

## Philosophy, Spirituality, and Academic Ambition

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The question “Why am I here?” has arisen for me in many contexts. As a human, I ask myself “Why am I here?” in a philosophical sense; what is the reason for being where I am, why is the world the way it is, what is the reason I do the things I do? As a believer in a higher power, I ask myself “Why am I here?” in a spiritual sense; what purpose am I placed in this life to serve? As a college student, I ask “Why am I here?” in an academic sense; why did I choose my major, why am I even going to college, where do I want to be in five years?

My study of philosophy has shaped my moral and mental faculties, which has affected the manner in which I reflect on that question. Many works have influenced me, but this essay will examine Immanuel Kant’s *What is the Enlightenment?* Kant describes the Enlightenment as “man’s emergence from his self-incurred immaturity” (Kant 54). The immaturity Kant speaks of is “the inability to use one’s own understanding without the guidance of others,” and it is self-incurred because it isn’t that we don’t have the capacity to use our mind on our own, but we “lack resolution and courage to use it” (54). I found Kant’s words extremely relevant in my personal growth; both as a student, and as a functioning member of society. College is a time to find out what I really believe,

and Kant's essay has helped me distill all my existential questions. Philosophy, spirituality, and academia have many intersections, and with the help of Kant, I can answer the question "Why I am here?"

I begin with my spiritual life, for Kant says, "I have portrayed matters of religion as the focal point of enlightenment" (59). As a child, I went to church every Sunday, attended religious education on Wednesdays, and prayed with my family every night; however, singing hymns and reading a book were not enough to solidify my spiritual convictions. I sought something more intellectually stimulating, so around adolescence I began following the 'New Atheist' movement. Christopher Hitchens, Richard Dawkins, and Sam Harris were the pioneers of this movement, and they were everything that I aspired to be. They were scientists and philosophers; furthermore, they spoke eloquently, and their world view was one that made sense to me. As years passed I became further compelled by atheism, and found myself rolling my eyes nearly every Sunday.

My perspective changed when I grew out of adolescence and into my late teens. Science was able to answer my questions about good, evil, and the origin of humankind; however, the creation of the Universe was still a mystery. Paley's 'Watchmaker's Analogy' resonated with me; a teleological argument that contended that the design of the Universe, humans, and the Earth is so perfect that it must have been shaped by the hand of a creator. I began to revisit my spirituality. I continued to explore the questions of life, but now with the help of prayer. I entered college as a believer in a higher power, however I felt that I was in a spiritual limbo because I did not know what

else I really believed in. When I was first introduced to Kant, the way he thought about spirituality and religion spoke to me.

Kant introduces different “guardians” from which we must liberate ourselves to become enlightened, and one of these is the clergyman. He says that the clergyman limits the intellectual enlightenment of humanity because he says, “Don’t argue, believe!” (55). The clergyman must do this because he is “bound to instruct his pupils and congregation in accordance with the doctrines of the church he serves,” for if he did not, “he would not be able to carry out his official duties in good conscience, and would have to resign” (57). Upon reading this, I found that I had thought of myself as a clergyman far too often. Attending church there were certainly times when I felt opposition to what was being said, and I doubted the truthfulness and validity of the doctrine being taught. Spiritual advisors taught me that it was okay to ask questions, but in the end, I had to “have faith.” Because I envisioned myself as the clergyman, I believed that if I did not agree with parts of Christianity then I would have to resign my faith completely. Kant liberated me from that way of thought and gave me hope by allowing me to think of myself as a scholar.

According to Kant, the scholar “enjoys unlimited freedom to use his own reason and to speak in his own person” (57). If I think of myself in this way, I am free to question, research, and believe as I please. I am able to “impart to the public all [my] carefully considered, well-intentioned thoughts on the mistaken aspects of those doctrines, and to offer suggestions for a better arrangement of religious and ecclesiastical affairs” (56). Additionally, Christianity teaches absolute truths, or “a certain unalterable set of doctrines.” Kant strongly opposes this, as it would prevent “all further

enlightenment of mankind forever” (57). Furthermore, Kant states “It is absolutely impermissible to agree, even for a single lifetime, to a permanent religious constitution which no-one might publicly question” (58). The church taught me that absolute truths must be viewed as unalterable and true in order to provide a base for my faith. Kant tells me that is preposterous, for it would hold humankind back from new discoveries.

Often, I was taught to ‘have faith’ and ‘just believe.’ Kant holds that unalterable doctrines are not only harmful to spirituality, but also to our overall intellectual well-being and enlightenment. Christianity teaches that every human is made to be a believer; the truest version of yourself is when you live in accordance with the Bible’s teachings (1 Timothy 2:1-6, 2 Peter 3:9, Colossians 3:1-17). To that, I disagree. Aside from the clergyman, we are all meant to live as scholars. We should search diligently and independently for answers to life’s biggest questions, and present our carefully considered findings to the public with our only motivation being to make humankind more enlightened. Inevitably, people will arrive at different answers; however, we will become more enlightened as a whole, and that is what truly matters.

