

February 12, 2019

P. Jackson - Existentialism

You Wanted 10 Pages on the Meaning of Life, So I Wrote the Narrative of How I Lost My Answer

I suppose I must have discovered the question “Why?” before any other. The moment I could question anything, it was motivation. It seems to be a commonality of the normative human experience, based on the shared grievance every parent faces having to bear their child’s repetitive uttering of the inquiry. It marks a point when a child learns the complexity of language and its relation to their condition.

I spent the subsequent formative years absorbing every answer to that question like a sponge. I was constantly prompted to ask, and some people took the time to answer, and I retained each response. Despite how thoughtful or thoughtless, gentle or crass, filtered or raw as the deliverer saw fit at that moment in time, that response contributed to my definition of the world.

Specific individuals certainly carried more weight in this process of definition I was partaking in, such as my parents and siblings. My mother was a devout Catholic, who raised me with 9 o’clock Sunday morning mass and Wednesday evening catechism. A lot of her answers to my questions of “why” revolved around this narrative that I heard before any other, and in looking back, it is not unreasonable to assume she held onto the faith for that purpose. Not just for her children who asked, but to fulfill the same questions she probably asked her mother some thirty-odd years prior.

There is a moment, though I cannot remember a marked point where it occurred, that I realized not every answer to my questions of why was necessarily true. Perhaps it

February 12, 2019

FS 102 Sec 19 - Existentialism

was when it seemed my learned definitions could not reasonably all contain truth simultaneously. This brought about a deepening of my sense of self, as I realized I had a decision to make each time information was given to me - to keep it or to throw it away. However, this perception of free will appears a fallacy to me now - how could I have had the capacity to make that decision, without understanding? I could not, but I really believed I contained the understanding, which is a naive impression some people carry through their entire lives. Something I now understand as a hindrance was my misunderstanding that people who misinformed me were doing it intentionally. This vilified the people I found to be dishonest, but also left the information (God) from people I trusted (my mother) reserved as undeniably true.

I was probably around ten years old when I began to conceive the idea that I did not know everything, and as a matter of fact would never know. Perhaps it was the introduction of infinity in Math, or space in Science, but I know I became acutely aware there were things outside of my capacity for understanding. With this newfound realization, I began to grow suspicious of every person who told me definite information. My interest in the question of "why" resurfaced, but with a new level of desired understanding. It could be asked not just of actions, but of supposed information. If someone could not adhere to my prodding, their teaching was as good as lying to me. The budding adolescent began questioning everything everyone had ever told her. This was also when I first remember experiencing panicked episodes, involving disordered eating, self-harm, and manic anger.

February 12, 2019

FS 102 Sec 19 - Existentialism

I went through middle school rather confused, as most remember the experience, and each memory involves sullen or anxious feeling. I kept most of my feelings from my parents, because I thought they would overreact. I attended a charter school, and there were about a hundred kids in each grade. Children took a standardized test three times per year to track their learning progress, and place them in a classroom of students within a similar scoring range. There was a huge emphasis on academic merit and competition, with frequent award ceremonies for performance. I remember agonizing over those tests, each grade, award, and ranking, which contributed to my long-term academic success, but also my need for validation.

I was an altar server at my church, got good grades in school, played the trombone and volleyball. However, I had difficulty connecting with other kids my age. Most of my peers did not seem to feel the weight of the world, and the ones who did could not understand why I was so sad even though my parents weren't divorced and I went to church every Sunday. It seemed as though some people were sad, and some were not, but most people who were sad had a good reason.

I found solace in obsession over boy bands and actors, and engaging with other fans online. I was one of the first generations to have social media before I could drive, or even cross the main road from my neighborhood to the playground. This was where the majority of my unhealthy coping mechanisms derived. I found a whole online community of other depressed young women, which felt like a relief at the time.

However, while the community was meant to validate each other and our experiences, it

February 12, 2019

FS 102 Sec 19 - Existentialism

also normalized and even romanticized unsound means of handling those experiences. It is an interesting problem that exists, because it is impressionable minds being influenced by equally impressionable minds. Coupling that with mental illness, it is no wonder why the youth is depressed. There are facets of this community for everyone, too, because they usually naturally stem from any fanbase. This is because people use artists and influencers and other idolized individuals as a source of motivation, and sometimes to an obsessive degree. The mentally ill find one another in each fanbase, and bond over their shared stories of salvation through whatever song or video, and eventually feel comfortable sharing more personal experiences. For me, my infatuation with characters in books and movies was merely a substitute for when I would finally be old enough for a real romance. Romance was the cure for all of my sadness.

