

This paper will explore the necessity of teleology and attempt to expand on the benefits and drawbacks of assigned purpose with context from Kant and existentialism. Potential benefits include restored meaning, empathy and connection which can fuel morality, but potential drawbacks include despair, rigidity and human supremacy which can welcome a lonely existence.

For the purposes of this paper, teleology will be the primary focus of discussion. Teleology may be defined as the end to which everything aims. In other words, teleology may be closely equated with purpose. It is this purpose which should be examined. In the context of a logical and mechanistic-focused society, teleology allows for purpose to be restored in a meaningless and scientific world which replaces purpose with absurdity. To be clear, in absurdity everything is without aim, without function. Everything is blind and random and accidental. In this, humanity is abandoned. Existentialism holds human abandonment dearly as a fundamental tenet. Kant does not.

Kant proposes the existence of a teleology in rescue from the alternative which results in a divided natural world and fragmented experience. He describes teleology as a promotion of harmony in which man takes pleasure because his use of judgment provides a “unique manner in which [he can] proceed in reflecting upon the objects of nature... to get a thoroughly coherent experience.” This is a unity fundamental in understanding the world which, although an assumption, must be adopted despite “[being] apart from any ability on our part to perceive or prove its existence.”

In other words, Kant recommends the same argument dismantling the existence of purpose due to lack of proof as a reason for adopting the existence of purpose. In many ways he exposes the near inability to conceive of a meaningless universe as even scientists – primarily in support of unassigned meaning – rely, even if regretfully, on the principles of judgment which appeal to teleology. He notes, “so they (scientists) say that nothing in such forms of life is in vain, and they put the maxim on the same footing of validity as the fundamental principle of all natural science, that nothing happens by chance ... so the abandonment of [teleological principle] would leave them with no clue to assist their observation of a type of natural things that have once come to be thought under the concept of natural ends.” Science must presuppose meaning, paradoxically validating its existence while also desiring to refute it or else come to terms with science’s inability to explain all forms of unity and causality.

Kant approves of science and bases his theory of morality on a similar concreteness which seems to abandon humanity. Yet, his supplementation of judgment to the theory of morality, grounded in teleology, relieves some of this abandonment. This abandonment also finds relief in prioritizing freedom. For this, existentialism complements Kant. Although despairing at first, existentialism allows in abandonment the silver lining of control and empowerment in that one may assign meaning or purpose based on individual need.