

Philosophy SLAM HIGH SCHOOL

NATIONAL HIGH SCHOOL 3RD PLACE

Akash Dagur, New York

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We are insignificant and have no higher purpose. It is arrogant to think otherwise. We live on a pale blue dot. Everything we do takes place on our little planet, in our own little solar system, drifting through our own little galaxy, among an innumerable amount of galaxies in our expansive universe. Yet, some believe that we have a vital role or purpose without which our lives, or the universe in which we reside, would have no meaning. There is more to the universe, the galaxy, and the world, than us. We exist through happenstance. There is no purpose in being here; we simply are. I am able to discuss this today because of an infinite number of occurrences which happened in the favor of my potential self. The successful chain of occurrences led to my being, nothing more.

This may be a bleak outlook on life. For that reason, some may question if life has no meaning. Why do we, and why did our predecessors, continue to live? It would be for the progression of society. One need not have a higher purpose or meaning to one's life in order to be an active member of society, contributing to it. Simply out of benevolent human nature, we replace the childish want of having a meaning in our lives, and create our own sense of fulfillment.

We happened by chance. In our purportedly infinite universe, which at the very least is inconceivably immense, it is likely that we are not the only beings created at the hand of luck. It is only logical to assume so. In our entire universe, life only occurred on our planet, in our tiny solar system? How pathetically closed-minded to assume that we alone have a purpose.

The general populace likes to think that life has meaning, because in most religions, one's meaning and role in life attributes to one's role in the afterlife. People often hide behind religion because they are afraid that there is no afterlife, and simply cannot come to terms that death is merely a permanent state of unconsciousness. Out of desperation, they search for meaning, in hopes that their life's actions will lead to a lasting afterlife when, in actuality, they are searching for meaning in a random series of events which result in nothingness.

If life did have a meaning, then each and every one of us has a purpose. If this is the case, then what is the purpose of those who suffer? What is the purpose of short lived lives? What is the purpose of suicides? What is the purpose of those who die from starvation? What higher

purpose do any of them serve? What sort of reprehensible meaning of life do these people fulfill? Those who believe in a higher purpose selfishly do not consider these people. It is completely immoral to insist that life has meaning, for it would imply that there is a higher, unjust purpose to the aforementioned tragedies. Our lives have no meaning. We long for one so as to fill the void created by the truth that everything we experience is random and without purpose. By believing life has a greater meaning, one not only ignores the light of truth, but deepens the cave in which they already reside.

NATIONAL HIGH SCHOOL 2ND PLACE

Nicole Park, Oklahoma

There is a distinct difference between existence and life. The meaning of existence is when one passively lets one's time on earth pass by. Existence is simply being on the earth. This effectively reduces one to merely being born to die. In contrast, the meaning of life—one's essence—is the process by which one perceives one's own existence, realizes the need for a purpose and subsequently creates a purpose, and makes efforts to achieve that purpose.

The first stage in developing essence is perceiving existence. One has to understand that there is nothing unique in any respect about one's existence; one is born for no reason and dies for no reason. At this stage one must perceive that one is simply a mass with anatomical and physiological properties of a human. Through these perceptions, one may feel anxiety—fear of being in the world, dread—dejection at meaninglessness of existence, and/or fear of death—regret because the build-up to death consisted of nothing. Roquentin of Sartre's *Nausea* portrays this stage as he is hor-



PHOTO BY CLAYTON FRASER FOR HISTORIC AMERICAN BUILDING SURVEY

HIGH SCHOOL 2ND PLACE (CONTINUED)

rified at his own existence and comes to describe the anxiety and dread with which he records his feelings in his diary as “nausea.”

The second stage involves purpose. One must feel the need to develop a purpose to combat any anxiety, dread, and the fear of death elicited by the aridity of one’s existence. Such is portrayed in Dostoevsky’s *Notes from the Underground* where the Underground Man realizes that he must counter the dread he feels from an existence bombarded by the customs of society. One must then create a purpose, drawing from personal experiences that originated from external circumstances and making convictions about how to integrate those experiences. The Underground Man draws from his dreadful experiences and resorts to isolation from the cause of his dread by physically alienating himself from society.

The last stage is devoting one’s life to one’s purpose. Just as one had to exercise free will of thought in the first two stages, one must exercise free will of action in this last stage by

making one’s own decisions and choices oriented to achieve one’s purpose and then acting on them. By utilizing freedom in this way, one can personally direct all aspects of one’s life. This resistance against passive acceptance of solely external, determinative forces allows one to ascribe meaning to life, thus creating one’s essence. Stephen Daedalus of Joyce’s *Portrait of an Artist as a Young Man* portrays this last stage as he makes choices and decisions that will allow him to become a priest of art.

By embracing the three stages of the meaning of life, like Camus’s Sisyphus one is capable of transcending mere existence and living fully. As Sartre said, “At first [Man] is nothing. Only afterward will he be something, and he himself will have made what he will be.” At first, one perceives the nothingness of one’s existence, and only through developing and striving toward a purpose out of his own freedom of thought and action will one be able to carve out an essence from one’s existence.

INTERNATIONAL AWARD WINNER

Prishni Seyone, Ontario, Canada

What is life? Biologically, life can easily be described as the ability of grow, reproduce, respond to stimuli, and metabolize nutrients. However, philosophically, the word “life” has a much deeper and complex meaning. For centuries, philosophers have questioned the true meaning of life, and yet there still seems to be no definite conclusion. Many say we live to seek wisdom and knowledge, however, others argue that we continue to live in order to ensure good and right. In my opinion, we live for happiness, to love, feel, and enjoy. I see happiness as the ultimate driving force for life, as all our choices are directly related to the consequences’ effect on our overall happiness.