I was raped the day after my 14th birthday by my first boyfriend. I don't think I even understood what had happened to me. It was the summer before I began high school, and my first romance had really betrayed me. In the months that followed my trauma, I had to endure not only how it altered my definition of the world, but also of myself. The young man who violated me found it worth bragging about. I entered the hellscape of contained adolescents which was high school with a collection of choice words to my reputation. For a long time, it felt as though the definition of myself was primarily constructed by the people around me, even though theirs did not align with mine.

February 12, 2019

FS 102 Sec 19 - Existentialism

At first, I felt shame. I was no longer a virgin - something I knew God was not going to be pleased with. I think about a month in, we had some sort of health lesson on sex and consent, and then I really fucking hated God. I was struck by the same inconsistencies other scholars and common people alike have found with monotheism throughout history - if God is all-powerful, how could he let this happen to me, if he is still all-good? The design surrounding my circumstances could not have come from anything with good intentions, certainly nothing worth worshipping.

I decided that God was going to hate me anyways, and so I was going to hate him, too. Instead, I focused on repairing my social status. I found that I tended to surround myself with other miserable people, and this gave me some dark, delicious satisfaction. I could find purpose in the degree of imperativeness possessed by my relationships to others. There are cultural phenomena which catered towards this sick perception, and I do view it as an illness in hindsight. I had an understanding of Adult Concepts like "right," "love," "just," which was that they all called for sacrifice. This tendency led me to person after person as I prepared to use my desperation for validation through selflessness to their advantage.

I got into a relationship with a piece-of-shit-boy to prove to everyone that I was not a slut. After about a year of turmoil that continued to escalate, I enrolled in an early college program to be at a different school from him. I was taking a Global Ethics course my sophomore year of high school, and I was prepared to find a new set of rules to fasten to my existence. However, any ideology that attempted to justify the experiences

February 12, 2019

FS 102 Sec 19 - Existentialism

I had faced, and was still facing, automatically became discredited to me. As I was in the midst of trying to flee an abusive relationships, I was learning about various divine forces that could be controlling me, such as karma, and ethical frameworks surrounding ideologies from family to greater good. The course was focused on the various definitions of morally right and wrong, and it seemed to me as though there was no set of ethics applicable to something like the human race. The more moral frameworks I read about, the less morals had any credence in my mind. My boyfriend was fucked up because of other circumstances; blame could be traced back indefinitely for why he was the way he was. Blaming myself felt more concrete, but there were other factors at play I could not recognize from my position. Who was going to tell me who to blame? Without morals, I thought I could at least cling to truth, but found doubt to be an unavoidable obstacle in searching for it.

One truth the world seemed to project back to me time and time again were states of subjectivity. I found myself becoming increasingly upset, because despite their lack of rationality, they were widely accepted. Frequently, the *facts* of my being a woman, a person with mental illness, in a family dangling off the edge of “middle class”, and so on, were brought to my attention through how I was treated by others. These assigned facts put me at some disadvantage, but I was well aware that there were other oppressions I would never experience. It seemed privilege could be measured in how few labels one’s assigned - but as I aged through the Obama presidency and into the Trump conniption, in a world of instantaneous globalized media, I learned that there was

February 12, 2019

FS 102 Sec 19 - Existentialism

much more vocabulary surrounding these feelings I had. They talked about misogyny and “red flags” - and I felt as though my suffering did not have to have a reason in order for it to end. It was no longer a unique thing, but a shared experience, one of which other people had escaped.

I have to say, it felt good to know other people were seeing the same shit I was seeing, outside of myself. That was the best part of growing up. At first, it was just seeing it, and I was looking around to only see mindless participants and evil perpetrators. When I found out there were other people not just defining these phenomenon, but also combating them, I was impatient to involve myself in the process. I was not convinced, however, of moral right or wrong on a global scale, but I understood tragedy to be something I did not want around. For someone who was not sure what to do with herself, looking around and worrying about the state of the whole seemed like a productive use of energy.

