augustine articulates this quite well — albeit in a slightly different context — in his famous statement that our hearts are restless until they rest in God. For an increasing number of people, however, a more acceptable road is that mapped out by psychology, the human sciences or even science itself. One can see this trend in the popularity of these disciplines, often as an alternative or even as an antithesis to religion. Others find greater satisfaction, and hence some meaning, in the more immediate and tangible results of their desire for a better kind of life as they pursue wealth, health and fame. There is nothing new here, but somehow as countries become more developed or sophisticated, an increasing number of people seem to turn in this direction. Despite these seemingly unconnected routes being taken, however, there is at least a certain common starting ground; namely, that all of us are questing for an answer. In fact, even the rather negative position adopted by those who reject any meaningfulness to life or the attempt to discover it can be said to be itself some kind of answer — and that in turn implies a certain route taken.

The Philosophical Route

Since the claim is that all of us, no matter what station in life we occupy, are in varying degrees engaged in this quest, what then has philosophy to contribute to our understanding of this human situation and of this human pursuit? What kind of route does it open up for us? Is the philosophical route not rather the privilege of a few? So why take a philosophical route in this quest?

Centuries ago the Greek philosopher Aristotle had commented on a similar situation. In his *Nicomachean Ethics*, he raises the question as to what it is that every human being is aiming for (the object of life, as he calls it). He defines it as ‘good’, not in the ethical sense but more in a biological or psychological sense since he bases himself on his observations of the general behaviour of reality. Commenting more specifically on human beings, Aristotle observes that all human beings aim towards a common good, leading him to maintain that there is agreement on the universality of the human search for happiness, *eudaimonia*. He notes, on the other hand, that people differ on what they consider to be the form of happiness they want. Aristotle lists wealth, fame, pleasure, and virtue as goals that some people set for themselves. Critiquing these as being inadequate — for Aristotle, these are goods rather than the good — he argues that each of these is really a means rather than the ultimate goal or end that human beings desire.

---

1 We are using “sentences” in the loose sense, and are therefore including questions, exclamations, imperatives and so on.

2 A particularly poignant image that has left a lasting impression on us regarding meaninglessness is that of a clock that has its numerals, but had lost its hands and still keeps on ticking.
for its own sake. His own standpoint leads him to consider *eudaimonia* to be the full development of human rationality: contemplation, not in the religious sense, but thinking for the sake of thinking.

Aristotle's own answer to the question which he poses would hardly meet with much approval – in fact, some would view it rather cynically. He has nevertheless shown – and the reason for our reference to him on this point – that the quest itself is more solidly grounded because it is universal. And as he puts it, this is because of the kind of beings that we are. The search for happiness is rooted in our very humanity. It is useful to be reminded of that point as we turn our attention to the quest for meaning in life.

There is of course a link between the quest for meaning in life and the desire for ultimate happiness. Not only do both arise from our human nature, but it can also be demonstrated that achievement, or even the recognition, of the meaningfulness of life can be so uplifting that it results in more than transitory satisfaction. It could also be argued that attainment of happiness is only possible when one not only derives complete satisfaction but also grasps its full sense. It should be added too that meaningfulness therefore should not be given a restricted intellectual interpretation. While the distinction between *eudaimonia* and meaningfulness is probably less crucial, it would be helpful nonetheless to point out that meaningfulness involves not just seeing sense in life but of life itself. It specifically focuses on more than an appreciation of what life has to offer but more significantly that it matters.

Philosophy – the route being pursued here – has long been associated with the pursuit of wisdom and with the search for truth. Since it implies a protracted and systematic activity, there seems to be a perception that only a few can really be engaged in it. Some philosophers themselves, including Plato and Aristotle, have perpetuated that misperception. Plato insists that only a handful of souls manage to emerge from the cave of darkness into the light, a rich image of the philosophical pursuit. Aristotle, for his part, maintains that philosophising connotes leisure, and hence is only possible for those who can afford it. Given this situation, turning to philosophy can hardly be helpful in our quest for meaning, which it is claimed is widespread.

