



My Angry Barista

Absurdity, Angst and Meaningfulness in Life

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"It's December. I can hear the trains."

The above words were part of a conversation with my friend and locally renowned barista as he attempted to express a growing sense of anger and angst at what he views as a seemingly pointless existence. There is subtext to what he is saying; he doesn't just hear the trains this December, he hears them *every* December. Pointless, wholesale, repetition from his perspective.

My friend is experiencing something many of us feel at some point in our lives, the alienated self: estrangement from the world and from himself. *"I'm having an existential meltdown,"* he adds. This meltdown includes questioning the foundations of his life and whether or not he has any purpose or significance. Some of his anger stems from the unacceptable understanding that someday he will simply cease to exist, unwept, and unsung. He concludes by asking a simple question that is surprisingly difficult to answer: *"What endures?"* We'll come back to this later.

Is this barista's life pointless? Perhaps. It all depends on your perspective. Some people believe that living a meaningful life requires having a purpose and being involved with others. Being purposeful requires connecting with and contributing to something bigger than yourself. Others believe in a reality that is simply, well, pointless. In the first reality we are actively engaged with the people we encounter; we possess significance and purpose for them through this interaction. In the second reality we remain cut off from the world and everything in it. Life is a hollow shell. Pointless. By living a shadow life, not only will no one remember a person after their death, no one will realize that person even exists while they are alive. If we argue that this life is pointless, does it follow that it is absurd?

“It is almost irresistible for humans to believe that we have some special relation to the universe, that human life is not just a more-or-less farcical outcome of a chain of accidents reaching back to the first three minutes, but that we are somehow built in from the beginning...It is hard to realize that this [i.e., life on Earth] is just a tiny part of an overwhelmingly hostile universe. It is even harder to realize that this present universe has evolved from an unspeakably unfamiliar early condition, and faces a future extinction of endless cold or intolerable heat. The more the universe seems comprehensible, the more it also seems pointless.”

Steven Weinberg, physicist

The First Three Minutes

ABSURDITY AND ANGST

Weinberg penned the above words while traveling 30,000 feet above the Earth, observing the dichotomy between our lush, benevolent planet below him and the infinite hostility and vastness of outer space above; the two separated by a thin, fragile layer of atmosphere. Classic absurdity.

Humans – on average – are egocentric creatures, believing that the Universe is made the way it is in order for us to exist. This viewpoint, identifying human beings as the most significant entity in the universe, is almost childlike in its simplicity and naivety. Given the incomprehensible scale of the Universe, the complexity of inconceivably large cosmic structures, and the reality that all this has existed for billions of years before our arrival, logic should dictate that the human race is insignificant and inconsequential. Does our hubris simply mask our fear that the Universe appears indifferent towards us? Of course it does. The angst created by the brevity of our individual (and perhaps collective) existence is no better underscored than by a line in T.S. Elliot’s poem, [The Waste Land](#): “I will show you fear in a handful of dust.” A handful of dust is all that remains of us in the end – a poetic yet depressing reality – a reality most of us fear.

A human life is like a match struck in the dark; it shines brightly for a moment, only to quickly fade away. For most of us, no one will remember our brilliant flash for more than a generation. The causal nature of our individual lives is lost in the chaos of deep time. Perhaps it is not the indifference of the universe but our own mortality that we fear. Nearby celestial bodies spin around us – all life on this planet dictated by astronomical cycles beyond our control. From birth we are trapped within a vast clockwork in which we are inconsequential: our birth, existence and death have no significance to the cyclical nature of the cosmos. The clock on the wall doesn’t measure time, it measures change and the cycles of our planet. We are, at a most basic level, forced to be solar-centric in our timekeeping. The cyclic nature of our Barista’s life is at once the source of his angst *and* of his comfort. [Cyclical patterns help ease the burden of the everyday](#) and the angst-ridden perception of his existence; an existence he often finds as harsh and absurd.

The philosopher [Thomas Nagel](#) sees absurdity as the conflict between how serious we believe our lives are and the possibility that everything in our lives means nothing. The reality is that absurdity is not caused by a human-versus-world conflict, it stems from conflicts within ourselves. What of our Barista friend – is he truly living an absurd life? “No,” he says, “*I think it’s absurd to say human existence is absurd.*” Absurdity, beauty, and yes even meaningfulness are subjective human constructs and therefore open to interpretation. Understanding these constructs requires a perspective based on experiences, beliefs and accumulated knowledge. My actions in a given scenario might appear absurd to you yet make perfect sense to me. We all view reality through a unique set of filters, thus creating a ‘world’ unique to ourselves, one that is vastly different from anyone else’s. In such a scenario, whose world is the actual ‘true’ world?

