

Why anything? Why something?

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Article History	Abstract
Original Research Article	<i>In this brief essay, I argue that although the human mind cannot grasp why there is existence at all, there is some kind of response which inclines one to either a nihilistic view of life where absurdity; a materialistic view of life and the power of the system predominate. However as opposed to this is a view of life that awakens spirit and “demands” kindness and awareness. Whether the latter can be realized and transform individuals and the world remains to be seen – in the meantime embracing such a paradigm may be a step closer to that mark.</i> Keywords: Nihilism; Existentialism; Religion; Materialism; Morality; Awe; Dialectic
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1) Introduction

A very basic question any curious person would ask is simply why there is a universe, why indeed is there matter itself. This question does not ask what the purpose of the universe is, but rather why there is one in the first place. Even if one would answer that it is to fulfill some or other purpose, the question remains as to why anything, purpose or otherwise, and why this very material world itself, with life and consciousness and the sufferings and pleasures that creatures must endure.

Unfortunately, there are no conclusive answers to this question. It is something that the human mind cannot grasp. Reference to a Creator does not provide a solution either for one might then enquire why there should be a Creator that gave rise to all things and so one is in the same quandary. In Jewish tradition, one answer provided is that the creation emanates from a supra rational or irrational desire without explanation. Rather it is an act of love, but imputing human inclinations to the Creator is highly problematic considering it axiomatic that the Creator is incorporeal and thus this explanation does not suffice. To deny a Creator is to sit with the heaviness that the universe is cold, random and even violent, although many evils have been perpetrated by peoples claiming to serve God.

In this essay, the lack of an answer to this question splinters into two opposing camps. The first one might call a nihilistic one which could be associated with Existentialism; dissatisfaction may spawn hedonism or

materialism, and the prevalence of evil is “solved” by the power of organized religion and/or the state (though with little effect; indeed, usually making it worse). The opposite pole as a sort of counter to the first pole is to see the universe with eyes of wonder leading to study, while countering dissatisfaction as pleasure is uplifted or sanctified, while evil is countered with goodness and kind deeds. I conclude that while there is a dialectic between these poles in the “messiness” of life, one can choose the latter pole and find peace even if knowledge is limited.

2) Dual Pole One:

As if just thrown into this world, one is left floundering in the dark. The following are natural metaphysical substrates that devolve from the utter strangeness of being here, not knowing why and unable to grasp the meaning of existence.

2a) Absurdity and Existentialism

Existentialism is a philosophy born out of the queerness of being in the world, where “existence precedes essence” as the well-known phrase goes. Such a condition is characterized by alienation, estrangement from the world, even as one is oneself a simple conglomeration of “stuff” as well. It is perhaps best encapsulated by the notion of absurdity.

Absurdity captures the sense of not being at home in this world. But rather than appeal to a higher metaphysical substrate, it embraces the fragility, vulnerability of finding

oneself here, where in absolute freedom one must choose what to become without any compulsion by the terror of knowing no absolute, no essential truth.

Existentialism was born of a century of wars where humankind faced the abyss. It sought to undermine totalitarian regimes and engines of violence by offering a system that did not have hierarchy, explanations, visions, systems, only the choice to either harm or not harm. Yet in its wake since it offers no system, it devolves into nihilism, where a sense of cruel “fate” inflicts existence upon its creatures for no particular reason.

2b) Unsatisfying and hedonism/materialism

While absurdity may have Existentialism as its foundation, the pursuit of pleasure and the underlying lack that presupposes it, leads to the twin vices of hedonism and materialism. But what is wrong with hedonism and materialism – does it not transmute the absurdity into joy and happiness and completion? It is true, an organism seeks above all both pleasure and satisfaction. This is how it survives. This leads to competing desires, the free market and competition (Communism cannot extract this from the system). This is not itself wrong, only if the underlying motivation is hedonistic pleasure and a materialistic philosophy, it may lead to strife between people. But one can retort that one can safeguard the system by saying that one may pursue pleasure but not at the expense of another, that one also has an obligation to treat another kindly.

The question then is, is a hedonistic and materialistic outlook conducive to such an approach: In other words, if someone is motivated by lust and greed and perhaps if he is conscious enough, an understanding that the universe is but a bunch of particles and life a mere clump of cells, will he indeed act kindly to his fellow? I conjecture that he will not.

