NOTHING MATTERS

Surely, it is how we face the absurdity of *being* that defines who we are and what we believe in. Meaning is derived from our intentions, actions, and passions as we carry out our journeys into the world as individuals and as a community. Meaning, insofar as it is traditionally understood, tends to be intertwined with religious doctrine. From Christians, the 10 Commandments or the belief that God helps and guides us is considered to be the “meaning of life.” Although the contemporary cultural scene seems to suggest that the “meaning of life” is a funny joke, implying that there isn’t an answer/there is no meaning to life. You can see this in references like the quirky, nonsensical answer, “42,” from Douglas Adam’s *The Hitchhiker’s Guide to the Galaxy*. Ambivalence about answering this entirely human question is a relatively new development, though. “When the throne of God is overthrown,” Camus explains, “the rebel realizes that it is now [their] own responsibility to create the justice, order[,] and unity that [they] sought in vain within [their] own condition and, in this way, to justify the fall of God.”2 It is easy to misrepresent statements like these from existentialists, for we are so far removed from the history of their times. Just remember that they are coming off the heels of the toppling of powerful monarchies where kings were believed to be divinely chosen—that God spoke through them and determined the rules. The death of god, by ways of revolution (and decapitation), revealed to those at the time that their lives were not dictated by a higher power. In this shift of perspective, people felt like their values were stripped from them, that there was no longer a meaning to live. This was the birth of nihilism.

Nihilism is often understood as the belief that nothing matters. Most of us in the West would then go a step further, claiming that if nothing matters, then “everything is permissible and nothing is important.”3 Indeed, in the absence of meaning, there is a lack of goodness on account of all the badness that accompanies it. Nihilism posits that goodness or badness are just accidents4—bound by nothing, anything can happen, with no apparent rhyme or reason.

This is not what we observe in the world, though. If nothing matters, then nothing is worth fighting for. The slave would not fight back against their master. Kings would not have been beheaded. So then, there is obviously something worth fighting for. Camus could see this contradiction, clarifying, “a nihilist is not someone who believes in nothing, but someone who does not believe in what [they see].”4 The nihilist gets swept up and overwhelmed by the absurdity of the world, oftentimes through isolation, fearing what they do not understand. They are lacking something; something that binds us all together. The nihilist cannot see beauty in the world. Perhaps they cannot see beauty in themselves. That’s where I was, only a few months back. Drained, hopeless, and young, I would wake up for class and desperately fight the urge to throw myself in front of the bus outside my apartment. Escaping this mindset takes time and compassion for oneself. Yet it is never evaded for good.

We see then the emergence of a certain anxiety—an anxiety born from the knowledge and acceptance of our place in the world. Because the world is absurd, because it does not owe us any comfort in survival, it is up to *us* to find meaning in it. Carl Jung, the founder of analytical psychology, wrote in his book, *Memories, Dreams, and Reflections*, “as far as we can discern, the sole purpose of human existence is to kindle a light in the darkness of mere being.”6 What the nihilist doesn’t see in isolation is that meaning comes from within. Nietzsche was a grand proponent of creating meaning for oneself (although many young Nietzsche readers fail to understand that part). God is dead. We no longer derive absolute meaning from him. The nihilist stops there, but Nietzsche keeps going, upholding that meaning is not a collective feeling—it comes *from* you, *for* you.

Sometimes, it can be hard not to blame the nihilist, for we humans can only derive meaning from experience. We are products of our environment, and the operations and values of society shape how we think and act in the world; it matters how you see yourself. An existential crisis is what happens when you finally see those larger systems influencing how you live or act—when you realize the way you lived your life was wrong. This is the true anxiety of being.

Existential anxiety is uncomfortable, leading many that become afflicted to run away from it. Denial and complacency are common responses to this kind of dread. It is easier to give in or to “play your role” than it is to face it in an attempt to gain understanding. This is the affliction of so many liberals today. They are too afraid to see that the way we live our lives is wrong and that we have to do something about it. They’re too afraid to realize that the American Dream is a lie. Too afraid to admit that racist people are created not by themselves or their perceived ignorance or hatred, but by the very system itself. They’re too afraid to see that they too are implicated in the proliferation of racism and misogyny in our cultures. They play by the rules because “that's just how things are.” It is indeed very hard trying to escape this anxiety. And truly it can never be defeated—one must always question themselves and their thoughts—but when we take that uncomfortable stance against those injustices, we begin to weaken their grasp on our lives. In opposing the systems of oppression, we must not let fear, hatred, or envy drive us. Who are we to fight for solidarity if we don’t even believe in it ourselves? If the first step is questioning why things are the way they seem to be, then the next is to maintain our connection to reality. We risk becoming detached from the lives of those around us if we come to conclusions under false pretense or because we don’t like the answer we are finding. What does reality have to say to us and is it worth fighting for?