In a court of law you are required to ‘tell the truth, the whole truth and nothing but the truth’. Are we fundamentally capable of knowing the whole, absolute truth? If so, whose truth? At one time it was absolutely true that the Sun circled the Earth – until it didn’t. At another point in history, the author of the Declaration of Independence, who penned the words: “...that all men are created equal...,” was also a slave owner. In the 17th century, Ethiopian philosopher [Zera Yacob](#) wrote in his book, *Hatata*, that ‘all men are equal...’ almost a century before the Declaration of Independence was written. So yes, the question “Whose truth?” is relevant, as is “whose beauty” or “whose absurdity?” [William James](#) wrote, “Truth happens to an idea. It becomes true, is made true by events. The truth of an idea is not a stagnant property...”

Does the assertion that an idea is not a stagnant property apply to meaningfulness? One of [Nietzsche](#)’s core thoughts was that human beings make their own meaning out of life. Advances in genetic science indicate that humans, chimps and bonobo’s share [98.8% of DNA structure](#). This 1.2% difference combined with the expression or suppression of shared the DNA segments accounts for what makes humans, human. Humanity has leveraged these advantages to create and exploit genetic benefits for the enhancement of meaningfulness to our species. While most of us would agree with Nietzsche’s assessment, in modern times there remains an uncomfortable reality bordering on absurdity: for many people, being able to worry about meaningfulness is a luxury. A single parent of three children, working two jobs to support the family, has precious little time to worry about meaningfulness.

MEANINGFULNESS

The tripartite of meaningfulness, purpose, and significance is usually concerned with the individual and their relationship to their own life and umwelt – a term naturalized from German and has come to mean a personal environment that is meaningful and effective for a given species or individual. The benefits of purpose help bolster and overlap ideas of meaningfulness, pushing each into that golden quadrant of high importance and high satisfaction. A typical me-centric discussion begins with the question: “Is my life meaningful?” or, “What is my purpose?” or, “Is anything I do significant?” The best way to respond to these

questions is to simply ask: *to whom?* The impact of each element of the tripartite changes with scale. Like the character George Bailey in [It's A Wonderful Life](#), your life may possess significance, purpose and meaning for your family or your local community, but on a larger scale your actions are likely to be inconsequential. For a leader of a global corporation or nation, however, the significance of his/her life might be monumental in scope – positively or negatively.

While attending a party I overheard someone describe, in embarrassing detail, what they wanted from life. I did not linger to hear the rest of the conversation; it was clear from the colorful summary that this person was absolutely sure about what gave them happiness in life. Happiness, however, does not guarantee a meaningful life. It is not uncommon to listen to people describe surviving hardships as some of the most meaningful times of their lives. A common thread that runs through stories of people caught in natural or man-made disaster scenarios, is the very real risk to their own lives while helping others. Happiness is associated with selfish behavior, that is, people are happiest when they get what they want and life is easy. Meaningful lives get a sense of satisfaction – but not necessarily happiness – from giving to others, taking care of others.

Purpose seems to be a universal need for our species. Without it most people feel empty, simply floating through life.

Years ago I saved someone's life. Even though it is by any measure the morally right thing to do, we cannot foresee the consequences of such an act; cause-and-effect know no temporal boundaries. That person or someone they influence could do good or evil deeds in the future. If someone had knowledge of future events, would they still save a person? It is important to remember that life is more complex than that: the person could just as easily do both, or neither. See the [Trolley Problem](#) for further exposition.

Did saving a life make my life more meaningful? Yes, my life suddenly possessed an amplified level of purpose, if only for a moment. The survivor could ask the same question regarding the meaningfulness of their life; perhaps even believing that they were spared for some grand reason. Having sampled the bitter taste of my own mortality on more than one occasion, I can attest to the fragile nature of our existence and the joy experienced when averting death. Those experiences have shown me there is no time to philosophize while in the moment. Sufficient time was needed to sponge away any lingering fear or confusion to understand how my views on purpose and meaningfulness were changed.

What defines a meaningful life? There seems to be no consensus on an answer. We could posit that a significant life – one having influence or impact on others – is a meaningful one, but this line of reasoning gets a bit tricky. Using the above definition, is a brutal dictator's life significant? Was Mother Teresa's life significant? These two examples undoubtedly represent

opposite ends of the moral spectrum. Should we then agree that a meaningful life is also a moral one? Not necessarily, human existence is more nuanced; sometimes a moral life seems meaningless, whereas an intense, meaningful life may appear morally compromised. A dictator's life may have been significant based on the enormous power he wielded, but any sane person would agree his evil deeds logically negate a *meaningful* life. A professional athlete may have a stellar game performance that advances a career, only to the detriment of the team.