And yet, while conceding that philosophy as understood by these two philosophers and others is indeed a specific concern of a few, a role undertaken by a handful and a task fulfilled only by those naturally gifted or properly trained, the pursuit of wisdom and the search for truth are far from being restricted to these individuals or to this grouping. These are human activities, whether we refer to them as philosophy or by another name is not as important. The knowledge and skills imparted by philosophical training can facilitate that pursuit but it does not initiate it. Nor can wisdom or the truth be attained only in philosophy as understood in this specific way.

The love of wisdom is actually rooted in our common humanity. In one way or the other, all human beings are engaged in philosophical thinking, albeit at different levels. In fact, many of the issues discussed and developed further in academic philosophy stem from everyday concerns; and many of the philosophical findings, even when at times they seem rather far-fetched, can enhance everyday life. The urge to pursue fundamental questions about life and reality is neither the prerogative nor the privilege of those who have dedicated themselves professionally to this task. Nor is philosophy limited to the academic investigations of those who do wish to delve deeper into fundamental questions and the answers given by past and present practitioners of this discipline. Strictly philosophical debates such as occur in scholarly conferences or recounted in scholarly publications have their place and significance, but they should not restrict our understanding of the nature and use of philosophical thinking.

---

3 This search for wisdom is the theme of our novel, *The Fountain Arethuse.*
To clarify this point, perhaps one should make the distinction between the study of philosophy and the act of philosophising. In some form or the other, it is actually the act of philosophising, that every human being engages in, rather than in philosophy itself. But it is that same act that leads to and is the basis of the study of philosophy. The more formal and structured form of this act – which is what concerns students and teachers of philosophy – is what is sometimes regarded as “philosophy”. Needless to say, this is an essential development since the pursuit of the questions asked and the answers given needs to be carried out at a particular level that very few would have the luxury or the leisure to do so. Moreover, we can benefit from reading the works of those who have carried out the act of philosophising in great depth and to a large extent. Nonetheless, this more academic and formal pursuit should not ignore the basis of philosophical thinking itself.

Accordingly, in our quest for the meaningfulness of life, philosophy can be helpful, precisely because the desire for meaning needs to be pursued much more intensely and thoroughly if we are not to be satisfied with merely superficial answers. Admittedly, philosophers understand and practice philosophy differently – and this can result in much confusion – but philosophy, with its insistence on raising fundamental questions, analysing the issues and pursuing any answer to its logical conclusion, can prod us on towards a viewpoint that can stand the test of careful and rigorous scrutiny by human reason. While it cannot and should not guarantee indubitable conclusions, philosophy nevertheless can abet the task of arriving at a more consistent, coherent and adequate answer. After all, asking whether life is meaningful is more than just asking what one would like to do for the day. To give an answer to that fundamental question is definitely unlike merely enumerating the options that one can choose for the day’s activity. Pursuing the meaning of life implies a thoroughness that befits our very humanity itself and challenges it. And for this task philosophy is particularly well suited.

Philosophy and Language

Just as philosophy has been associated with wisdom and truth, so has it also, particularly in contemporary times, been linked with language. In fact, at times philosophy is interpreted as the analysis of language. One hears of philosophy’s function as the clarification of issues that have become clouded – due to the misunderstanding of terms or words – in the hope of dissolving, as it were, the problems that baffle philosophical minds. However, while this can be of invaluable assistance in arriving at truth or achieving wisdom, philosophy can and should go beyond – pace some philosophers – merely analysing language. Here we will try to do both.

In the present context, the connection between philosophy and language is particularly appropriate since the initial discussion in this paper focused on life as a series of sentences and the correct punctuation to enable one to read its meaning. The grammar of language – more particularly, punctuation marks – will therefore serve as a valuable metaphor for this exercise. Taking up once again what was asserted at the start, the claim that is being made here is that we need to insert the proper punctuating marks – that is to say, to engage in certain kinds of human acts in life – to allow life’s meaning to come across to us as readers – that is to say, as participants of life. Again, we need to be reminded that the assumption in the present context is that life does have a meaning and that our task is to make the effort to discover it. That meaning is lost if we do not make the effort; and it becomes distorted when we insert the wrong punctuation marks – meaning, neglect certain essential human activities.

