

In Memoriam W.A.Y.

OBIIT MMVI

What is the purpose of life?

Before you can answer this question, you have to determine what you really know. This involves epistemology, the study of the nature of human knowledge. I have discovered that much of what I was taught in school or read in books and magazines was half-true or total nonsense. So what is real?

The French philosopher Descartes proposed in the 17th century that the only thing you really know is that you are thinking, so you must exist. Every perception of the world is subject to distortion or illusion, but at the very least you are sure that you exist.

Twentieth century philosophers such as Wittgenstein have added that language can hardly be used to discuss such issues meaningfully (though ironically he uses plenty of language to try to explain this). Some modern philosophers fall into the sinkhole of solipsism, which asserts that nothing beyond the self is knowable.

I consider this a rational but sterile endpoint. If philosophy is the “love of wisdom,” and wisdom is knowing what is good and true, then solipsism is the opposite of philosophy. It is a kind of misosophy: “hatred of wisdom.”

Pulling ourselves out of the sinkhole formed by modern solipsism, we can look anew at the purpose of life. If atheistic, Darwinian thinking is correct, then we are simply biological entities in competition to survive and reproduce. We should not even consider larger questions beyond survival. Humans should be programmed as survival machines, working only on a physical level.

But humans *do* think of issues beyond the physical plane. If we consider for a moment that a metaphysical plane for thinking and being is possible, the question of life’s purpose becomes meaningful again.

The Danish philosopher Kierkegaard spoke of this questioning as the “leap of faith,” or the “movement of faith.” Kierkegaard understood that by its nature, faith had to be something above pure reason. But as we saw before, knowing anything beyond one’s own existence is a leap. So is the movement of faith unreasonable?

All over the world throughout the millennia, people have tried to answer metaphysical questions. These attempts can be called mythology, philosophy, or religion.

All religions have to deal with morality, suffering, and afterlife. None of these issues should even be considered in a strictly Darwinian, materialistic world.

Morality is concerned with questions of right and wrong. In the barest terms, the issue is “How should you behave toward your neighbor?” Here are the formulations of this question in different world philosophies and religions:

The Greek philosopher Socrates stated, “What stirs your anger when done to you by others, that do not do to others.”

The Stoic philosopher Epictetus said, “What you would avoid suffering yourself, seek not to impose on others.”

Confucianism: “Do not do to others what you would not have them to do to you.” Also, “What you do not wish upon yourself, extend not to others.”

Hinduism: “Do not unto others which would cause you pain if done to you.”

Buddhism: “Hurt not others in ways that you yourself would find hurtful.”

Zoroastrianism: “Whatever is disagreeable to yourself do not do unto others.”

Judaism: “What thou thyself hatest do to no man.”

Jewish Rabbi Hillel taught, “What is hateful to you, do not do to your neighbor.”

Islam: “Hurt no one so that no one may hurt you.”

Jesus taught, “Do unto others as you would have others do unto you.” This is a positive inversion of the normal formula, one I find compelling.

The German philosopher Kant tried to formulate a purely rational moral system without religion. His “categorical imperative” states, “Act only in accordance with that maxim through which you can at the same time will that it become a universal law.” This is just a reformulation of “Do unto others as you would have others do unto you” two thousand years late.

The most common cause for doubt in an omnipotent creator is suffering in the world. The strict Darwinist should wonder what the fuss is about. According to Darwinism, biological entities struggle to survive, perishing if unfit, and achieve success through reproduction. That’s the end of the story. Under Darwinism, humans should not bitterly ponder suffering; it is the necessary mechanism for weeding out weak individuals and species.

But people instinctively want to understand the nature of their condition in metaphysical terms, and that includes their suffering.

Hinduism is based on the idea that the world contains suffering, brought on by misdeeds in one’s prior lives. Transcending this world and its suffering leads to the state of salvation. Enlightenment is required for liberation from a cycle of birth, death and rebirth in a world of hardship.

The Buddha noted that all life is suffering. This suffering is the result of desire, craving and grasping. Buddhism's answer to suffering is to remove all desire of the material world: abandonment and nonattachment. Extinguishing all desire leads to blissful Nirvana.

Judaism finds suffering in punishment by an angry God. The punishment is either for sin or disobedience, or it is a test of the believer's commitment to God. The Book of Job documents God permitting the torture of Job by Satan.

Christianity makes a critical leap. It proposes that the Creator took on human form to undergo the worst physical and emotional suffering imaginable in the form of betrayal, scourging and crucifixion. This belief system encompasses a Creator who empathizes with the suffering of humans. Jesus is the answer to Job.