So again, 'What is a meaningful life?' Truth is there is no one definition of a meaningful life, there is a multitude. We must be cautious, however, on casting too broad a net as to what defines meaningfulness: if everything is meaningful, nothing has any real meaning. Someone who dedicates their life to decorating the walls in their house with blasts from a shotgun, or cleaning each blade of grass of their front lawn with a Q-tip, may not be leading a meaningful life.

*An infant shares a temporal reality with a chimpanzee:
they both exist in a 'banana-now' world.*

Complicating our attempts to define *meaningful* is the disturbing tendency of human ideas to evolve over time. In the immediate present – our *Now* – everything in this universe is on its way to becoming something else. The pre-Socratic Greek philosopher, Heraclitus, is credited with: "You cannot step into the same river twice. For it is not the same river, and you are not the same person." We evolve along our timeline as events and shifting beliefs change our perspective; our lives are influenced by continuities and contingencies. Continuities are trends, cycles, hum-drum routines that we often see as boring, yet give normalcy and stability to our existence. Contingencies are rare events that cannot be predicted in advance and force us to make dramatic changes to our lives, often with long-lasting effects. Contingencies are similar to [Black Swan](#) events which are also rare, but result in extreme impact, and are given retrospective predictability. Contingencies may appear dramatically or subtly: we crash our vehicles, or we crash into love, and nothing is ever the same. Our future timeline is altered and what we deem as meaningful changes with it.

At the outset of the conversation with our angry Barista, he lamented about the continuities in his life: how nothing changes, the mind-numbing, soul-destroying sameness that surrounds him. Asked to define what meaningfulness *means* to him, he momentarily draws a blank, then offers: "For God's sake, I'm almost 30-years old and I make coffee for a living! That's not my idea of a life with purpose." By now we recognize the subtext here as simply a plea for affirmation, yet, his use of the word *purpose* is significant. Purpose seems to be a universal need for our species. Without it most people feel empty, simply floating through life. Only when a life feels purposeful and is committed to fulfilling a goal or value, can that individual feel meaningful.

We are temporal beings existing in and of time. Time fills the world within us and around us, its influence is unavoidable. Within each of us is a vast symphony of cellular clocks relying on the [superchiasmatic nucleus](#) in the hypothalamus to act as the conductor to keep those clocks in perfect harmony. Externally, life on Earth has been dominated by the light cycle of night-and-day for billions of years, and has learned to adapt to these rhythms. For humans, the circadian rhythm affects every system within us, which in turn controls how we view, react, and interact with the reality surrounding us. Depending on the circumstances, this temporality can be a blessing or a curse.

Just as it takes time for a human to physically mature, it takes time for a human life to unfold and develop enough experiences to ponder existential questions. A three-year old is much more interested in where they came from rather than where they are going. An infant shares a temporal reality with a chimpanzee: they both exist in a *banana-now* world. When hunger strikes, the thought is never, '*banana-in-an-hour,*' or '*banana-two-hours-ago*'; it is always '*banana-NOW!*'

In the 21st century we have managed to extend that infantile *banana-now* idiosyncrasy into adulthood. The average American television viewer is now exposed to over 400 hours of advertising annually. Frenetic consumerism, driven by saturation marketing in all forms of media entices us to buy, buy, buy whether we have the need or the means. Is this part of what fuels our Barista's anger? He lives in a *banana-now* world, but his common sense prevents him from shouldering the burden of debt that often accompanies a buy-more mindset. The vagaries inherent in the conflict between *what is* and what he thinks life *should be* creates – or at least contributes – to his crises. His anger is merely the first existential domino to fall, starting a chain reaction that eventually has our Barista questioning his own significance.

Our Barista had only one question: "What endures?"

The Danish philosopher [Kierkegaard](#) argued that our lives are a series of choices which may or may not bring meaningfulness to our lives – but the choices made in our lifetimes are ours alone. Our Barista seems to be living proof of that idea. Here is the upside to our temporality: it takes a lifetime for meaningfulness to be fully expressed, offering us the possibility to exist in a confusing quantum-like state of *being meaningful* and gradually *becoming meaningful* at the same time. A meaningful life is not something controlled by an on-off switch but rather a dimmer switch, allowing us to be more or less meaningful at various points in our temporal existence.

The evolution of meaningfulness is most apparent when we examine what drives the stages of our lives. Our twenties are occupied with starting an independent life, friendships, pleasure, and experimentation in relationships, careers, and lifestyles. In our thirties and forties, meaningfulness often corresponds to new responsibilities like marriage, children, and a home. We let go of our selfishness and put the needs of others before our own. In the final stage of life (fifties to eighties) meaningfulness corresponds to a dramatic societal dichotomy: We

harbor feelings of satisfaction regarding our accomplishments and gladly share benevolence and wisdom with others, while at the same time struggle to find purposefulness. As discussed earlier, a life without purpose struggles to find meaningfulness, as does one without love and friendship. As a grandmother slyly suggested to her grandson, “If you were to ask me to lunch sometimes, I would say yes.” And a tradition was born.

