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The Importance of Depth Perception: Creating Meaning with Our Own Two Hands

Mi Thuta

One's meaning is something everyone must think about in their life. *Why am I here on this Earth? What legacy will I leave behind after I die?* One's meaning leads their life and transcends their life. This essay will explore why humans search for meaning in their lives, and the factors that motivate one to search for and refine genuine meaning.

The following definitions will be used in this essay to discuss the meaning of life: faith is defined by Tillich in *Dynamics of Faith* as “the state of being ultimately concerned” with the infinite which “demands the total surrender of [one] who accepts this claim, and [promises] total fulfillment even if all other claims have to be subjected to or rejected in its name” whereas meaning is the result of fulfillment of faith (*Dynamics* 1-2); depth, as defined in Tillich's sermon, “The Depth of Existence,” is “a symbol for a spiritual quality” or profoundness in one's life, whereas the surface is “that side of things which first appears to us” or what seems to be but is not (“Depth” 1); existential reason is reason “grasped an ultimate concern ... driven beyond the limits of its finitude” that grants humans the awareness of potential infinity (Tillich, *Dynamics* 88); and lastly, existential doubt is “the doubt which accompanies every risk” and the “[awareness] of the element of insecurity in every existential truth” (Tillich, *Dynamics* 23).

The Absurdity of Life

As humans, we instinctively search for meaning in our lives because of our unique capability of self-reflection. We are able to step back and look at ourselves from outside ourselves, making us aware of our own mortality and impermanence. Nagel's essay “The Absurd” explains this phenomenon, citing humans' ability to “engage in transcendent awareness” (“The Absurd” 726) – which Tillich states is an aspect of existential reason – to make our lives absurd. Absurdity is based on the discrepancy between expectations and reality: the absurdity of life comes from an individual stepping outside of themselves and realizing that everything in life that they take with utter seriousness – their goals and aspirations, their use of rationality and logic, systems within society – are all completely arbitrary, meaningless, or shallow (Nagel, “The Absurd” 718). Taken far enough, this preoccupation with the surface can be idolatrous – making the finite one's ultimate concern (Tillich, *Dynamics* 20) – which brings no true fulfillment, only despair. Moreover, everything one does will mean nothing in a million years' time, just as the events of one million years ago mean nothing now (Nagel, “The Absurd” 716). In short, the Earth is a giant palimpsest. After this realization, the absurdity comes from the individual returning to the mundanity of their lives with this knowledge of the meaninglessness of it all (Nagel, “The Absurd” 719).

Deeper probing shows they cannot answer every question about their meaning that arises from this reflection, as doing so would cause their answers and questions to circle back to one another, or otherwise be completely unanswerable (Nagel, “The Absurd” 717). This may bring forth distress

about this meaninglessness, as humans intrinsically seek control and logic in their lives, and so one might attempt to remove this absurdity by changing their lives: changing their goals, their habits, or removing themselves from reality (Nagel, “The Absurd” 718).

However, Nagel argues that this realization of life’s absurdity should not be the gateway to nihilism. If nothing matters, “then what reason can we have to resent or escape it” (“The Absurd” 727) in the first place? “It need not be a matter of agony unless we make it so ... such dramatics ... betray a failure to appreciate the cosmic unimportance of the situation” (Nagel, “The Absurd” 727). If everything we do does not matter, the fact that nothing matters also does not matter. The world may be absurd, but carve out a meaning for yourself anyway. As a result, we seek meaning in our lives and attempt to fulfill it because we are aware that fundamentally life is absurd. Meaning is simply a part of human nature, as we want to believe that, regardless of the fleeting character of our lives, it was still worth it. In a million years, our relationships, aspirations, happiness, distress, victories, and fears will have vanished off the planet, but while we are still on this planet it matters to us. We can take things seriously, but our meaning is made more important by the fact that it ultimately does not matter to anyone else except us, and that we are so uniquely grasped by an infinite that lies beyond ourselves.

