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My Purpose

Oil paint on canvas

I ask the question: what gives you meaning in life? This is a question that cannot be answered. My research on the meaning of life gave me one strong overarching connection. This point being that love gives us meaning in life, purpose. My paintings are an ode to this meaning, because while the answer is love, how do you define and know what love is? Oil paint gives me the tool to communicate what love is to me. Because while I don't feel I can describe love in words, I can with paint, and with color. The moments in these paintings are simple but capture the spirit of love within my life. The colors in the paintings give power to each memory depicted. While my paper may go through the many complicated theories on what the meaning of life is, my painting gives a clear understanding of what I have learned and drives me in life.

The Pursuit Of Happiness



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The Oxbow School

OS48

I. What is happiness? What does it mean to pursue it?

Google defines happiness as “the state of feeling happy,” which I didn't find very helpful. When searching for happiness on Google, the search engine is filled with anything from positive psychology journals to “top 100 quotes to lift your mood!”, to articles, books, and movies all centered on happiness. They advertise how to be happy, how to find happiness, and how to make your life happier. The results led me to the topic of “the pursuit of happiness,” which intrigued me. This so-called journey, adventure, and search for happiness seemed beyond description, similar to the way I think about happiness as a definition.

The pursuit seems to be a popular topic from movies to books, with everyone trying to find a way to go about it. What I found surprised me. Vanda Vitali and John A. Moran claim there are two main ways humans try to find happiness, one being the “more” approach, which as the title sounds, is the goal to obtain more possessions, validation, and success. This event only gives temporary feelings of happiness, which are not sustainable. “Aiming higher and higher by trying to be happy all the time is also not possible as such states are not enduring psychologically” (Vitali and Moran). The second way is the “enough” strategy which is focused on finding happiness within oneself. This idea is found to be the goal of finding contentment instead, which will be discussed later. So, the first way is the common way Western society goes about it. This avenue of the pursuit of happiness does quite the opposite of helping one find happiness. The pursuit of happiness is never achieved because you will always be chasing it. We feel depressed and dissatisfied no matter what because we are always comparing the present to an unknown “better” future. Although living in the present doesn't always guarantee us happiness, only focusing on the future is going to leave us dissatisfied with the present and will ensure a life with little pleasure.

II. What is the true nature of the happiness we seek?

Contentment comes from our relationship to what is going on around us, rather than our reaction to it. It is a realization that we are whole and complete just as we are, despite the feelings of anger, sadness, joy, frustration, and excitement. It is a long-lasting feeling accompanied by peacefulness, gratitude, and satisfaction. While happiness is a temporary feeling, contentment possesses the ability to last indefinitely. (Vitali and Moran)

There is much information from books, movies, and art all trying to find happiness. I realized it was not happiness they were talking about, it was contentment, which still begs the question: what is happiness? because now I feel that the pursuit of happiness in Western society is just the pursuit of contentment. The pursuit of happiness is a facade for the pursuit of contentment.

I still want to know if happiness is an emotion or a state of mind, but I think there is a reason happiness is hard to define. When I look at my research, people say happiness is a state of mind that anyone can achieve, a way to make humans feel that happiness is achievable no matter how miserable one's life is. At the same time, other people claim happiness is a temporary feeling that is not sustainable. Happiness can be used in a lot of different contexts, but I have narrowed it down to two definitions for time's sake. Happiness can be a temporary emotion identified through joy and pleasure; these experiences are external. This means they are temporary and will dissipate. Once you experience the feeling it begins to leave, to fade away. The emotion is unstable and unsustainable, and you will be perpetually trying to regain the feeling. On the other hand contentment comes from within. It is internal and it can only come from within oneself. It is a deep state of fulfillment, peace, and serenity. "Contentment is contained within us whereas happiness happens to us."