To assume that life has meaning is not to ignore that this very fundamental issue should be of concern to us here, a point previously made. However, what is implied by this assumption is that we will not know the answer until we are actually engaged in the very task of searching for it. In other words, it is in and through our efforts to discover meaning that we learn that life has meaning. This point is quite
different from saying that we create meaning, as some existentialist philosophers were prone to assert, as if there is no other meaning except the ones of our subjectivist creation. Rather, just as a series can simply be a grouping of words with no coherent sense unless and until we punctuate them properly so that they become sentences, so does life present itself to us. It is of course possible that the grouping of words is merely that: words strung together, not even qualifying as clauses, much less sentences. But generally we will not know that to be the case until we take the trouble to place certain punctuation marks even if only tentatively. We could of course also be accused of reading meaning or sense into the assembled words. But that would in fact confirm the point that it is in and through our effort that meaning is discovered. In short, the attempt is in a way also a disclosure.

Turning to Grammar

Punctuation marks, an integral feature of the grammar of any language, enable us to read a group of words in ways that convey a definite sense and elicit a specific response from us. Punctuation marks break up words, sentences and even paragraphs to facilitate our grasp of the message. They are marks which we add to the words of the text to enable us to get the meaning. Without them the text would be merely a collection or even an undecipherable jumble of words.

For example, a particular grouping of words, which we would normally refer to as a sentence and ends in a full stop (or period) indicates a statement of fact, a description, a declaration and other similar claims. A question mark elicits a different response, this time from the reader or, in conversation, from the other party. At times, it may be what is termed a rhetorical question and thus no specific answer is expected or given. What is common is that a message that is followed by this punctuation mark, unlike a full stop, raises a point or makes a query. It asks rather than states. In contrast, a message that ends in an exclamation point comes across more strongly: it is intended to express the speaker’s feelings, or to alert the reader.

Other punctuating marks play other roles in eliciting grammatical sense. Quotation marks enclose the message and disclose a source; they can also show that a certain significance is being given to the quoted message in relation to the primary text. A colon (or a semi-colon) halts the message, thus indicating that there is more to come: a further explanation or an illustration. Commas, on the other hand, merely provide a pause in the message, a ‘breather’ as it were. They are essential in delineating the grouping of words, thus bringing out the sense not only of the group of words but also of the entire message. A dash is another kind of pause, more as an aside but one that is regarded as relevant to the point being made.

Punctuation marks can also be the basis of agreement or differences inasmuch as we can agree on their appropriateness or inappropriateness as we seek to interpret the sense of the sentences or the entire message itself. They can be said to set the parameters of how we read (or are meant to read) the text. For this reason, care must be exercised by whoever inserts these marks to forestall any misinterpretation. The author or editor of a text needs to check the extent that a particular punctuation serves a purpose, and clarifies or confuses the meaning of the text.

4 Albert Camus cites the situation of Sisyphus, condemned to roll a boulder up a hill, only to have it roll down again after reaching the top. Sisyphus has to keep repeating this activity forever. For Camus, the human situation is in a similar absurdity, but human beings can create values that will give them some purposes in life.

5 No attempt is made here to provide an exhaustive list of punctuation marks.

6 A particularly interesting book in this regard is Truss’s Eats, Shoots & Leaves. A particularly useful example which she provides on p. 9 is: “A woman, without her man, is nothing.” and “A woman: without her, man is nothing.”
Punctuating Life’s Text

On a number of occasions life has been compared to a book – we even make references to the book of life. It has been said therefore that various events in one’s life are like the chapters of a book. Death is sometimes portrayed as the last chapter in one’s book of life, with the reminder that often, as in a book, that conclusion is written on the basis of the contents of the preceding pages.