In my social justice phase, finally rid of horrible men, I poured myself into public outcry, as well as education. I read academic papers, watched and read the news, went to hear experts speak. I began deconstructing all of the opinions I'd been thoughtlessly carrying without realizing, and I attempted to participate in dialogue. I had to learn my place within that as well. As more people began trying to speak over one another, I understood the importance of boundaries within where I could speak - it was only valid to discuss things personally affecting me, and do what was in my capability to further project the voices behind other necessary discussions.

February 12, 2019

FS 102 Sec 19 - Existentialism

There was a lapse, though, when I was violated again by a third man in my junior year of high school. After going through a transformation, and feeling grounded and confident, I still felt victim to my subjectivity. I had been sneaking around my strict parents, and the kid who was meant to take me home refused to without sex first. The fact was, I was going to have sex I didn't want or have to answer my parent's questions of "why". My parents subjected me to their expectations of a socially acceptable young lady, and that boy subjected me to his expectations of a car ride recipient, apparently. It did not matter that I had endured an abusive relationship for a year and a half; he still saw slut.

It was at this moment that I decided my existence was a fucking joke. I thought if someone was making this happen he probably really enjoyed himself. If God is real, he has to be a man. I began throwing myself into surrealism, and lost any motivation to learn or expand upon myself at all. I drove up to school each day, and sat in the parking lot for however long class was supposed to be, smoking bowl after bowl. My life became narrowed to finding ten more dollars, and then fifty cents or a dollar for a cigarette or two, finding a place to nap, a parking lot where no one would mind if I sat for a while.

The funny thing was, through all of this, no one was worried about me until an entire semester had gone by and the grades came in. That's when my mom really thought she began connecting the dots, but blamed it all on my deviation from her expectations. My lack of pride in my appearance, disinterest in things like homecoming and school spirit, and especially my absence in church, disappointed my mom. It was

February 12, 2019

FS 102 Sec 19 - Existentialism

difficult to see her come to conclusions about me from her narrowed perspective, but also could not bring myself to communicate my side to her. Even if I did, I knew our ideologies were too distant to discuss everything productively. This deepened the divide in our relationship.

I was just passing time until I could flee. I had this notion that becoming an adult would give me the freedom to rise above all of these definitions and find my own motivations, purely because I would be able to leave the place I had remained stagnant in for my entire life. Every negative association I had to my home overshadowed any good childhood memory. I found others who were dismantling their ties with hopes to leave soon.

This is where finding motivation became a precedent. I was going to have to start trying if I really wanted to leave. My sights set everywhere; I could see myself bustling in a city in New England, or meandering through a sunny West coast campus. I even entertained the thought of studying in France, going as far as to enroll in two French courses my senior year. However, I had no concept of how my established habits would inhibit these from being possible.

The work of actually reaching these destinations loomed over me, and I ignored it. It was easy to do when I was high all the time. I fantasized about eating brie in an authentic Parisian cafe while I sat in some parking lot when my French class was in session. I longed for rigorous discourse with people in wire-rimmed glasses while my

February 12, 2019

FS 102 Sec 19 - Existentialism

Common Application sat blank. When the deadlines popped up in my planner, I smoked more.

I could not explain what possessed me to disassociate from my life so strongly. I guess this is my attempt to find out. Obviously, it worked out. I found a college nestled in some pretty mountains in Pennsylvania that wasn't going to make me specialize in anything right away.

I am currently in the process of rebuilding my existence which I have been unsuccessful in annihilating. Part of that is finding the motivation. There are numerous things which I could list as being motivations, and the capacities which they fulfill are diverse but have an undeniable common factor, which is that they bring me some sort of contentment. I refrain from using the word happy, because anyone who solely pursues pleasure is met with immense disappointment in such an uncomfortable and unforgiving world.

From my observation of my peers, a common theme within their motivations is some goal for the future. However, I have found that my inability to invest in any "future" is rooted in how ineffective it is to conceive it. People create an ideal future, and spend the present moment working towards it, ignoring the fact that it only has as much substance as any idea. Setting any expectation, to me, only creates infinite possibilities of failure and a singular possibility of success. Perhaps the motivation is found in enjoying that process, but I do not see how it is possible to enjoy doing something when you do not know where it is going.