No one wants a bloated discourse, especially our laconic Barista. It is not surprising, however, that the word ‘meaningful’ appears numerous times in this essay; a meaningful life is what our Barista is seeking, right? Yes, but indirectly. Occam’s razor states that among two competing hypothesis, the one with the fewest assumptions should be selected; or that when you have competing theories that make exactly the same prediction, the simpler one is the better. For the sake of our discussion we can simplify this further: ‘Don’t over-think this’.

Given the flow of the overarching ideas consuming our Barista’s thoughts, his search for significance and purpose will ultimately lead him to build a meaningful life based on his core values. These same values indirectly influence his actions that will dictate the continuity and contingency events that populate his life. A feedback loop exists between contingency-influences and time-influences, constantly tweaking what meaningfulness *means* at various points along his timeline. Our Barista’s angst, generated by feelings of pointlessness, is simply the dawn of his self-awareness, setting him on a path of discovery to help define what a meaningful life means.

ENDURING

Our Barista had only one question: “*What endures?*” To clarify, for the word ‘endure’ we use the definition: ‘to continue to exist,’ and it applies to both non-living and living genres. The Universe contains trillions upon trillions of ‘things’, covering an impressive range of time measured from picoseconds to billions of years. Buried deep within this cacophony of things and time is our small spark of life, the essence of consciousness and thought, and the wonders of human creativity. Given our apparent insignificance in this cosmic overview, daring to answer our Barista’s question seems like an exercise in futility, but we are an egocentric species.

Again the question: “What endures?” There is something troubling, something unreasonable about this question. This simple question hides an implicit assumption that challenges us yet offers no proof of viability. It’s as though any answer offered could be deemed at best – glib – and at worst, a non sequitur. Overflowing with our lofty scientific and philosophical theories, it is tempting, perhaps even natural for us to approach his question from a cosmic perspective. Based on our current understanding of the Universe and its machinations, the answer to his question is simple: nothing endures. Many scientists believe everything in the Universe will eventually die a [heat-death](#) and ‘wink out’. This leads us back to Weinberg’s assessment: “*The more the universe seems comprehensible, the more it also seems pointless.*”

If our cosmic perspective seems pointless, switching to an individualist perspective allows us to re-examine the detail hidden in our Barista's question. The amount of what endures increases dramatically when viewed relative to a selective frame of reference. Within the individualist frame of reference we can alter our original definition of *endure* to read 'to continue to exist, for as long as it exists.' From this perspective a pet or a building endures, purpose endures, love endures (we hope). By simply asking 'what endures?' our Barista obfuscated the fundamental truth he is seeking: will *his* life matter, will *his* actions endure and have a lingering impact on others. From this perspective, the more appropriate question to ask is, "Will I endure?" By re-phrasing the question, the answer changes. The revised question allows us to refocus from the totality of the Universe to our Barista's narrow Universe – his *umwelt* – if you will. Within the constructs of our Barista's physical and metaphysical realities, much endures within his lifetime.

Yet, as with the earlier version, there is still something troubling about this question. It veritably drips with ego, but this me-centric stance is likely unavoidable. Naturally, as he deals with his angst, our Barista's focus is on 'self' and his eulogy. In reality, like our Barista, the vast majority of us will never create breakthroughs that attain the global impact and notoriety the likes of an Einstein or Steve Jobs. Most of us lead richly-textured, low-impact lives; lives that are anonymous yet nonetheless significant.

Our Barista should worry less about being remembered by faceless strangers and focus more on living a life filled with purposefulness and meaningfulness with those around him. Absurdity, angst, and pointlessness cannot exist outside of the human consciousness; these and all other human constructs end with death. The lives he touches, the people he helps, the children he nurtures – they endure. He will be remembered through them, he will remain a part of them. His life will be judged as meaningful by them, perhaps for just a single generation, but isn't that enough? We, like the floating designs our Barista uses to decorate a latte, are ephemeral creations to be enjoyed for what they are, when they are.

There is hope for our Barista. As he contemplates his pointlessness while immersed in the frozen righteousness of a wintry December, he understands that the exuberance of spring is only a few months away. The trees will leaf-out once again, muffling the mournful wail of those distant trains he so disdains. To him the sound of those trains represents a landscape bereft of life – a pointless, dark existence. Turning his thoughts towards the positive will allow the ghosts of his angst to dissipate. The evolving verdant environment will serve as a harbinger of his own evolution and the realization that human existence is not a single narrative. None of us live in a bubble.

We close with an excerpt from the song 'Doctor Good Doctor' by Texas singer/songwriter Guy Clark: "*He said: Quit whining! He said: Straighten up and fly right! He said: Life is not a piece of cake...*" Now that's good medicine – existentially speaking.