
Why People Search Meaning In Life

One professor said that “Existence is too difficult without a reason.”.

Let me be honest with you, I will not try to solve the biggest life questions in these several pages.

Who am I, to talk about something that goes beyond my wisdom as a 20 years old student. Adding to that, I can't even brag about my impressive life story, because I don't have one. But if I would have one, it would at least help me to convince that my words have some weight. That's how people put weight on their words, right? You have to escape from crocodiles jaws in Africa, survive a plane crash, become a millionaire or suddenly start Bhikkhu practises in order to make people listen attentively. So what is the topic I want to talk about? I'm deeply interested in the reasons behind people's search for the meaning of life. As I said before, I will not solve the never ending philosophical discussion, but rather try to look at the reasons why we - human beings, are consciously looking for purpose in this world.

Eat, sleep and repeat

Let's take the human being as the outcome of evolution. The main motivators for survival are hunger, fear of predators which results in run or fight mechanisms, sleep for rest and multiply to leave offsprings and extend genes. But what's the evolutionary explanation for our cognitive capabilities which sometimes may lead to overthinking or the philosophical mind that brings up fundamental questions. Why should human beings even think about something like the purpose of life? What if people would stop doing things that don't have advantages for survival? Is the thinking about our existence what makes us different from animals? Besides, what is the explanation for altruism? There is still an ongoing discussion whether the reputation management or inclusive fitness - focusing on the gene transmission, could be the reason for altruism. But both motives look weak for me when thinking about altruistic actions without rewarding reputation incentives or helping those who are not our friends or family but rather an enemy. The book “Social psychology” suggests the motives for altruism as follows: social reward, personal distress (when in order to avoid feeling bad you help those in need) and empathic concerns. But let's take an example and put these theories into practise. I will ask you to use imagination again, now the background is warzones, where soldiers helps their enemies. Doesn't sound like a smart idea, but the story of Private Desmond Doss showed to the world that sticking to your beliefs can be stronger than the fear of death. “Facing heavy machine gun and artillery fire, Doss repeatedly ran alone into the kill zone, carrying wounded soldiers to the edge of the cliff and single handedly lowering them down to safety. Each time he saved a man's life, Doss prayed out loud, “Lord, please help me get one more.” By the end of the night he had rescued an estimated 75 men.” (Mike Miller, 2017). This man's story attracted the newspapers, the media and even hollywood. The soldier that never wanted to touch the gun still voluntarily went to the army to serve his country. He stucked to his values and saved lives, non discriminating if they s were a friend or a soldier fighting against his country. To hold on to these beliefs in the most extreme situations requires strong self-control and determination and I think a feeling of purpose makes it possible.

A couch potato

Can we live without thinking about deeper questions? Yes, no doubts! Actually our society stimulates us to live hedonistic and materialistic lives. The overwhelming mass of youtube videos, Netflix series, TV shows or scrolling through social media makes it easier to kill time in front of the screen. Without all these activities young people find themselves dying from boredom because they don't know what to do with the free time. We can see that also in older adults, even if they more frequently spend their free time working extra hours or taking care of the family, household tasks, thus leaving no space for self-conscious thoughts about the meaning of existence. Although seeking for happiness and satisfaction is one of the main drives in humans life, like one of the Aristotle's quotes says: "Happiness is the meaning and the purpose of life, the whole aim and end of human existence." Does that make us think about the purpose of our existence? Well, the philosophers reading ancient literature till they have grey hair and tired eyes don't look like the ones who found the secret of happiness in life.

Nonetheless the cross-sectional study conducted by Bronk, Hill, Lapsley & others, showed that indeed there is a positive association between having identified purpose in life and satisfaction during adolescence and adulthood. However what their study also found that searching for purpose in life is associated with greater life satisfaction in adolescence and emerging adulthood, but not in adults. This might be because one of the main adolescence features is identity search, therefore personal purpose is an important component in development before becoming an adult. Erik Erikson in his book "Identity and the life cycle" claimed that for healthy personality growth the active search for purpose is even necessary. It might be the case that if you leave a couch potato without any unnecessary distractions, it will become a conscious potato that reasons 'what would I do if there would be no couch?'

Me, myself and I?

