

Monty Python's The Meaning of Life

UK : 1983 : dir. Terry Jones : Celandine / Monty Python Partnership : 103 min
 prod: John Goldstone : scr: Chapman, Cleese, Idle, Palin & Jones : dir.ph.: Peter Hannan

Eric Idle; John Cleese; Graham Chapman; Terry Jones; Michael Palin; Terry Gilliam;
 Carol Cleveland; Simon Jones/Jouinn; Judy Loe

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Source: Amazon.com ?

Leonard Maltin's Movie and Video Guide 2001 review:

“Original, outrageous comedy exploring various facts of life and death – from procreation to the Grim Reaper himself – with typical Python irreverence. Highlights include the world’s most obese man (an unforgettable scene, like it or not) and a cheerful, elaborate production number about sperm! A barrel of belly-laughs for Python fans; others beware. *** ”

Speelfilm Encyclopedie review:

“In this film the Monty Python team attempt to fathom the meaning of life by means of a series of bizarre sketches that span human life from birth to death (and beyond). Intelligent, anarchistic and sometimes delicious slapstick humour, such as the sketch in which the monstrously fat Mr Creosote vomits all over a high class restaurant, at the same time stuffing

down a gigantic meal, and subsequently explodes. *** ”

Halliwell's Film Guide review:

“A series of sketches in questionable taste. Subjects include organ transplants, sex, death and the results of over-eating.”

The Good Film and Video Guide review:

“A portmanteau of sketches allegedly commenting on various aspects of life, satirising public schools, class, religion, tourists and obsequious waiters; the result is a disastrous hodgepodge of schoolboy humour, poorly times and badly judged. Some comic song numbers, notably "Every Sperm is Sacred", a splendidly choreographed Catholic's lament in the style of "OLIVER!", and the finale, "Christmas in Heaven", are the only clever or funny items. The rest is strictly for people who laugh at rude words *per se* and fat men being sick.”

Movies on TV and Videocassette 1988-89 review:

“The latest import of brazen comedy from the Monty Python madcap satirists is surely the group's most outrageous and uneven film, ranging from a witty spoof guaranteed to offend the devout, to a scene so gross that it will leave you cringing. One is an uproarious spoof of musicals, children, Catholic doctrine, birth control, and sex. The other plunge into excess involves a very posh restaurant invaded by an enormously obese man. For Python addicts! **1/2 ”

Video Movie Guide 1993 review:

“Those Monty Python goons perform a series of sketches on the important issues of life. According to Michael Palin, the film “ranges from philosophy to history to medicine to halibut – especially halibut”. It’s the English troupe’s finest feature film to date – a heady mixture of satiric and surreal bits about the life cycle from birth to death. It may prove offensive to some and a sheer delight to others.

Rated R for all manner of offensive goings-on.
**** ”

[no listing in "The Critics' Film Guide", "Rating the Movies (1990)", "The Time Out Film Guide", "TV Times Film & Video Guide 1995", "Variety Movie Guide 1993" or "The Virgin Film Guide"]

After giving the epic treatment to “**MONTY PYTHON AND THE HOLY GRAIL**” and “**THE LIFE OF BRIAN**”, the Pythons’ swansong is a return to their original TV format of interconnecting sketches without punchlines - some good, some not so good – a little Oxbridge patronising of their audience, and a lot of raspberries blown in the direction of “good taste”. Conspicuous by their absence are the trademark animated links of Terry Gilliam, although he does put in a personal appearance.

For me this is the least satisfying of their films (“**MONTY PYTHON LIVE AT THE HOLLYWOOD BOWL**” scarcely counts, being just yet another reprise of the best-known sketches from their TV days). In the early 70s I was the staunchest of Python devotees, yet this final film raised only one laugh, and precious few smirks besides. How can this be? Firstly I was a sixth former in the early 70s, a very different animal from today. Secondly the Pythons themselves were tiring of the game, and falling back on some old ideas. The **HOLY GRAIL** titles gag about Llamas returns as a joke about fish; the **HOLY GRAIL** intermission returns as a middle-of-the-film break; Eric Idle’s song at the end of “**LIFE OF BRIAN**” having proved an unexpected hit, this film is fairly littered with songs, many of them sung by Eric Idle.