Many events in our lives involve a series of useless actions, but these actions are performed for the desire of happiness. Imagine it was your friend’s birthday, after deep consideration you found the perfect gift for him or her, and can’t wait for the upcoming birthday party. However, wrapping the gift would be quite difficult, and may be time consuming. Would you still wrap the gift? Most likely, yes. Although it seems more convenient to simply give individuals’ gifts unwrapped, we take the time to wrap the gifts in order to watch them excitedly tear off the wrapping paper whilst wondering what’s inside. This feeling makes us feel happier, making all the effort worthwhile.

Is a life without happiness worth living? In many cases, happiness exceeds the need to survive. People, who lack

hope of happiness, often look to suicide as a cure, rather than living in a state of depression. In these cases, suicide becomes an action of severity, a result of true unhappiness. This action proves that although food, water, and nutrition are vital for biological survival, true survival involves much more. Humans must be content with the ongoing lives. We must convince ourselves, that even through the struggles, we mustn’t give up, as there is always hope of happiness.

The famous philosopher, Socrates, once said, “Not life, but good life, is to be chiefly valued.” This message directly relates to my theory that happiness is the driving force of life. Socrates believed that it is not survival that makes life valuable, but rather the happiness within your own survival. You should be satisfied with the life you are living, and never regret your actions. Life will go on, but you must be happy with the way it’s going. Then only, will you have true happiness. True happiness is the ultimate motivation to an important, meaningful, and significant life. There is no key to happiness, it must be found from within. Always remember to follow your dreams, and not others. Instead of dreading about the past, be happy about the present. Never forget,

Life is not measured by the number of breaths you take, but by the number of moments that take your breath away. (Maya Angelou)



MOST PHILOSOPHICAL STUDENT IN AMERICA

WINNER OF THE JAMES W. BUCHAN AWARD FOR WRITING EXCELLENCE

Marianna Zhang, New York

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We are a lonely race. The yawning cosmos is terrifyingly vast compared to our pale blue dot. Civilizations rise and collapse, life is born from stardust and turns back into stardust . . . all is meaningless against the indifferent backdrop of time. What is the value of life, that unhappy and futile struggle? We constantly strive to fulfill some insatiable desire for a fleeting spark of contentment before we set off again, living a tragically unfulfilled life. We struggle and we die, mere trifles compared to the infinite universe. “All is vanity and a chasing after wind,” proclaims Ecclesiastes. “Hope made a fool of him until he danced into the wind!” Schopenhauer laments. “Why must Sisyphus persist?” cries a reader of Camus.

The very absurdity of our short lives forces us to confront our mortality and create our own set of values. Death is brushed off easily in our society. As Heidegger would put it, “People die” has turned into the assumption that nobody dies. The very presence of death is hidden, forcing people to conform to societal morality. This constant self-objectification and bad faith viciously perpetuates stereotypic values in society. It is only when an individual faces the readiness-to-hand of their own death that they are able to escape these values and forlornly act as a being-for-itself. But how is one to live without societal morality? “God is dead!” Nietzsche’s

madman proclaims. Meanwhile, Sais lifts the dreaded veil, revealing a terrible, unblinking, and meaningless void. We have left conventional morality and cast ourselves adrift in this infinite sea. How can a lonely soul find their way in the cold indifferent universe without any stars to guide him? He creates his own stars, of course. He does not leap overboard and drown himself in the harsh sea. He does not wait calmly for God to deliver him back to land. No, he continues to struggle and fight and live. He lives for possibilities. He draws upon everything he has ever experienced. Every wisp of memory, every surge of passion, every caress of love. In the darkest of nights, he forges his own individual set of values, something enduring that he can live by. He faces death, but boldly faces the challenges of life anyway. He emerges from the twilight intact, having created meaning, radiant stars as fluid as the sea. He is not lost. He sails on, resolutely soaring through the relentless waves. Newborn stars constantly rise from the horizon until he finally slips away, fading into stardust. It is this colossal and passionate struggle that we hurl into the yawning abyss that gives our existence significance. We are responsible for creating our own meaning in this terrifyingly vast and empty universe. As Stanley Kubrick declares, “However vast the darkness, we must supply our own light.”



Cogito ergo sum rectam (I Think Therefore I am Right):

A Student Misconception about Philosophy

Tim Fisher

When Susan walks into a biology classroom she knows that she will learn about the systems of the body, animal life, microorganism and the like. When Thomas walks into a history classroom he knows he will learn some dates and will have to understand the causes of events in the past. When Arjun walks into an English classroom he expects to read books, analyze poems and write.

All this is familiar and predictable for the high school student.

But if Susan, Thomas or Arjun walked into a philosophy class for the first time they probably will not know what to expect.

At least this is my experience teaching high school in South Carolina.

Of course, this can be exciting for a teacher—clean slates are rare.

But, as it turns out, this clean slate is actually not so clean; while students may not know exactly what to expect in a philosophy classroom, *they know just enough to have already formed strong misconceptions.*¹

I recently conducted a brief survey of sophomore, junior and senior students. I spoke both with students who have never studied philosophy, and with those who have taken my philosophy class. Here are some responses students expressed:

Anything is right in philosophy. (Male, 10th grade student)

I don’t think anyone is “wrong” in philosophy because opinions aren’t right or wrong, they’re simply what you believe. (Female, 11th grade student)

There is no way to prove if you are right or wrong in philosophy. (Male, 11th grade student)