2c) Evil and religious and/or political systems

So, if nihilistic absurdity and “modern” materialism (and hedonism) offer a negative relationship to this world and does little to rid the world of its evils, then the two great structures across civilization that is said to create a better society and a more well-adjusted individual, is the operation of the state and/or religious codes of conduct and power.

These two powers drive the consciousness of entire nations. Rather than solving the problem, however, they are the very engines that have fueled divide. However, they are also the mechanism to restore peace where nations confront nations, and it is often a battle between civilization and barbarism. But why this cruel encounter? Does it have to be so? It only exacerbates our question that this essay seeks to inquire into – why something? Why all the fuss – of matter, of

consciousness, of civilization – and the terrible agony of such a process, if indeed there is a telos in the first place?

Consider the great religions: Judaism; Christianity; Islam; Hinduism and Buddhism; consider modern nation states, great empires of the past and the narrative is almost unequivocally one of bloodshed, war and atrocity. For all their claims of goodness, redemption, equity, they have wrought much evil. One might rebut such a claim and speak of progress over time and moral refinement amidst a tremendous surge in knowledge, technological innovation and cultural interconnectedness globally. Yet still the overriding agenda is power mongering and strife the world over not only in spite of these systems of order but because of them. (I would maintain though that Judaism offers the most viable end to suffering and represents the original and true revelation of the Infinite within the something we cannot fathom).

3) Dual Pole Two:

As opposed to this rather somber approach, there is an equivalent yet far more optimistic and hopeful response in the face of an unanswered question and ability to grasp existence, self and the universe and that is to see beauty and to argue for spirituality (as opposed to materialism), inner transformation (as opposed to social systems) and awe (as opposed to absurdity and alienation).

3a) Miraculous wonder and study

Instead of angst at been thrown into an absurd and inexplicable, lonely universe, life itself becomes that which teems with effulgence, abundance; uncanny survival and a spirit that is said to pervade all things, subtle and grossly material. Instead of bulking at the incomprehensible, man can assert his ingenuity, come to understand and manipulate nature for life enhancing ways of life. Such an outlook inspires a culture of learning, study and discipline, as well as love for creation and the creations.

While knowledge remains limited and partial, its boundary conditions expand ensuring evolutionary stability. In fact, the very inexplicable quality of life, of existence itself, is the very basis for a sense of the magical and miraculous. This attitude also keeps knowledge itself humbling rather than a show of power and institutional might. Rather than simply call this “being in the world” as something absurd with no intrinsic meaning, one can see in the very pulse of life, from the subatomic to the cosmological something infinitely mysterious and grand.

3b) Pleasure and sanctity

The challenge to hedonism and materialism is not asceticism but rather elevating pleasure as something expressive of the very miracle of life, that the life of the body can be sanctified. Thus, countering materialism is a

spiritual outlook and countering hedonism is a moral pejorative. In such a view matter and spirit are not oppositions but part of the same dance just as the soul is said to enliven the body. Nature is not just mechanistic but truly alive just as consciousness expresses greater and greater independence yet aligned with the source of energy that allows such independence in the first case.

3c) Goodness and kind deeds

While organized religion and empire/state etc. have not solved the world's problems, the only solution lies in individual acts of kindness. Education today in general, does not teach this at all. Family units are also not a good model for this in general. A whole new consciousness needs to take root: not to hurt others physically or psychologically; to use one's energy and talents for the good rather than to feed greed and assertion of power. Is such an ideal attainable? It seems like a long shot. There are pockets of goodness, but a whole new paradigm shifting consciousness would require a miracle.

4. Conclusion

In reality life exists as a combination of both these poles: at times one is more pessimistic and vexed by this world and the unanswered questions. At other times, one feels that the good is emerging and that things can change for the best. One cannot force belief - either a belief in God nor in kind deed - or the reverse and a belief that nothing really matters, that there is no good in this world, that we are doomed and flounder in the abyss of the unanswerable. However, once we are aware of this dialectic, one can choose life. And the very local act becomes greater even than the political - a kind word; giving charity; a kind act - the redemption that will tilt the scale and usher in an era of the divine. Knowledge, a tool for liberation rather than domination. What was once a dream may yet become real.

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