Along these lines, but with a different focus, reading the meaning of life’s message can be likened to the writing of the book. In the present context, instead of the composition of the book of life, it is the significance of the punctuation marks that we put on the text that we wish to stress. For it is also in the editing of our life’s sentences and not just in the authoring of them, as it were, that life’s message is communicated to us. Sometimes we compose the sentences, more often we receive them and it is in the interaction between the active and the passive side of life, so to speak, that life’s message can be read, interpreted and lived. At the same time, how we break the text of our lives into meaningful phrases, clauses and sentences is what enables us to discover the meaning of life itself.

Taking our cue then from grammar, one could say that we need to make the effort – just as much as we need to be given opportunities – to place the appropriate full stops, question marks, exclamation points as well as the colons, the commas and the dashes in the proper moments, stages and cycles of our lives. For only then can we understand and appreciate what life is to us. We need to insert punctuating moments to the sentences that we compose in life as we carry on with our daily routine, engage in specific activities or celebrate certain events. Those sentences may be our responses to what life offers to us, or they could be creations of ours as we make our own contributions to life itself as it moves on, affecting us and others. Just as in our use of language, there is a received as well as a composed side to the over-all communication.

Transliterated into the context of life, the full stops (or periods) of life are the moments when we do come to the end of one activity, event, or phase and then move on to the next. These moments spell decisions made, activities completed, or simply points accepted. To some extent, these are the general markers in our lives as we press on from day to day. Sometimes these are just routine; others are more significant but not sufficiently so for us to regard them as “out of the ordinary” such that they are life-changing moments.

Life, too, has its ups and not just downs: when we are surprised, uplifted and even thrilled. These exclamation points of our lives are moments that enable us to see life as a gift, to see beyond the routine. They make us stand still – and it is a pause that is indeed pregnant. At times, these special situations make it all worthwhile for us to continue; and, since they stand out, they somehow throw light on our lives, enabling us to appreciate what we have been given or what we have achieved. Living is no longer merely “existing” but “ex-sisting”.

It will not come as a surprise that philosophical thinking would be associated with a particular punctuation mark – and that is the question mark. As had already been noted above, philosophy is equated with the pursuit of wisdom; and it is generally held that the beginning of wisdom starts with the questions we raise regarding ourselves and our world (Sia, M. F., Sia, S. 1994: 19f). The question marks of life are the moments when we, just like the symbol of this punctuation, “curl back” because we are reflecting (reflexere) on our experience of various aspects of life – both humdrum and profound. Daily life presents situations when we ask, query or challenge. Unlike full stop moments, these moments make us step back and not merely move on. There are even occasions when we raise fundamental questions about life.

---

7 Existentialist philosophers are at times cited as maintaining that how we die – although not in the physical sense – is shaped by the choices that we have made in life.
itself: asking about its significance, its purpose and its destiny. These questioning moments are sometimes the result of terrible or tragic situations; in some cases, they come about because of our inability to see what is in store for us or whether there is any point in continuing\(^8\). At other times, because we wonder, we ponder.

At times, we pause, not because we are reflecting or questioning but because we expect further information, explanation or illustration of what we have just experienced. These colon moments of expectation stand between the past and the future, between what has just been or what is to come. And when what was expected has come to pass, we begin to appreciate what has happened because we have been provided further information, explanation or illustration. Sometimes these colon moments simply take place unexpectedly; at other times, we ought to make them happen.

