

PHILOSOPHICAL REFLECTIONS (PART 2 OF 5)

Rating: 5.0

Description: This series of articles provide a conceptual framework for answering the 'big questions' related to our existence. Part 2 urges us to reflect on what actually is success and whether our existence has a purpose.

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Published on: 13 May 2013

Last modified on: 25 Apr 2020

Success

"...they are the ones who are successful." (Quran 7:157)

"Truly, this is the supreme success!" (Quran 37:60)

One of the best definitions I have found of  success is "the completion of what is intended". For example, if I were to intend to learn how to drive, and I passed my driving test, that would be a success. As human beings we intend to achieve things all the time; to get a promotion; to be our own boss; to be a good father and husband; to travel the world or to write a book. If we achieve or complete our aims and objectives then it can be argued we have been successful. However is this view of success meaningful? I would argue it is not.

If we live our lives to complete the things that we intend to achieve, without even questioning the intention of our own existence, we will have not found any ultimate meaning to our own lives. Therefore our view of success is almost baseless and devoid of real value. If each person completes his life by intending to achieve all of the things we mentioned, and he or she didn't even complete the intended meaning for his or her life, then can we call their lives successful? We can even ask: does it really matter whether they ever existed at all? His or her life may be of some importance relative to the things they want to complete, but what is the ultimate significance of completing their own lives?

Let's look at it from a scientific perspective, our children, our actions, our loved ones and everything we do are just arrangements of molecules. Carbon and other atoms in various combinations make up our lives and even the things we intend to complete. From this perspective mankind is thus no more significant than a swarm of flies, or a herd of sheep, for their makeup is all the same. Also, if we follow the scientific line of thought our end is also meaningless, we just die and that's it. This is true for each individual person. The amazing achievements of the scientist to the advancement of

human thinking, the on-going research of bio-medicine to find the cure for cancer, the efforts of the politician to establish justice and peace in the world, all these come to nothing. Even if human beings were to exist forever, the mere infinite duration of our lives would not make them any more meaningful, there would still be no ultimate significance.

Existentialists such as Jean-Paul Sartre and Albert Camus understood the meaningless reality of life in absence of acknowledging the intention of our existence. This is why Sartre wrote of the “nausea” of existence and Camus saw life as absurd indicating that the universe has no meaning at all. The German Philosopher Friedrich Nietzsche argued in clear concise pronouncements that the world and human history does not have any meaning, any rational order or aim. Nietzsche argued that there is only a mindless chaos, a directionless world tending towards no end.

If we found the intention of our existence, thereby giving our lives ultimate meaning, and we were to achieve and complete what was intended – that would indeed be true success. In contrast to this type of thinking someone may contend by stating that this whole discussion assumes that some metaphysical entity created the whole universe with some sort of purpose. This is true, but by removing this assumption we will only be presuming atheism to be true. Additionally, the logical conclusion of atheism is that our very existence is pointless, which is a conclusion not many atheists would like to follow through due to it being at odds with our innate nature and psychological disposition. So the following questions naturally follow, what is the intention of our existence, and what outlook would make sense of our continuous search for ultimate meaning and success?

Purpose

“So where are you going?” (Quran 81:26)

“Our Lord! You have not created all this without purpose” (Quran 3:191)

“God did not create all these without a true purpose; He explains His signs to those who understand.” (Quran 10:5)

The Austrian philosopher Ludwig Wittgenstein, who inspired two of the 20th century’s principal philosophical movements, once said, “I don’t know why we are here, but I’m pretty sure that it is not in order to enjoy ourselves.” Wittgenstein did not have the answer to the perennial question of what is humanity’s purpose, but he did indicate that there must be one, even if the answer could not be discovered intuitively. However, it can be argued that the assumption that there is a purpose may be false, and if it is false, then there is nothing to be bothered about, and we should all just carry on living. As Albert Camus, the French Algerian philosopher and journalist, who was awarded the Nobel Prize for Literature, explained “You will never live if you are looking for the meaning of life”. Camus’ point is not ontological, it doesn’t probe into the nature of reality, and his concern seems to be an existential one, meaning that the important thing is how life works for you, the life of individual; regardless of any truth behind existence. So in light of this we must ask: is it reasonable to believe we have a purpose?

To answer this, take the following points into consideration:

You are probably reading this in your bedroom sitting on your chair, and you are definitely wearing some clothes. So I ask you a question: for what purpose? Why are you wearing the clothes and what purpose does the chair fulfill? Since these are rhetorical questions you don't have to answer, because we all know the answer. The chair's purpose is to allow us to sit down by supporting our weight, and our clothes fulfill the purpose of keeping us warm, hiding our nakedness and making us look good! Now from your bedroom let me transport you to a forest somewhere in the world, now this forest obviously has trees and on a particular tree there is a moth. This moth is on this tree drinking its sap, underneath that moth there is another moth and its role is somewhat bizarre, it drinks the excrement of the first moth. This is because the first moth almost instantaneously removes its waste while drinking the sap. You are probably thinking where I am going with this, well; firstly let us discuss what the purpose of the second moth is. Its purpose is to clean up the excrement of the first moth in order to prevent it trickling down the tree so that ants, and other insects, would not be encouraged to travel up the trail and in consequence eat the first moth. So in simple terms the second moth is the first moth's insurance policy!

Now take this into consideration, you probably didn't know anything about this moth three minutes ago, in fact if moth genocide were to occur, you wouldn't really care – well most of you anyway. However, we attribute purpose to such an insignificant creature, and coming back to our clothes and the chair, which are inanimate objects with no emotional and mental faculties, we attribute purpose to these too! Still, we do not attribute purpose to our own existence? Is this not absurd?

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