The Quest for Meaning

Meaning is something a person creates for themselves, rather than something given to someone or something discovered. Tillich argues that the human capability for existential doubt and reason makes us capable of self-reflection and to question ourselves. He says that our ultimate concern is the act of being grasped by the infinite (Tillich, *Dynamics* 88): recognizing that there is something beyond the superficial lull of everyday life; rather, humans are aware of this and seek truth below the surface into the depths (Tillich, “Depth” 1). In “The Depth of Existence,” Tillich argues that the plunge into the depths requires removal of prejudice and one’s willingness to seek truth. He uses the example of a student and an uneducated mechanic. The student may initially seek meaning, hence why he studies great philosophers, essayists, and leaders. However, he never attempts to enter the depths himself. Instead, he “[dwells] on the surface among petrified bodies,” preoccupied and content with others’ truths, and therefore his spiritual life remains ever shallow (Tillich, “Depth” 2). He has the answers but not the depth.

In contrast, the worker one day questioning the meaning of his life while performing a menial task not only consciously seeks out meaning but attempts to create meaning for himself in the context of his own life and values, even if he may not have the answers (Tillich, “Depth” 2). Additionally, two people can live through the same event but come out of the other side having obtained completely different meanings. For example, if both individuals were diagnosed with a terminal illness, one might use it to forge a deeper relationship with God and their religion, whereas the other may find a different meaning – such as justice or love – with more purposeful connection with secular symbols. Hence, no matter one’s circumstances, one has the intrinsic capability to create meaning. It only requires the will to do so.

What walks on four legs in the morning...

Experience is an important factor that motivates us to search for true meaning in our lives, as well as distinguish between disingenuous meaning and real concern. Firstly, it is important to distinguish between wisdom and knowledge: wisdom guides us through life and comes to us from experience; in contrast, knowledge is true beliefs involving methodological doubt and reason – able to be proven or

disproven using facts, conclusions, and evidence (Tillich, *Dynamics* 39-40) – that we acquire throughout our lives by being taught. Montaigne in his essay “On Experience” argues that experience is necessary for wisdom in our lives because it allows us to see the greater world rather than our own limited worldview, and that it reveals to us how one knows oneself and one’s limitations. He argues that “it needs some degree of knowledge to observe that one does not know; and one has to push at a door before realizing it is closed to one” and that “assertion and dogmatism are positive signs of stupidity” (Montaigne 356).

In these quotes, he says that self-satisfaction and decisiveness reveal one’s ignorance and lack of wisdom – one believes they know all there is to know, and experienced all they need to experience despite their smallness in the world – whereas a genuinely humble wise person would continue doubt and seek out knowledge, experiences, wisdom, and meaning. Continuously seeking out experience and continuously improving or doubting oneself allows one to probe deeper, reflect on one’s experiences, and see whether one’s concerns are meaningful at all.

... Two legs in the afternoon...

Moreover, Tillich in “The Depth of Existence” believes that experience in the form of suffering leads to us reaching the depths, which he calls God. He states that “the depth of suffering [is] the door, the only door, to the depth of truth” (“Depth” 4). This is because we are capable of ignoring the depth in our daily lives due to our constant motion: we do not seek to probe further and readily accept the superficial appearance of the world. He says that “it is only when the picture that we have of ourselves breaks down completely ... when an earthquake shakes and disrupts the surface of our self-knowledge” (Tillich, “Depth” 2) that we cannot continue to maintain the status quo. Thus, we are forced to confront the terrifying unknown, enter the depths, and form a new surface to which we must continuously go deeper.

These ‘earthquakes’ of suffering come in many different forms, from personal suffering such as “self-scrutiny,” “internal or external catastrophes” (Tillich, “Depth” 3), or the pain of looking at one’s depth (Tillich, “Depth” 4), to suffering in the form of social upheavals and movements that impacts the collective (Tillich, “Depth” 3). As a result, deeper spiritual meaning can be formed from this unavoidable suffering as we go through life, revealing truths that should concern us infinitely (Tillich, “Depth” 4).

