



Meaninglessness

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Why shouldn't I just die? My life has no meaning, no purpose, no significance. Why should it matter if I just stop living?

The patient is a chronically dysthymic woman in her mid 30s, with alcohol dependency and marked borderline tendencies. She has a background of profound emotional abuse. An attractive and intelligent woman, she has been unemployed for 2 years, has no long term relationships and has had no success in her chosen field of artistic endeavour.

Of course, at one level, her demand that I provide conclusive evidence that her life (that human life in general) has some intrinsic value is a mere piece of passive aggressive byplay. It is not metaphysics that has made her unhappy, but the myriad circumstantial details of her life acting upon her innate constitution. Not that she needed to be born especially vulnerable – had I shared her familial environment I'm sure I would also be chronically dysthymic, substance abusing and tending to the borderline.

While humans may be capable of logical and philosophical thinking, we acquire values and meanings by more emotional, experiential routes. New parents do not look to philosophers to tell them the value of their recently arrived child. Most children, fortunately, are simply loved for no compelling reason of metaphysics, and those who are not can't blame Aristotle or Kant.

Given that mental health and meaning are so closely intertwined, it is unsurprising that the consulting room witnesses frequent collisions between psychology and philosophy, or at least questions of meaning. The most common one I hear is depressed people asking: 'Why do I feel so bad? There must be something (morally) wrong with me. Other people are far worse off than me yet they are not depressed'. This is a case of looking for meaning in all the wrong places. The depression may not be a response

to the patient's recent circumstances at all, but might be due to either more distant, occult life events; or perhaps its cause lies more in the biochemical rather than the personal narrative.

Of course the 'how can I be so sad?' does have its opposite; not heard so much in the surgery as at the dining table of those with self righteous adolescent children. Here the argument is 'how can you be happy when there is so much suffering in the world?' Here, moral fault lies with the happy, who are incapable of the teenager's great spiritual empathy.

My patient's question is really an example of rationalisation, an invented justification for her wretchedness. More than that, she is creating an opportunity for me to fail, and thus establish beyond doubt my impotence and her inability to be helped. On this reasoning, to engage directly with her question would be worse than futile.

On the other hand, cognitive behavioural therapy (CBT) in particular does tell us that the stories we tell ourselves are important. The patient does believe that her life is worthless – and makes judgments accordingly – leading to reinforcement of the underlying belief. This belief sustains her chronic dysthymia and negative self image, so perhaps it would be worth challenging. This might be a case for 'philosophical therapy'.

The 'meaninglessness of life' question arises often enough to make the answer worth at least thinking about. There are probably as many possible answers as there are philosophers, but for my money the problem was most succinctly framed by Friedrich Nietzsche in 'The Joyous Science', written toward the end of the 19th century.

Nietzsche, famous atheist that he was, acknowledged that there was no teleologic purposiveness to human existence. All human life is cosmically insignificant. At the same time, he

recognised a basic will to survive, and an equally basic human need to believe in purpose. These conflicting facts frame the essential tragedy of being human.

To deal with this situation, man has invented a number of religions and moral codes by which to live. These have been of mixed benefit. While they do help guard against suicidal extremes of nihilistic despair, they have often resulted in stifling, oppressive, societies and given rise to violent conflict. But just as we have the capacity to invent grandiose religious systems, we also have the capacity to laugh at human vanity and so undermine pompous priests and their dogma. All religions go through phases of growth and decay, but as one succumbs to ridicule, another prophet begins to be taken seriously. Life is a constant struggle between tragedy and comedy, with both essential to our survival.

The idea of life as essentially tragi-comic appeals to me, though how therapeutically useful my patient would find it I'm not sure. Perhaps the more reassuring part of Nietzsche's formulation is that while cosmically insignificant, the search for meaning at a human level is absolutely essential. While often accused of being a nihilist, he was nothing of the sort. He was in fact attempting to create a new morality, albeit one that had many deeply unpalatable aspects.

His ambitious plan of establishing a morality that would last a millennium may not have succeeded, but the essential philosophical challenge he laid down – to live meaningfully in the face of our cosmic insignificance – remains very much alive.

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