A group of Eastern Christian thinkers called the Cappadocians, writing in the fourth century, understood what this meant for Christianity.

Gregory of Nazianzus wrote of mankind, "And having been first chastened by many means...by plagues, by waters, by fires, by wars...at last he needed a stronger remedy, for his diseases were growing worse." The remedy is Jesus; Gregory wrote of Jesus, "He was sent, but as man, for He was of a twofold Nature; for He was wearied, and hungered, and was thirsty, and was in agony, and shed tears according to the nature of a corporeal being." In another passage, Gregory mused, "He teacheth, now on a mountain.... And perhaps He goes to sleep, in order that He may bless sleep also; perhaps He is tired that He may hallow weariness also; perhaps He weeps that He may make tears blessed."

Basil of Caesarea observed that the world is "the school for rational souls to exercise themselves, the training ground for them to learn to know God."

Another way to understand suffering is to consider the way humans tell stories. Good stories involve difficult quests or challenges to overcome. Whether we look at Homer's ancient *Odyssey* or Tolkien's modern *Lord of the Rings*, the protagonists' ordeals are the heart of the story. If Homer allowed Odysseus to return home happily to Ithaca after four paragraphs, the story would not have been handed down for three thousand years. If Tolkien allowed Frodo to destroy the One Ring by dropping it into his fireplace at home, the story would not have sold fifty million copies over six decades. Tolkien described the writer of a tale as the sub-creator; he considered story-telling an act of creation akin to the original creation of the world. If story-telling is an appropriate metaphor for human life, then the suffering of our favorite fictional characters is analogous to the suffering in our own lives.

Humans at all times and places worldwide have wondered about life after the death of the body. Atheists such as Sigmund Freud considered this a reflection of childish wish fulfillment. How are we to judge Freud's view? Much of his psychiatric thinking has been discredited, abandoned even by his early followers. Freud's method involved analyzing his own neuroses and then projecting them onto the entire human race. Freud hated his religious Orthodox Jewish father, urinating in his father's bedroom at age seven. I think Freud is an unlikely candidate for representing all of humanity. The meaning of the word "psychology" is the study of the soul. But Freud did everything in his power to banish an eternal soul from consideration.

Psychologist Carl Jung towers over Freud in his understanding of the metaphysical aspects of human life. Jung introduced the concept of synchronicity, which he defined as “the *meaningful coincidence* of two or more events, where something other than the probability of chance is involved.” This is the connection in time of related events that cannot be reasonably explained by random physical reality. Jung pioneered the study of psychological types: introversion and extraversion, thinking versus feeling, sensing versus intuiting. Jung explored universal human characteristics across time and culture, labeling this idea the collective unconscious. Jung stated that beyond each individual’s personal consciousness, “there exists a second psychic system of a collective, universal, and impersonal nature” which consists of pre-existent forms, or archetypes.

The idea that the human being has a lasting soul is nearly universal. From Socrates, to Greek mythology, Norse mythology, Hinduism, Buddhism, Judaism, Islam and Christianity, the concept of a metaphysical soul residing in the physical body is ubiquitous. Socrates posited a cycle of reincarnation for immortal souls, subject to earthly virtues. Greek mythology fashioned Hades for its afterlife, while the Scandinavians awaited Valhalla. Hindus seek enlightenment after multiple lives, while Buddhists attain Nirvana. Jews anticipate resurrection or the Garden of Eden, while Muslims hope for the garden of Paradise. Christians look forward to eternal life in Heaven. If the soul continues to exist after the death of the physical body, then life on earth takes on a different significance. A person’s finite existence on earth dwindles in importance compared to the eternal life of his soul. Any suffering, pain, or trauma experienced in bodily life diminishes to nothing measured against infinity. The worst earthly suffering becomes as insignificant as a child crying momentarily over a skinned knee.

If the Cappadocians are correct that life on earth is a school for rational souls, then we are being prepared by the Creator for the eternal afterlife.

Addressing the issues of morality, suffering and afterlife provides the key to understanding of the purpose of life. That purpose is to find the Creator and to love your neighbor.

As Kierkegaard would say, this conclusion involves a movement of faith. No one can argue you into faith. My own movement of faith has led me to Christianity. I prefer Christianity’s answers to the universal issues of morality, suffering and afterlife. At critical moments I have experienced micro-revelations matching certain Gospel passages. For me, these synchronicities cannot be explained in a purely physical, mechanistic world. So I believe in Jesus Christ.

Life on earth is the chrysalis from which we emerge into eternity.

Your movement of faith must be unique. It is *your* story. I hope to see you after this world’s end.

Regards,
Paul