Turning to philosophy, my education at the University of Tulsa has given me more questions than answers about humankind’s purpose, or as Aristotle would say, our “Final Cause.” This is understandable, for even Kant says, “we are too short-sighted to perceive the hidden mechanism of nature’s scheme” (52). To narrow my focus on this essay, I’ll ask only the question ‘What purpose do I serve?’ or as Kant would say, my “purpose in nature” (42).

Last year I constantly battled the feeling of being alone, yet never being able to actually be by myself. That is to say, I was alone because I did not have friends with

whom I had deep conversations, yet at the same time, I could never clear my head to think. Even when I was not physically alone, I was mentally alone. This is what Kant calls “unsocial sociability.” He defines it thusly: “Man has an inclination to live in society, since he feels in this state more like a man, that is, he feels able to develop his own natural capacities. But he also has a great tendency to live as an individual, to isolate himself” (44). One of my goals in college was to meet people, to experience different things, and of course make lifelong friends. As Kant says, I felt “more like a man” when I was present on campus, and active in social settings, yet there were certainly times when I felt I needed to isolate myself. Recognizing my “unsocial sociability” I realized that the feelings I battled with were feelings that people have battled constantly since the formation of societies.

In addition to humanity’s unsocial sociability, Kant identifies another factor that affects the purpose I am meant to serve. He states: “Man wishes concord, but nature, knowing what is good for his species, wishes discord. Nature intends that he should abandon idleness and inactive self-sufficiency and plunge instead into labour and hardships find means of liberating himself from them in turn” (45). That is to say, not only can one obtain growth from less than ideal situations, but experiencing hardship is in fact a benefit to one’s well-being. This taught me that I must “abandon idleness” and put myself in situations in which I am not comfortable, for ultimately what nature intends is for me to struggle and come out a more enlightened individual (45).

Kant teaches me that the purpose I serve is to abandon idleness, and fight the natural human urge to be unsocial. The application is that I have become more involved in organizations, such as taking a leadership position in my fraternity, becoming a

mentor to younger students, and starting a website. These steps toward enlightenment were a product of Kant's work, and have shaped the attitude in which I approach life daily. Furthermore, it has caused me to ponder the importance of my work in the classroom.

Finding motivation is paramount in the classroom; I am unlikely to excel as a student if I feel that my work is without purpose. I was always told when choosing my major to "do what I want" yet it seems that has created a paradox; for solving differential equations is certainly not what I 'want' to be doing, yet people have told me it is necessary in order to ultimately achieve what I want. Kant puts the paradox like this, people do not "pursue their aims purely by instinct" nor do they fulfil some "prearranged plan like rational cosmopolitans" (41). Diligently working on my studies certainly is not a product of me following my instincts, yet I know that I must be assiduous in order to achieve what I ultimately want, a happy life. This is because my life is not given or a "prearranged plan."

Another paradox I face is that I constantly look forward to new tasks while completing old ones. For example, in high school I was motivated to work hard so I could get into a great school and earn scholarships. In college, I am motivated by my desire to get a job after graduation. Once I get a job, I will be motivated by 'working up the ladder' and earning enough for my family and retirement. It is a tireless cycle that seemingly never ends. Kant writes about this: "The earlier generations seem to perform their laborious tasks only for the sake of the later ones, so as to prepare for them a stage from which they can raise still higher the structure intended by nature" (44). I must escape this cyclical pattern in order to reach my full potential as a student.

Another motivation that drives me towards hard work is recognition from others, and acquisition of wealth and power. Kant says, "The desire for honour, power, or property, it drives him to seek status among his fellows, whom he cannot bear yet cannot bear to leave" (44). I often wrestle with this idea. Kant offers ways humankind can successfully live together in society, but he does not clearly outline means to escape and liberate myself from desire of power. Frequently I have searched for other means of inspiration, but eventually I decided that if these motivations are natural for humankind, why fight them? I have learned to embrace "the desire for honour, power or property" as my means of academic motivation.

I began by repeatedly asking the question: "Why I am here?" Now, thanks to Kant, I am prepared to partially answer that question. In a spiritual sense, I am here to ponder and diligently work to answer the great questions of life. I am not here to prescribe to any principles blindly. I will present my spiritual discoveries to my peers, and offer ways that the doctrines of religion can be improved. In a philosophical sense, I am here to be active in my community, and make a positive impact on society. I am not here to remain idle, and I must fight the urge to isolate myself. In an academic sense, I am motivated by my natural desire for power, property, and wealth. Finally, my purpose is to use my own understanding without the assistance of another, and become an enlightened individual.

### **Works Cited**

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