

WHAT'S THE POINT?



Paul Kolberg

What's the Point?

Extract

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What's the Point?

FINDING HOPE IN A CRISIS

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“He saw mankind going through life in a childlike manner... which he loved but also despised.... He saw them toiling, saw them suffering, and becoming gray for the sake of things which seemed to him to be entirely unworthy of this price, for money, for little pleasures, for being slightly honoured...”

Hermann Hesse, Siddhartha

“I wanted you to see what real courage is, instead of getting the idea that courage is a man with a gun in his hand. It's when you know you're licked before you begin, but you begin anyway and see it through no matter what.” [Atticus Finch to his son Jem]

Harper Lee, To Kill a Mockingbird

“Only connect! That was the whole of her sermon. Only connect the prose and the passion, and both will be exalted, and human love will be seen at its height.”

E. M. Forster, Howards End

“The miserable have no other medicine But only hope. I have hope to live, and am prepared to die”

William Shakespeare, Measure for Measure

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Introduction

SOME KIND OF PERVERSE JOKE?

We humans have always wrestled with trying to understand why the world couldn't just be perfect. At some point in all our lives, regardless of wealth, sex or ethnicity, we all of us question why our experience of existence couldn't be free of pain, suffering and death.

What we observe and what we experience of existence on earth, flies in the face of the notion that whoever or whatever intelligence created the Universe, is caring or loving. Who could reasonably label as love, all the pain, misery and suffering we have witnessed and experienced for ourselves for thousands of years? On the contrary, for most of us, existence here on Earth seems to be some kind of perverse joke. Any happiness that comes our way, seems fleeting, elusive, and fragile. If we are fortunate to

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experience happiness at all, then it rarely lasts and is difficult to enjoy for anything more than brief episodes that are interrupted by much longer periods of anxiety, stress, and depression. If this is all that existence can offer, then we ask with some justification: “what’s the point?”.

THE ANSWERS MUST COME FROM EXPERIENCE

We have all become highly sceptical of what others tell us we must think and do. Please be assured that I do not do so in this book. I set out my findings but leave it to you come to your own conclusions. The conclusions and analysis in this book, are based on what people can see and experience for themselves. I wanted everyone to know that when they understand what pain and suffering is, as well as its causes, it becomes clear that not only does everyone have a purpose in life, but the process of my analysis reveals what that purpose is, and how to fulfil it.

HOPE GUARANTEED

When you have read this book, I guarantee that it is possible for you to fulfil the true purpose of your existence and more importantly, to find happiness. Please feel encouraged when I tell you that notwithstanding all the pain and suffering that is going on right now or in any crisis that you may experience, there is a point to your life, there is every reason to be hopeful.

INTRODUCTION

WHAT PROMPTED ME TO WRITE THIS BOOK

Back in the late 1980's, my eldest son was born prematurely, with substantial and life-threatening medical complications. Weighing just three and half pounds, he contracted or more likely already had *en ventre sa mère* necrotising enterocolitis,¹ and at five days old had to have two thirds of his colon removed. A month or so later, he had hydrocephalus² and had a shunt inserted into his brain. That first shunt repeatedly blocked, necessitating several emergency dashes to the hospital, sustained periods of hospitalisation and eventually a second shunt being inserted.

The first five years of his life were a particular struggle for him. Whilst my son survived, other babies were less fortunate. My wife and I often think about Carl, and his parents. Carl was a baby who died when only a few days old in the incubator next to our son's. It is difficult to reflect upon the fact that Carl would be the same age as our son now and he and his family have missed a lifetime of shared experiences and love.

Last year, the hydrocephalus returned and my eldest son who is in his early thirties, endured seven invasive brain operations. The headaches he endured for weeks prior to his operations were unbearable for my family and I to witness, let alone for him to endure. The pain might be more easily imagined than described.

On two occasions I had to hold his hand while stitches from the head wounds were re-stitched, without any anaesthetics. Try, if you can, to imagine the pain of stitches being administered in open raw wounds without any

anaesthetics and imagine having to watch that and being helpless to provide relief. Imagine the courage it took for him to have the stitches done knowing the pain that was to come.