But there is another punctuation mark that can be said to facilitate our search for meaning; namely, the comma. The association of philosophy with the comma is not obvious in the way that the question mark is. But there is something about reflection – integral to the philosophical activity – that invites the comparison. For just as in grammar where, to decipher the meaning of a sentence or a text, appropriate commas can be useful, so in life appropriate pauses – which create an atmosphere of reflection – do enable us to establish balance, maintain priorities and sharpen a focus. These comma moments can aid us in making sense of the seemingly endless series of activities that we are engaged in or the various pursuits that we are trying to fulfil – when we take the time to see how the particulars are to be understood in the context of the general., or when we “take a moment” to view the details as they come together in the light of the overall scheme of things. These moments enable us to see connections, small enough (like the symbol of the comma) to enable us to continue with everyday life but important enough to leave an impression on us. Comma moments are not just inserted as “breathers”, as it were (although they can be useful in that way), but because they serve the important function of providing “sense”. And as we see the sense of the various groupings, they can open up the bigger picture. It seems that as we take – and make – the time to add these comma moments in our lives, we provide ourselves with a greater opportunity to see not just the “senses” of the various happenings in our lives but even more importantly, the “sense of it all”.

In this respect, there is something quite instructive in the actual mark of the comma itself. The comma, unlike the period (or full stop), is a dot that curls downwards towards the left. It does more than just bring out the meaning of the sentence. It does this by connecting us, as it were, with the past – the group of words that have been separated by the comma. In life too, we need to be reminded that the question of where we are heading is partly answered by considering where we have come from\(^9\).

**Text and Context**

So far, the claim that has been made is that to draw out the meaning of a series of sentences in a text, the proper punctuation marks have to be inserted. This is a task both for the writer if he or she wants to ensure that the meaning is correctly understood and – in the absence of such marks – for the reader to insert the appropriate ones to elicit an intelligible interpretation. It should be added now that such a quest for meaning, particularly on the part of the reader – which is our point of comparison – is

---

\(^8\) The existence of evil and of suffering is one such occasion. Cf. From Suffering to God, where we develop this point and its challenge to our concept of God.

\(^9\) A particularly helpful way of understanding and defending this point is provided by Charles Hartshorne’s metaphysical category of creative synthesis. Cf. his Creative Synthesis and Philosophic Method.
often aided by making use of various resources to complement one’s individual efforts.

One such valuable resource to understanding the sentences in a text and their meaning is knowledge of the context of the sentences. In fact, a sentence that has been lifted from the paragraph or the section (or even a greater context like a chapter) does not always convey as full a sense as it is meant to. Awareness of the general theme of the text as well as of the background (including that of the writer), connotations, varying interpretations, culture and so on can heighten and deepen the reader’s sensitivities to such an extent that the reader can confront not only the explicit but also the implicit meaning of the text and of the words which make up the text. The same claim can be made – if life is being likened to a text – about discovering the meaning of life. The quest for meaning can be greatly enhanced by taking life’s contexts into account. This is because this task is not simply a matter of inserting punctuating moments, as it were, by the individual but also of interpreting the meaning of those moments and eventually appreciating them.

The task of interpreting a text – as is well illustrated in literature – is much more than merely providing one’s own understanding of it. While this can be and often is done, one nonetheless risks arriving at subjective conclusions. This is also the case with our quest for meaning in life. It is important that our individual efforts should also avail of the collective wisdom of humankind and the extensive experiences of others. After all, if it is true that the quest for meaning is a common human activity, then there is something that we can learn from one another.

The term “context” is sometimes interpreted differently by other philosophers, particularly by those influenced by Wittgenstein’s philosophy. What it does not mean here is that the act of philosophising is fenced in by one’s subjective experiences such that one finds it impossible to transcend them. Rather, we take it to mean – and use the term accordingly – that the act of philosophising takes place in the concreteness of life. These are specific life-situations, but they are not completely subjective nor are they entirely particular instances, such that one does not see any resemblance to other situations. The concreteness of life serves as the starting points for our reflections.