... And Three Legs In The Evening?

Death is another significant factor in the search for true meaning. Death and meaning are invariably linked, as death makes the quest for meaning more urgent. Human awareness of their own mortality means that an individual is aware that they have an estimated time limit for finding meaning in their lives. Knowing a person’s life can be snuffed out at any second means they want to have found fulfillment while they exist. Nagel in his essay “Death” demonstrates this by arguing that the death of a young person is more tragic than that of an elderly person (“Death” 79-80). A young person’s death is considered tragic because they had potential. They had only taken the first step, or the first few steps, or no steps at all, in discovering the meaning of their life. They never got the chance to fulfill their goals and aspirations or be satisfied with their meaning the same way an elderly person can. The older one gets, the more experiences one has under their belt, and therefore more time to have been uprooted, plunged into the depths, and reflect and doubt their ultimate concern and meaning. Thus, the elderly can die, content in knowing their ultimate concern was in fact genuine and not idolatrous, or at least having enough knowledge to recognize it as idolatrous faith. A young person does not have

the same privilege simply because they have existed for a shorter length of time. And their meaning, left undiscovered or unfulfilled, becomes tragic.

Therefore the concept of *memento mori* is so important: people in the Middle Ages were surrounded by death, and constantly created art as tangible reminders that vanity, pleasure, and suffering are ephemeral, and mortality is fleeting. Instead of bringing despair, *memento mori* encouraged people to find humility in living, cherish relationships and passions, recognize the futility of material wealth, and look beyond the surface to focus on the immortality of the soul – one’s true meaning and ultimate concern – oftentimes in the form of salvation from God. Moreover, *memento mori* emphasized that death is the great equalizer that comes for kings, scholars, and peasants alike. One’s social status did not matter, because true value comes from the infinite. A king may live in opulence, surrounded by a wealth of knowledge of philosophers and religious figures past. But he has the same knowledge of death as the humblest peasant, and the humblest peasant may find genuine meaning where the king failed to. The lessons taught by *memento mori* are still pertinent and necessary to us in our busy modern lives, where daily preoccupations such as jobs, school, and money distract us from finding true meaning and fulfillment despite the ever-present death that looms over us.

As a result, if humans were immortal, the same urgency would not apply to acquire meaning, and they may never reach the depths at all. The realization of the inevitability of death that shakes one’s very core would be absent. Thus, an immortal being would remain utterly preoccupied with surface level motions for their continuous immortal life. As stated prior, the main cause of being shaken and plunging the depths is suffering (Tillich, “Depth” 4). The awareness of death brings distress – especially if one makes a brush with death in sickness and injury so that human mortality is reinforced again in a tangible way – and one’s meaning is questioned. Of course, other experiences may involve suffering but not death. An immortal may go through severe bodily injury or psychological torment, and this may cause them to question the meaning of their lives. However, Tillich argues that genuine meaning and faith involves an act of courage, with an individual leaping for this ultimate concern without knowing if one would land safely on the other side. This leap is a leap towards the infinite plane, from an individual who is bound to the finite physical reality (Tillich, *Dynamics* 20). Thus, faith transcends life itself into the unknown, including death. If one is immortal, one can only remain in the material world with finite goals, incapable of even obtaining the possibility of ultimate fulfillment that is found in the infinite plane.

Conclusion

In conclusion, the human capability for existential reason and doubt allows us to self-reflect and search for deeper spiritual meaning in our lives instead of being solely preoccupied with shallow, finite things on the surface. Death and experience play significant roles in one’s search for meaning, as death brings urgency to the search whereas experience – especially in the form of suffering – forces us to confront our biases and assumptions and seek truths of the world found in the depths.

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