

Let Your Curiosity Be a Source of Meaning

The philosopher Albert Camus once wrote that the only meaningful philosophical question was “why shouldn’t I commit suicide?”

Jarring, I know. But there’s more to the question than you might think. This is not just philosophy for emo kids.

Camus and the existentialists asked this question because they recognized a lack of inherent meaning in the universe. That lack of meaning is intensely frustrating for humans because we seem wired to look for it.

But look however much or however deeply or however far you want, nothing in the natural order of things is going to provide you with a reason to live. At least, that’s what the existentialists say. In Camus’s words:

“Man stands face to face with the irrational. He feels within him his longing for happiness and for reason. The absurd is born of this confrontation between the human need and the unreasonable silence of the world.”

For the existentialists, the solution is self-created meaning – meaning imposed onto the absurd and found within the context of experiencing the absurd.

Whether or not you agree with the existentialists, all humans seem to experience the truth that we have to create or at least seek out meaning. Life won’t provide it for us. So where do you look?

Perhaps instead of asking “What is the meaning of life,” we should ask “what can life be like?”

The first question assumes a certain end which we often don’t seem to be able to find. Perhaps we can’t find it because we weren’t meant to. Perhaps the answer is experiencing life as fully and broadly as possible, rather than as meaningfully as possible. **After all, to ask what the meaning of life is assumes we know exactly what life’s limits and rules are. We don’t.**

Think about the Camus’s suicide question this way:

Q. Why not commit suicide?

A. If the universe and life are without inherent meaning, then you have nothing to lose by exploring them. The universe may be meaningless, but for practical purposes it is also limitless.

You have not exhausted the available modes of being, but you have the power to try as many as you'd like. And that exploration provides the "meaning" for human life.

In other words, our curiosity about what life can be like is an antidote to what Camus called "the absurd." It can be a dynamic and continuing source of meaning in what often seems to be a meaningless world. We'll never reach the end of our curiosity, so we'll answer Camus's question with "not today."

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