“Context” as used here also refers to some kind of a unifying vision or at least the need to recognise its significance. The specific life-situations on which the act of philosophising is based serve as pointers because it is through these specific situations that we become somewhat aware of a larger picture. In fact, we can only recognise them as specific because there seems to be a broader background against which they are set. Whitehead’s analogy of “seeing the wood by means of the trees” can be helpful here (Whitehead 1967: 6). It is the trees that we initially encounter, but it is also they which enable us to become aware of the wood. In seeing the wood, we have gone beyond merely noticing the trees. We may even see them in a different light because we see them against the backdrop of the wood. Similarly, the larger picture or the vision, that are opened up by the various contexts in which we philosophise, can enlighten us when we look again at the specific situations, including those that have set us off initially on our philosophical pursuits. T.S. Eliot puts it even more succinctly: “…we arrive where we started/And know the place for the first time”.

“Context”, as used here, thus refers to two distinct but related meanings: (1) the concreteness of our human experience as the basis for our philosophical reflections; and (2) a unifying vision that underlies our response to that experience. The question that inevitably arises is how something concrete (or detailed) can be reconciled with what is essentially abstract (or general). In insisting that philosophising is always carried out in context, are we therefore claiming that this activity is at all times both concrete and abstract? That would be a correct conclusion except that as these terms apply here, they refer to different dimensions of the philosophical act. Insofar as philosophical thinking emerges out of
the concreteness of life, it is concrete. It is based on and grounded in the day-to-day questions which need to be addressed as we live our lives and carry on our daily routine. But philosophical thinking, if it is not to be a superficial or an ad hoc response, must address those questions against a more general framework that helps to provide a sharper focus. This is the abstract dimension since it is general and comprehensive. There is something about human nature that is not fully satisfied with mere instances or selected examples. The human desire for some continuity, comprehensiveness, and unity in our understanding of reality, and in our attempts to make sense of it, is what we believe drive us to this quest for a more general vision.

Religion as Context

Despite some valid criticisms as well as misinterpretations, religion can be regarded as providing one such valuable context in this instance, particularly since the various religions do concern themselves – in its scriptures, teachings and practices – with, among others, the human quest for meaning in life. But in what way can the religious context be of help in the quest for meaning? Some theists have regarded religion as adding depth to life. But the word sounds very much like a negative judgment over non-religious interpretations. It would also be quite difficult to show, given the complexities of validating the belief in a God, that religion really deepens our understanding of life. A less contentious word is vision. This means then that despite admitting that the quest for meaning is a human one, the theist can still claim to be influenced by a vision not shared by secularists of what it means to be human. Because religion holds that creation stands in a relation with God, the theistic perspective is shaped by that conviction. It is on this very point where the scriptures, be they Christian, Jewish, Islamic, Hindu, Buddhist, play a significant role. For the scriptures capture and express in written form that religious vision. What they offer is this vision of creation standing in a certain relationship to God. There are insights and themes which bring out this understanding. The sacraments or the rituals and worship of the different religions highlight this relatedness to God because these do not make sense apart from this belief. To a great extent, the sacraments are a celebration of the theist's awareness of being related to God. Such a context can make a difference to our quest for meaning in life and to how we punctuate it for its message.

Because “religion” too is understood in so many ways, it would useful to explain its usage here and to develop the point further. In the light of what has been said so far regarding the quest for meaning, Whitehead can be of help to us. While accepting that there are special occasions which can lead to religious consciousness, religion as far as he is concerned emerges from ordinary human experience (Whitehead 1928: 19f). He refers to religion as ‘the human search’ or ‘the longing of the spirit’ for something which transcends everything; but the search or the longing for it is deeply rooted in mundane matters, in everyday experience. This search or longing results in what he calls ‘solitariness’.

Solitariness, however, is more than just the common experience of loneliness. Solitariness is the sense of separateness, the initial experience having been that of belongingness. It enables one to become aware of one's individuality, which is a further stage from one's previous pre-conscious experience of sociality and relatedness. Since religion itself, according to Whitehead, is a response to solitariness, it means that solitariness is actually ‘pre-religious,’ despite being a further stage in one's search for the transcendent. Strictly speaking then, religion is not to be equated with individuality. And unlike the sense of solitariness, religion is more than a stage. There has been an evolution in one's expe-

10 According to Whitehead, ‘experience’ is one of the most deceitful words in philosophy. For a more extensive and technical discussion, see his PR, particularly Part III.
rience and not just a prolongation. In addition, there has been a development since there is an active element: religion after all is what one does with one’s own solitariness. It is the response to one’s search or longing. There is a purposeful consciousness in religion that is merely latent in solitariness but is developing as one becomes aware of one’s individuality.