III. Where can we find meaning in our lives if not within happiness?

When you look to the ancient Greeks to find an answer to this question you are met with the word Eudaimonia, which was emphasized by philosophers Plato and Aristotle. Many people believe this word corrects the shortfalls of our modern definition of happiness. When we are trying to find meaning in our lives or purpose in our jobs, or relationships, it is to find happiness. Ancient Greeks did not believe the purpose of life was happiness, but to achieve eudaimonia. This word has a variety of translations but I believe the best is “the condition of human flourishing or of living well”(Duignan) The key difference between finding eudaimonia and happiness is the presence of pain. Western society's concept of being happy today is hard to achieve because the belief is that we are going to reach this state of happiness and lose all negative emotions. How can we live our lives utterly untouched by any negative emotions? Well, that is why eudaimonia may be what we are looking for. Eudaimonia encourages us to trust that life's more difficult projects will be worthwhile. Exploring jobs, keeping relationships, and more will not always keep us in a state of happiness. The belief is at the end of our lives we will feel it was all worthwhile. Through these hardships of life, we will find something better and more interesting than happiness; the belief that we have made a difference. That in our lives we did justice in the journey of our full human potential. Eudaimonia is one of the oldest concepts on finding meaning in life and has survived the test of time. Eudaimonia incorporates all aspects of subjectivity. It's both more and less prescriptive, allowing it to be subjective and malleable by every person. Ancient philosophers did not consider a state of mind or feeling of contentment or pleasure instead it is what Aristotle believed is the highest human good.

Eudaemonia is the basis of Stoicism. At the core of most Stoic teachings is a trifecta that serves as the fundamentals for finding eudaimonia. This triangle is considered a framework one

can follow. The first corner of this triangle is “live with Areté,” areté is Greek for virtue. This is believed to be expressing the highest version of oneself from moment to moment. Self-awareness and mindfulness are essential to finding this virtue. Not being present is the reason the pursuit of happiness fails. The pursuit forces you to constantly compare the present to a so-called better future, making you never happy with the present, and never live focused in the present. Areté is believed to be the way to bridge the gap between you today and the future ideal version of yourself. The second corner is about focusing on what one can control, understanding what we cannot control, and accepting these outcomes. While this belief is hard for me to accept, I understand why we must focus on what we can control. Stoics believe the only things we can control are our minds, our actions, and our judgments. The last point of the triangle is to take responsibility. This is the contrast to control because one may not have control over everything that happens in their life, but one can take responsibility for one's life. Think of it this way, external situations do not determine if one is happy or unhappy, but our minds respond and create judgments of these external situations. This is the biggest control we have over our lives. The way this triangle works is by focusing on what we can control. We can then take responsibility for our judgments and choose to take action as our highest self. This is one way to go about this idea coming from Aristotle who believed humans are born with a given purpose. He believed there is a human essence and a certain way to be a human. This means that what you believe has meaning has nothing to do with being a “good human”. After my research on eudaemonia, I was reminded that “Nothing that any of us does is inherently important, because stuff just doesn’t have any inherent meaning”(Green). That made me question Aristotle's beliefs and I went in search of more answers.

The next philosophy on the meaning of life I found in my research was existentialism. Existentialism is an approach in which humans are free to determine what has meaning and what we feel has a purpose.

IV. What is the meaning of life if nothing has inherent meaning?

Albert Camus, the 20th-century French philosopher, attempts to answer this question best, in my opinion. Camus recounts the ancient Greek myth of Sisyphus. In the story, Sisyphus is condemned by the gods to roll a boulder to the top of a mountain. When he reaches the top, the boulder rolls back down and Sisyphus must start over (Camus). Rolling the boulder up the mountain was the entirety of his existence, he could not do anything else. This myth is commonly used to explain that we are each Sisyphus, and how nothing we do has meaning. Camus looked further into this saying “We must imagine Sisyphus happy” because while we all are just rolling a boulder up a hill we can be happy doing it. We can choose to give meaning to anything we do, allowing us to find happiness in anything. This concept has made the most sense to me. It allows us to accept that it is possible nothing has meaning, but we can choose to put meaning into anything in our lives.

V. How do we know what has meaning?

This question was the last of my research and one I felt I got a telling answer on. It begins with 20th-century philosopher Robert Nozick. His theory asks us to imagine that scientists created the ultimate virtual reality, called the Experience Machine (Nozick). The machine would allow you to experience anything you desire for as long as you want, even for the rest of your life. Technology would be so good that you wouldn't be able to tell that you were in the machine. Nozick asked: would you enter the machine? In return, he believed that most people wouldn't want to enter this machine, but how did he reach that conclusion? He proposed that because the experiences were

not real, then they wouldn't have meaning. Pointing out that maybe what we believe needs to have meaning in the external world. Having a real impact on the world is something of importance to us. The difference we make in this world is part of identifying what we believe has meaning.