Following his final operation, he had a major seizure that nearly killed him. My wife and one of our other sons were only a few feet away from him when the seizure occurred, whilst a crash team of medics fought for over an hour to save his life. The seizure was so severe he broke his shoulder bone and it was dislocated. He lay in agony for five days before the injury was diagnosed and pain relief provided. He couldn't speak or gesture since the seizure had affected his speech and mobility.

MY SHAME AND REGRET

One of my biggest shocks was realising just how much I loved my son and in the instance of his seizure, the thought of losing him was unbearable. It was agonising and painful for me since his almost dying made me feel ashamed of myself.

I realised that I had at times taken him for granted and had often not treated him as well as I would have hoped. He is a vulnerable adult with some learning difficulties. At times, especially when busy and tired, his disabilities were difficult to manage with equanimity. Anyone that is tasked with looking after a physically or mentally disabled person will know that life is not just a challenge for those who are ill, but for those who care for them. Thankfully, it has its funny and deeply rewarding moments too.

INTRODUCTION

Nevertheless, in the instance of the seizure and the realisation that he might die within the hour, I was to say the least disappointed at some of my own past behaviour and devastated at the very real possibility of not being able to tell him how much I truly loved him. I was heartbroken at the prospect of being denied the ability to make amends.

I am pleased to report that he has made an almost full recovery though he will remain on anti-seizure medication for several years. Fortunately, too, he certainly knows how much he is loved by those who truly care for him.

FOUR LIFE CHANGING TAKEAWAYS

I fully understand that my family's story is not unique. Everyone has suffered, is currently suffering or knows someone that is suffering. That is why I have written this book. I hope it helps answer some of your questions and to be clear, I do so without resorting to religious dogma or theology. In the process of thinking deeply about suffering, I have come to understand four important and potentially life changing things:

1. Everyone can be happier.
2. Most pain and suffering are illusory.

But to be happier and to avoid pain and suffering, we all need to understand:

3. What happiness actually is and where to find it.

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4. What pain and suffering is, its source, and how to avoid or at least mitigate it.

If any of these things are of interest to you, then I strongly urge you to read on.

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PART ONE: HAPPINESS

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Chapter 1

Life

UNDERSTANDING THE QUESTION

Asking the question: “what’s the point?”, in its usual context, is often a shortened version of “what’s the point in living?”, a question that usually arises in moments of despair. We rarely if ever ask the question when our mind is occupied elsewhere, especially, for example, during moments of pleasure and excitement.

We ask the question in response to the pain and suffering that we observe in others or feeling for ourselves. We ask the question when we are forced through challenging circumstances, to pause and reflect on the true merit of what we are doing with our lives. Many people particularly ask the question towards the end of their lives, when they begin to realise that ultimately, death may be at hand, and they like everyone else, do not *know* what is on the other

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side. When we question the purpose of life, we are seeking an answer to a fundamental question about our existence: “Why do I exist?” or put another way: “Why am I alive?”.

DIFFERENT TYPES OF WHY

There are two types of “why” questions. Thus, we ask why does something do this or that? This is really a “why” question in the nature of asking *what* or *how* makes something do this or that. For example, “why does the Earth orbit the Sun?”, is really asking what makes the Earth orbit and we all understand the answer is gravity. This type of *why* is not a philosophical one but concerns the mechanics and physical properties of something.

We can also ask *why* questions from a purely philosophical perspective. Such philosophical questions are not about the mechanics of existence (though they might include such aspects in reaching an answer), but about the fundamental nature and purpose underpinning existence. Why in the philosophical sense means for what reason, for what purpose. This type of why, seeks to get to the heart of the question “what’s the point?”.

WHAT WE KNOW

To begin to answer the question, it is helpful to establish what we *know* and what we *do not know* about the subject in question. I mean know from personal experience, observation, rational and logical enquiry. Religious and