It is interesting that Whitehead should regard the human experience of longing and searching, which leads to solitariness, as the fundamental context in which religion can emerge. Some of the modern critics of religion had attacked it for preying, as it were, on such experiences. Freud, tracing religion back to the need for emotional comfort, especially relief from disasters, accidents, sickness, and other natural evils that surround us, accused religion of perpetuating human immaturity through its teachings and practices. He regarded religion as an infantile neurosis that ought to be cured before we can grow into mature, healthy adults. Once cured of such a sickness, human beings, he alleged, can achieve maturity as a race. It will then no longer be necessary to invent fanciful beings personalized by religion for us to be able to face this impersonal and at times brutal world of ours. Marx criticized religion for enslaving people through its preaching of acceptance of one’s miserable lot in life and its championing the virtues of patience, humility and self-denial. Religion, he claimed, misleads us in not recognizing the real causes of our alienation and suppresses our desire to improve the economic and political conditions of life. Both of these influential thinkers would hardly agree with Whitehead that true religion stems from the human experience of longing and searching. If anything, such an experience in their view is being misinterpreted and misled by religion.

But these experiences of life, as our pre-reflexive starting point, are part and parcel of human life itself. While agreeing with Freud that religion is based on emotional needs, Jung rightly criticized him for not taking into account that they are basic to human nature and that we cannot deny them without inducing neurosis. What is called for therefore is not the abandonment of religion as demanded by Freud. Rather, it is our response to those needs that is really in question. It will determine the kind of religion that we have in mind, as Whitehead clearly states. Our response to human longing or yearning for something more does not have to be, and should not be, in the form severely criticized by Freud and Marx.

Many religious practices and customs have arisen in response to specific life-situations. Religion cannot ignore deep-felt hunger or yearning for ‘something more’ even if it is not always clear what that ‘something more’ is or even if the expression of this desire is simplistic or unreflective. Whitehead correctly underscores this point whereas Plato neglects it. In the Western world Plato led the way in freeing religion from the particularistic, anthropomorphic expressions of it as exemplified by the Greek divinities. He insisted that true religion is concerned with fundamental and comprehensive questions rather than with emotional concerns. His own theory of religion was grounded in his desire to understand the universal attributes of reality, far removed from the transient, ever-changing environment which surrounded him. But by sharply establishing a line of demarcation between the established interpretation of religion in his day – understandably so, given its crudities – and his own one, Plato unfortunately cut off an important link with concrete life. He wanted to construct a theory of religion that had left behind the world of sense experience. While there were good reasons for dissociating genuine religion from the so-called religious practices and beliefs of his time, Plato’s hard-line attitude resulted in a rather intellectualized, and even elitist, version of religion. Whitehead’s conception of religion, on the other hand, rightly shows that it is in the midst of everyday life, experienced in various fashions and expressed in concrete ways, that we begin to ask questions which take us beyond the particular situation that we find ourselves in and lead us to what he refers to as ‘solitariness’. And our reaction, also part of human living, to that solitariness shapes...
religious thought. Our further attempts to make sense of our experiences of and in life lead to something more general and more complex as we yield to the urge for something more. There is in human life what Whitehead calls ‘a noble discontent’, which is “the gradual emergence into prominence of a sense of criticism, founded upon appreciations of beauty, and of intellectual distinction, and of duty” (Whitehead 1942: 12).