VI. What universal thing all gives us meaning and the will to live?

Emily Esfahani Smith is a writer from Washington DC who published a book called “The Power of Meaning”. I used this book practically as my bible. Smith begins by explaining how we might find happiness in this life, but it isn't enough to fulfill us. After coming to this conclusion she wanted to know what will fulfill us. Smith used philosophy, psychology, literature, and her personal life and was able to connect her investigations into “The Four Pillars of Meaning”. The pillars she believes in are what we need to live a meaningful fulfilled life. The first pillar is belonging; “belonging comes from relationships in which you are valued for who you are and you value others' equality.” We all need to feel understood and recognized by the people around us. True belonging comes from a place of love, love for who you truly are. It finds itself in daily interactions and moments in life. The second pillar is purpose; which is not about finding a perfect job but about what you can give to this world. “Purpose gives you life, some “why” that drives you forward” (Smith) This relates to the experience machine in the fact that we care about what we bring to the world, and that impact on the world gives us meaning. The third pillar is transcendence; the feeling of leaving the present and being lifted to a higher reality where your sense of time and place falls away. Where you can lose your sense of self. The fourth pillar is storytelling, which Smith explains as the life story you tell yourself. Since our life stories are not predetermined, our identities can always be changing and transforming. Storytelling can help humans to rationalize who they are, and Aristotle always said that humans are deeply rational.

Looking back at our lives we can explore what essential parts make us into who we are. Smith retells the story of when her father had a massive heart attack, that “should have killed him.” When she asked her father what was going through his mind in the face of death, “All he could think about was needing to live so he could be there for my brother and me, and this gave him the will to fight for life.” Smith explains that her dad was repeating their names over and over again as he went into anesthesia. Her father did survive and his love for Smith and her brother is what kept him alive. His love for children, purpose as a father gave him the fight to live and gave him meaning to survive. That is the power of meaning, that in the eyes of death, love is what keeps you alive. The lists and charts and theories and examples I have gone over on the meaning in life all lie within love. “The act of love begins with the very definition of meaning”(Smith).

VII. Conclusion

Maybe there is no “meaning of life” and no end destination, but that doesn't make the journey pointless. Maybe that is the purpose of our lives, to pursue the meaning of it. The only way we can go about this pursuit is through love. *Man's Search for Meaning* is a 1946 book written by Viktor Frankl, the book tells the story of his experience of being a prisoner of a Nazi concentration camp but also has some of the best information on what the purpose is of our lives. Love is what our lives come down to. Frankl explains:

I understood how a man who has nothing left in this world still may know bliss, be it only for a brief moment, in the contemplation of his beloved. In a position of utter desolation, when a man cannot express himself in positive action, when his only achievement may consist in enduring his sufferings in the right way—an honorable way— in such a position

man can, through loving contemplation of the image he carries of his beloved, achieve fulfillment. (Frankl 30)

Frankl has uncovered what it means to find meaning. That love is what the meaning of life is. Love is the foundation of our lives. When stripped of everything, love will still stand. Loving is what makes us human, it is the very definition of being human. Nothing we do for ourselves will give us as much meaning as love, because the more of ourselves we direct on loving others the more human we become. When I look at happiness I can see love within it. The pursuit of happiness is not to find an emotion but to find meaning and we find meaning through and within love. Eudaimonia is about human flourishing and the only way to flourish as a human is by loving. In extremist views, we choose what has meaning, love is what decides what we choose. The experience machine proves we choose to love over having experiences we desire. Emily Esfahani Smith, the creator of the four pillars says: “Love, of course, is at the center of meaningful life. Love cuts through each of the pillars of meaning”(Smith). Love is braided into every idea I covered, it is the ground every idea has walked over. “That love is the ultimate and the highest goal to which man can aspire”(Frankl). Love is what makes us human, and it is what gives us meaning. The meaning in life, the ability to find points of happiness “through love and in love” (Frankl).

“Happiness comes and goes, but having meaning in life -- serving something beyond yourself and developing the best within you -- gives you something to hold onto” - Emily Esfahani Smith

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