But given that it was released in the depths of the Thatcherite winter, the film chooses a disappointingly lame set of targets to lampoon. The Catholic church and its stance on contraception comes in for the most savage kicking. One would think they might have found more topical targets closer to home. Satire feeds on autocratic government, but there is little true satire here, and a lot of what the US call “gross out” humour. On TV most of the barbs were aimed at stuffy BBC conventions, or the civil service, the aristocracy, the working class, but on the big screen, and with eyes on transatlantic sales, such parochial targets were avoided, and no larger ones found to take their place.

It’s not quite so dismal of course. The “Every Sperm is Sacred” number, done in the style of “Consider Yourself” from “**OLIVER!**”, is a high point; there’s a nice skit on organ donor cards, a compassionate parade ground RSM, Death trying to wrench respect from a dinner party of the chattering classes, heaven as a tawdry Las Vegas nightclub act, an officer in the Zulu wars waking up to find his leg bitten off by a mosquito... The film opens with an overlong “supporting feature” about mutiny in a merchant bank (featuring none of the Pythons), seemingly for no other purpose than to have the mutineers burst into the main feature during a boardroom scene which is leading nowhere. The five themselves, with the passing of the years, have lost nothing of their gift for mimicry, and carry virtually all the speaking roles between them, but TV skits will not really work at the cinema, as “**AND NOW FOR SOMETHING COMPLETELY DIFFERENT**” (their first feature) should have taught them.

Why is it here? The first three or four sketches concern birth and education. We see a middle class woman in labour wheeled into a delivery room where all the expensive machinery is present only to please the eye of the hospital administrator. Birth in “the Third World” is represented next by a Yorkshire village of the 1920s where baby plops out onto the kitchen floor while ma is doing the dishes (“Oh.. Pick that up would you, dear?). Dad (Michael Palin)

comes home to announce to wife and scores of kids that he's lost his job, and there's nothing for it but to sell them all for medical experimentation. Cue the big sperm number. Merely the sight of ranks of small children trilling the word "sperm" should have been enough to give Mary Whitehouse a heart attack (had there been any such organ to attack).

The boys' school sketches start with a religious assembly and a cheeky parody of the Lord's Prayer, then a sex education class in which all the clichés of the prep schoolmaster (John Cleese) are applied to an eye-wateringly frank explanation of foreplay, clitoral stimulation and vaginal juices. A four-poster bed unfurls from behind the blackboard and the master's wife arrives to partake in a practical demonstration of coitus before the class. Inversion and incongruity were Python's favoured devices, so before the master arrives the boys are busy at their books, and only when he is spotted approaching do they all start fooling around and making a ruckus. The boys are no more interested in sex than they would be in Latin, it is the master who knows his Kamasutra. Finally there's a brief masters-vs-boys rugby match, in which some very small boys are trampled underfoot and bludgeoned to the ground in a logical extrapolation of the famous football match scene from "**KES**". The film then segues into war (on Zulus, who else?).

The great anticlimax ending of **HOLY GRAIL** is not equalled here. The Python crew evidently felt they couldn't raise audience expectations of a "meaning of life" without offering any stab at it at all (In "*The Hitch-hiker's Guide to the Galaxy*", Douglas Adams came up with the mesmerising answer "42".) so the film ends with a desultory shrug rather than a bang or a whimper, followed by another Eric Idle tune to hum on our way home. Altogether a sad disappointment from a team who once revolutionised the nature of British television humour. They all went their separate ways, but interestingly the most successful of them in the long run proved to be Terry Gilliam (as film director) and Michael Palin (as TV travelogue presenter) rather than Idle or Cleese. Graham Chapman died of AIDS a few years later, his demise (like that of John Lennon) finally putting paid to any hopes of a Python reunion.

See subject index under **COMEDY, LARGE BROODS, RELIGION, SCHOOL** and **SEX & SEXUALITY**.