Such a discontent distances us from particular experiences and inevitably prods us to seek conceptual expressions and rational support. Whitehead outlines the process in this particularly helpful passage:

Our consciousness does not initiate our modes of functionings. We awake to find ourselves engaged in process, immersed in satisfactions and dissatisfactions, and actively modifying, either by intensification, or by attenuation, or by the introduction of novel purposes. This primary procedure which is presupposed in consciousness I will term Instinct. It is the mode of experience directly arising out of the urge of inheritance, individual and emotional. Also, after instinct and intellectual ferment have their work, there is a decision which determines the mode of coalescence of instinct with intellect. I will term this factor Wisdom. It is the function of wisdom to act as a modifying agency on the intellectual ferment so as to produce a self-determined issue from the given conditions (Whitehead 1942: 58).

Concluding Comments

In this article, we have been concerned with developing further the claim that if life is not to become ‘a sentence’ on us, we can regard it more as ‘a series of sentences’. However, if we do not wish them to become disjointed or a mere collection of words, then we should make the effort to punctuate them properly. The use of punctuation marks in grammar is particularly useful in clarifying and developing this claim. Moreover, again turning to the role of punctuation marks in grammar, we assert that it is only when we insert those ‘punctuating moments’ that we discover whether life has any meaning at all. In our quest for meaning, the various contexts in life – religion being one of them – can be helpful just as knowledge of the context can facilitate the interpretation of a text – to which life is being likened.

References

Hartshorne, Ch. 1983. Creative Synthesis and Philosophic Method. University of America Press.

Sia, M. S. 1997. The Fountain Arethuse: a Novel. Lewes, UK: The Book Guild.

Sia, M. F.; Sia, S. 1994. From Suffering to God: Exploring our Images of God in the Light of Suffering. Macmillan.

Sia, S. 2004. Religion, Reason and God: Essays in the Philosophies of Charles Hartshorne and A. N. Whitehead. Peter Lang.

Truss, L. 2003. Eats, Shoots & Leaves: The Zero Tolerance Approach to Punctuation. Profile Books.

Whitehead, A. N. 1942. Adventures of Ideas. Cambridge University Press.

Whitehead, A. N. 1928. Symbolism: Its Meaning and Effect. Cambridge University Press.

Whitehead, A. N. 1978. Corrected version. Process and Reality: an Essay in Cosmology, ed. by David Ray Griffin and Donald W. Sherburne. N.Y.: The Free Press.

Whitehead, A. N. 1967. The Aims of Education. N.Y.: The Free Press.

---

11 Whitehead sets this out for the purpose of understanding social institutions, but we have used it in this context because it also shows how he understands the process from experience to conceptualization. He does add that this division must not be made too sharply.
„SKRYBOS ŽENKLAI“ GYVENIMO ŽINIOJE: GRAMATINIAI IR FILOSOFINIAI „PRATIMAI“ IEŠKANT PRASMĖS

Marian F. Sia, Santiago Sia

Gyvenimo prasmė nedavė ramybės daugeliui protų ištisus šimtmečius. Šiame straipsnyje autoriai, taikydami savo nagrinėjamus dalykus (literatūrą ir filosofiją), aiškina, kaip šis esminis klausimas atsispindi įvairiose disciplinose. Teigiama, kad gyvenimas mums pateikia iššūkį: jis gali tapti mumis „nuosprendžiu“ arba jį galime laikyti „sakinių eile“, kurioje slypi žinia. Vis tik, kaip ir gramatikoje, būtina įterpti teisingus skyrybos ženklus, kad galėtume suprasti žodžių grupes sakinyje, taip ir gyvenime – svarbu sukurti „akcentuotinus momentus“, kad lengviau perskaitytume gyvenimo pateiktą žinią. Straipsnio autoriai naudojasi pamokomis, kurias išmoko studijuodami literatūrą ir filosofiją, tam, kad suprastų ir paaiškintų gyvenimo prasmės ieškojimus. Straipsnyje taip pat aptaria, kaip religija gali padėti spręsti šią problemą.

Reikšminiai žodžiai: gyvenimo prasmė, sakiny (sakiniai), gyvenimo žinia, literatūrinis filosofinis požiūris.

Išteikta 2010-02-18; priimta 2010-03-24