Does this existential problem just appear in modern countries, where egocentrism is all around us? In the lecture "Depression in different cultures" philosopher Pius Mosima tried to explain the african worldview stating the moto "I am because you are, since you are, therefore I am.". He also noticed that in african languages there is no word for depression and even if the person feels somehow ill, the community will help to recover. In other words, when there is strong connections with community and society, there is no place for egocentric focus on just the own good. Maybe our generation is lost in the competition about who is the best. Already from a young age we are placed in a certain environment, with certain rules and always someone to tell us what to do - parents, grandparents, teachers, coaches, tutors, priests - anyone who can, will tell you how to live, what to be ... Later we start to work - here again: we are playing by the rules of the employer. Like sheeps we can't find green grass by ourselves and would starve in the desert without a shepherd. On the day when we decide that we no longer want to play by fixed rules, we come to realisation that what we do may not be what we want to do. The psychiatrist and founder of the third school of Vienna, Viktor Frankl also noticed that in the society of first world countries there is no instincts or traditions that would tell what to do when there is enough of everything to satisfy the basic needs. When young souls are lost, even don't know what to wish for, then does what others do (conformism) or what others wish him to do (totalitarianism). What I also see is the huge influence of globalisation and mixture of cultures on people's identities. When you belong to a group, you have responsibilities and that gives you a purpose. Nowadays our thinking is more self-concentrated and the paradox appears - as more open-minded we tend to see ourselves, our minds actually are around our own good.

The symbols in your blood

Humans are really interesting creatures. We know our history of thousands years and now as never before we have technology, evolved medicine and it seems that most of what's possible to imagine is already created. Nevertheless our social and political thinking is pretty much the same. We still have wars, kings or government, we create families and communities. And spiritually - we have religions that some of them doesn't change over the years. It's fascinating how we come up with the same ideas with people in different part of the world? Let's say we never spoke with a person, we even speak a different language and live in totally different environments, read different books and watch different ted talks. Now just imagine, how is it possible to have the same symbols in the dreams as the alchemists were investigating thousands years before? It seems like independently from the time and place humans share something more than just the genes or history. One of the most popular theories of Sigmund Freud is the unconscious in the personal nature, where the id, superego and ego share the responsibility for some behaviors that cannot be explained by conscious decisions to act in a certain way. And Carl Jung goes even further: he introduces the theory of collective unconsciousness, the part of unconsciousness that is not individual but rather universal. The main evidence for that was dream analysis of his patients. For some, this findings may look foolish, but Jung claims that dreams are the only doors to the unconscious world. He found that in some dreams people see the repeated symbols that were existing long time ago. The patients never read ancient literature neither had an interest in old symbols, so how could they actually dream about it? Jordan Peterson also reasons that if our brains stores the ancestors memory that may also influence our building blocks for values systems. If psyche has history and all human beings share the same beginning, that could answer why we still deal with the same main questions about life meaning. Maybe the drive to seek for the purpose is written in our DNA.

Listen to your heart - they say

What they really want to say is - listen to your feelings. We have emotions for a reason and those are signals for us to understand the external and internal world. A lot of inner dialogues causes emotions, for example release, fear, happiness, uncertainty and so on. Frankl in the book "Man's search for meaning" highlights young man's suffering from inner emptiness - existential vacuum. He says that inner conflicts are not always a pathological phenomenon, they can even be achievements if they grow out of existential frustration. How can psychological and emotional suffering be an achievement? Perhaps it can woke up from the state of latency, from the couch potato phase. It motivates to move forward. When the uncomfotability from the inner tension appears, I believe, there is a bigger chance that a man will improve in his development, form new skills and mature in cognitive reasoning. To illustrate continuing tension Frankl (1992, p. 110) uses the metaphor of polar field: "where one pole is represented by meaning that is to be fulfilled and the other pole by the man who has to fulfill it.". While I feel that harmony is important for mental health I somewhat agree that the tensionless state might lead to the inactivity. For this reason striving and struggling for desired goals, a freely chosen task can temporarily cause the emotional disturbance but in the end it will pay off. In contrast Steger, Kashdan, Sullivan & Lorentz in their research introduced theories for the search of meaning that aren't that positive such as symptomatic of dysfunction. "Baumeister (1991) and Klinger (1998) have suggested that the search for meaning only occurs among individuals whose needs have been frustrated." However their own study showed the correlation between tendency to search

for meaning and some personality traits such as openness, tender mindedness, absorption, drive, artistic and investigative interests, also propensity to ruminate over past experiences. These findings opens another discussion whether the personality characteristics plays a crucial role why some people search for meaning and others don't.

So can we just stop overthink and start to think?

Having a purpose would explain some really altruistic not advantageous actions of people. Having a meaning makes you more satisfied with the life. Self search and explorative part of the life leads to the search of meaning. development of life main schemas includes the persons place in the world. Collective consciousness tells something about the roots that we cant explain and maybe humans have inborn instinct for searching his reason of existence.

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