

Lucifer's Question

Blithering Genius

2023 June 20

Contents

1	Hamlet's Question	1
2	What Is The Purpose Of Life?	2
3	Lucifer's Question	2
4	Nihilism	2
5	Choices And Values	2
6	Philosophical Skepticism And The Abyss	3
7	Lucifer's Question Is A Paradox	3
8	Should I Accept My Nature Or Reject It?	4

1 Hamlet's Question

To be or not to be?

That was Hamlet's question.

When I was young, I used to get a strange feeling looking over the railing of a balcony or bridge. In those situations, I could feel the closeness of death. It wasn't that it felt dangerous. There was no risk of accidentally falling to my death. But there was the potential to jump, and that scared me. Even though I didn't want to die, I had a very small desire to see what it was like. I wondered what it would be like on the way down. What would my last thought be? I also had a very small desire to get just a little bit closer to death. I wanted to lean over the railing, and maybe even climb over and then climb back again, just to see what it felt like. Death is a great mystery, and I felt a slight attraction toward that mystery. And that scared me.

Hamlet's question is really just about timing. We are all going to die eventually. We don't have the choice to live forever. But we do have the choice to end life now. So, in a sense, we are choosing to exist every day. When you look both ways before crossing the street, you are choosing life over death.

Hamlet's question makes us aware that we have the freedom to choose death. In ordinary life, that freedom is hidden from us. When you cross the street, you don't ask yourself whether you should step in front of a truck. Hamlet's question makes the choice to exist explicit. It shows us that the alternative is always present. That's why looking over railings both scared and fascinated me as a child. It made me aware that I could choose death.

2 What Is The Purpose Of Life?

Hamlet's question raises another question. Why live? What is the purpose of life?

When I was a bit older, I spent a lot of time contemplating that question. I often did it while sitting on the edge of a cliff, a hundred feet above jagged rocks. The abstract philosophical question was brought into sharp focus by the nearness of death. In that situation, I had to exercise caution not to die. I wasn't in great danger, but a moment of absent-mindedness or clumsiness could be fatal. I was very aware of the nearness of death.

3 Lucifer's Question

Now that I have you metaphorically sitting on the edge of a cliff, I want to talk about another question. I call it "Lucifer's question".

Should I reign in hell or serve in heaven?

Lucifer never asked the question, but we know his answer. He chose to reign in hell.

I'm an atheist, so I don't believe in heaven or hell. To me, Lucifer's question represents the choice between nihilism and purpose.

4 Nihilism

Nihilism is the philosophical rejection of truth and value. If you have no purpose, then you are subjectively free to choose anything. You can step off the cliff. But you have no reason to do anything. There is no reason to step off the cliff, or not.

However, the nihilist is not actually free to do anything. He has a nature, and that nature determines his choices.

5 Choices And Values

Choices depend on values. To make a choice, you must want one thing instead of another. The nihilist rejects values as arbitrary and unfounded. Thus, he has no philosophical basis for making a choice. He can't say, philosophically, that it is good or bad to step off the cliff. But he still has a nature, and he still makes choices. The nihilist will not step off the cliff. He will go home, have dinner, and go to bed.

Some people say that the nihilist is dishonest: that his philosophical rejection of value is a pretense. There are tactical nihilists, who use philosophical skepticism hypocritically, to attack beliefs that they don't like, while holding their own beliefs off-limits to skepticism. But there are honest

nihilists, who apply philosophical skepticism to all truth and value claims. They have come to the “conclusion” (in a sense) that there is no basis for truth or value.

6 Philosophical Skepticism And The Abyss

If you try to justify your truth and value judgments, you will discover an infinite regress. Any attempt to justify one claim will involve other claims, or faith in certain mental processes. Those claims and processes would then require justification as well. Philosophical skepticism demonstrates the absence of a foundation for truth and value. The search for a foundation reveals its absence.

Much of philosophy has been an ill-conceived attempt to find a foundation. It is a futile task. There is no foundation, any more than there is a biggest number.

Suppose that X is the biggest number. Now add 1 to X . $X + 1$ is bigger than X . Thus, X is not the biggest number.

Suppose that F is the ultimate foundation of truth and value. Now question F . Thus, F is not the ultimate foundation of truth and value.

Philosophical skepticism is a process of disillusionment. It annihilates the illusion of a foundation. Before skepticism, thought was framed by unexamined and unquestioned assumptions. Those assumptions created the illusion of a foundation. Philosophical skepticism involves examining and questioning those assumptions. Once they are revealed to be assumptions, and open to doubt, the illusion of a foundation disappears.

This casts the skeptic into the abyss. He yearns for the lost paradise of his philosophical innocence: the illusion of a foundation. He tries to create or find a rational foundation, but he can't.

That is the position of the honest nihilist.

Like everyone else, the honest nihilist makes intuitive truth and value judgments, and acts toward what he values intuitively. But philosophically, he recognizes that his intuitive judgments have no ultimate basis or authority. His own existence seems absurd and pointless to him. He might even view himself as a puppet, dangling on nature's strings. He doesn't philosophically value his existence, yet he is compelled by his nature to go through the motions of a living being: eating, sleeping and avoiding death. He can't do otherwise. He is free to question anything, but not free to believe, want or do anything.

7 Lucifer's Question Is A Paradox

Lucifer's question is a paradox. How can you rebel against God? If God created you, then you are an expression of his will, and even your rebellion is an expression of his will. If God is omnipotent, then you can't act against his will. No matter what you do, you will be under his control and serving his will.

The same is true of your nature. You can't really rebel against your own nature, even if you reject it philosophically. You might arrive at the philosophical position that life is meaningless, but you won't act as if life is meaningless. The brain that generates philosophical skepticism also generates the will to live.

Philosophy has relevance for ordinary life, especially in the modern world. But philosophy is not foundational. It comes after the fact of existence. My subjectivity has an objective basis: my brain. I can think about myself, because I exist. My thought is not free in some absolute sense. It is determined by the nature of my brain. I can theorize about my nature, and question my nature, but I can't escape from it.

8 Should I Accept My Nature Or Reject It?

Should I accept my nature or reject it?

If I reject it, then I reject myself, and I even reject the rejection itself. I am in a paradox, a loop of self-negation.

If I accept it, then I accept myself, and I accept the acceptance itself. Once I have accepted my nature, I can build a rational worldview from that starting point. It is not a foundation that I stand upon. The "foundation" is just me, floating in the abyss.

There is no prior basis for choosing between self-affirmation and self-negation. There is nothing irrational or wrong about either choice. Likewise, there is nothing rational or correct about either choice. They are just there in the abyss, waiting for us.