Max Poole

Entry 1)

Throughout Moral Tribes I have been unable to fully disconnect the idea of morality and the meaning of life. If there is a meaning to life greater than pure survival, the one thing that most every person seems to agree upon is that living a moral life is at the core. I don’t know whether I think there is a real meaning to life, and at the risk of confusing the inverse for the contrapositive, this hints at there being no merit to a true unifying morality. If the meaning of life is to live a moral life, but life has no meaning, then is there such a thing as a “moral life.”

I am not religious, but I have always found religious philosophy and morality to be very fascinating. Religion gives an easy explanation for how to live a moral life (though I do not wish to dismiss the difficulties of actually following a religious life). If there exists a god than there must exists an objective morality. The objective morality would be whatever a god says it is. However how can I tell what is actually the will of god? To bite from Joyce the ineluctable modality (that is to say the inescapable limitedness) of our sense prevents us from ever really understanding the world.

We are constantly staring into the void of what we do not know. We are constantly facing the fact that we don’t and may in fact be unable to ever fully understand this world that we inhabit. Kierkegaard looked into that void and found god there. He believed that the very fact that the world was so incompressible made an omniscient “god” figure inevitable. I think that is a weak argument. To look into what we do not know and say we know something because we don’t know something, is an argument I find rather baffling.

Camus called Kierkegaard’s view of god as “philosophical suicide.” Camus talks of the absurdist world in the Myth of Sisyphus, taking as a given that life is meaningless. If life is meaningless than we can disregard our higher moral concepts like religion and love. Indeed one of Camus’ absurdist heroes is Don Juan, a man that sleeps with women with abandon. Don Juan is a hero because he recognizes that there is no higher order to life, what really matters is not the “meaning” of your experiences but the quantities of them. Which brings me to my personal dilemma.

I start at Camus. I am not religious and I do not believe there is any true “meaning” of life. Nothing is set in stone, we have no destiny, however I don’t agree with where Camus goes with that.

Life does not have *a* meaning, it has meanings. My life is given meaning by my boyfriend, family, and education. Your life may be given meaning by something different or something pretty similar. At the end of the day I don’t think there is a true one meaning that we can all follow. From this I don’t think there exists a morality that we can all follow. Since we are all trying to meet our own meanings, we are all trying to follow our own morality.

Entry 2)

*How much a dollar really cost?*

*-Kendrick Lamar*

            The quote above is from a song off of Kendrick Lamar’s most recent album, the song is called *How Much a Dollar Cost?*In the song Kendrick meets a homeless man on the side of the road. The man asks for money from Kendrick, but he doesn’t give him any. During the song Kendrick explains why he doesn’t give. He says he needs it more, says that the homeless man doesn’t deserve it. Kendrick tries to avoid the blame. Then chorus then comes in…

*It's more to feed your mind  
Water, sun and love, the one you love  
All you need, the air you breathe*

            To me this chorus is reaffirming the theme of the song. That the money we keep, the money that we refuse to give, is doing us little good. We could be doing so much better in the world to give up some of, if not most of, our wealth. We could help the homeless man on the street or any of the, as Greene puts it, “stastical people” in the world. But we don’t.

            This song has stuck with me for this reason. I want to understand why we don’t help people, or at the very least why it feels so hard to take $500 out of my own bank account and give it to charity. After reading Greene’s musings on the subject I felt compelled to write something about it.

*I need all of mines, and I recognize this type of panhandlin' all the time*

*I got better judgement, I know when nigga's hustlin'.*

            Kendrick initially refuses to help the man, feeling that he trying to take advantage of him*.*At the same time he puts up a barrier around himself, trying to deflect himself from a moral quandary. He says both that he *can’t* help because he needs all of his wealth, and he *shouldn’t* help because the homeless man is actually lying about his situation. He falsely elevates his moral position, while making the homeless man into straw.

            I think Greene would describe this as Kendrick’s “automatic” mode. Moral quandaries that can disadvantage us (even mildly) make us recoil in a predictable fashion. We at once try to nullify the situation. After all if the moral quandary is false, if the man isn’t actually starving, then our solution is obvious. At the same time we try to put the person into a group separate from our own. One of the things that I don’t think Greene talks enough about is groups of convenience. Mental groups we make just to avoid having to make hard decisions.

*A piece of crack that he wanted, I knew he was smokin'  
He begged and pleaded  
Asked me to feed him twice, I didn't believe it*

            Kendrick makes the man a crack smoker in his head, so he doesn’t have to give him sympathy. In fact by doing that he gives himself free reign to scorn the man. By making the man a crack smoker he can inflict parasocial punishment by refusing to feed the man. He doesn’t have to give, in fact he shouldn’t give, the man deserves his fate.

Why we don’t give is incredibly complicated, but I think we can learn some things from this song. We don’t give because we try to make ourselves the victim (‘How can I give? I need all *my*money’). If we need our money, we don’t have to feel bad about not giving it to someone else who also needs it. But this isn’t perfect, we still feel guilty, so we have to also put the needy in a group separate from us. If those who are in need are actually drug users, or prostitutes, hustlers or criminals, then we don’t have to feel guilty about helping them. In fact we can feel good, we are punishing the dredges of society! The guilty deserve to not eat!

            Right now I see so many people using the automatic setting and refusing to make the world a better place. Sometimes in quiet and forgivable ways (like buying an Xbox One instead of donating to the Children’s Defense Fund), but I think that our own guiltiness gets ugly. I see this coming up when we discuss migrants;  ‘they’re all rapists!’ I see this when we talk about America’s poor; ‘They just need to pick themselves up their bootstraps! They are leaching off the system! Using foodstamps for caviar!’ And I see this whenever another young black man is striken down by the police; ‘He’s a thug! Of couse you would get shot from if you run from the police!’

            Our moral machinery isn’t set up to help the world, and I don’t know if we can take the whole world off its automatic setting. At the end of the song Kendrick discovers that the homeless man he was talking to the whole time was actually god. God chastises Kendrick, saying he has lost his place in heaven. Kendrick responds with

*I wash my hands, I said my grace, what more do you want from me?  
Tears of a clown, guess I'm not all what is meant to be  
Shades of grey will never change if I condone  
Turn this page, help me change, so right my wrongs*

            I can only hope that the world is not contented to just say their grace, to just wear their sticker, to just take their day of silence. I hope that when we are faced with real moral dillemas we don’t flee. I hope that our group, our continent, our country, our state, and our city, can come together to help others. I hope that those in my school engage with the plights with the world head on. And I hope that I can be a better person. Especially when its hard.

*How Much a Dollar Cost?*

Bottom of Form