Widening Horizons

Issues on life and death from Existentialism to Buddhism

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What is the meaning of life?

Camus: life is absurd.

It happens that the stage sets collapse. Rising, streetcar, four hours in the office or the factory, meal, streetcar, four hours of work, meal, sleep, and Monday Tuesday Wednesday Thursday Friday and Saturday according to the same rhythm---this path is easily followed most of the time. But one day the “why” arises and everything begins in that weariness tinged with amazement. “Begins”—this important weariness comes at the end of the acts of a mechanical life, but at the same time it inaugurates the impulse of consciousness... (Albert Camus)
Life is ultimately meaningless

If I ask myself how to judge that this question is more urgent than that, I reply that one judges by the actions it entails. I have never seen anyone die for the ontological argument. Galileo, who held a scientific truth of great importance, abjured it with the greatest ease as soon as it endangered his life. In a certain sense, he did right. That truth was not worth the stake. On the other hand, I see many people die because they judge that life is not worth living. I see others paradoxically getting killed for the ideas or illusions that have given them a reason for living (what is called a reason for living is also an excellent reason for dying.)

(Albert Camus)
Thrown into this world

...Each human reality is at the same time a direct project to metamorphose its own For-itself into an In-itself-For-itself and a project of the appropriation of the world as a totality of being-in-itself, in the form of a fundamental quality. Every human reality is a passion in that it projects losing itself so as to find being and by the same stroke to constitute the In-itself which escapes contingency by being its own foundation, the *Ens causa sui*, which religions call God. Thus the passion of man is the reverse of that of Christ, for man loses himself as man in order that God may be born. But the idea of God is contradictory and we lose ourselves in vain. Man is a useless passion.

(Jean-Paul Sartre)
Being-toward-Death

....just as Dasein is already it’s “not-yet,” and is its “not-yet” constantly as long as it is, it is already the end too. The “ending” which we have in view when we speak of death, does not signify Dasein’s Being-at-an-end [Zu-Ende-Sein] but a Being-towards-the-end [Sein-zum-Ende] of this entity. Death is a way to be, which Dasein takes over as soon as it is. As soon as a man comes to life, he is at once old enough to die.

(Martin Heidegger)
Different Domains, Different Logics

- Natural Number system:
  \[ 2 - 1 = 1 ; \ 1 - 2 = ? \]

- Whole (integer) number system:
  \[ 1 - 2 = -1 ; \ 4 / 3 = ? \]

- Rational number system:
  \[ 4 / 3 = 1 \frac{1}{3}; \ \text{square root of} \ 8 = ? \]

- Imaginary number system

Ven. Hui Kai
In any narrowly defined set or domain, formula or equations that cannot be solved within the narrow number system could be readily solved when upgraded to a larger scope or higher level of set domain. Whenever a formula or a problem appears to be unsolvable, it is often not the solvability of the problem at hand that is in question, but rather the domain given is too narrow. (Italics supplied.)

Ven. Hui Kai
...[H]uman life is very similar and problems that appear to have no answer at a lower level of reasoning could very well be readily solved if a higher level or a broader domain of thought is taken into account. ....Heidegger’s existential analysis seems to presuppose the point of view and position of a single-life theory. Then death is, to human, the most absolute and complete ending and conclusion. Hence, Heidegger couldn’t help but say humans exist as “being-toward-death.”

Ven. Hui Kai
Buddhism

- Offers a broader view not just of life but also of death.

- The meaninglessness of life stems from the limited view of a single life.

- Buddhism offers a larger domain from which to solve these problems of existence.
Phenomena arise due to other phenomena. When the causes and conditions that produce and uphold them are removed, all phenomena themselves will cease to be. To say that ... [phenomena have] no self is another way of saying that they arise dependent on one another.

Venerable Master Hsing Yun
The Buddha and Nanda
Emptiness

....Emptiness is the basis of the arising of all phenomena. It is not void; it is construction. Without space, we would not be able to build a house. If a bag were not empty, it could not contain anything. Without emptiness in the Universe, human beings would not be able to survive. Hence, there must be emptiness before there can be existence....

Emptiness does not mean pessimism and nihilism. It carries with it creative and constructive meanings. Once we fully recognize emptiness, we will be able to abandon attachments that we cling to, and investigate all phenomena from new angles. When we can fully understand emptiness, we will be able to eliminate our biases and re-examine our lives again. If we have experienced and realized emptiness, we will be at harmony with all phenomena in the universe.

Ven. Master Hsing Yun
‘Dasein always understands itself in terms of its existence—in terms of possibility of itself: to be itself or not itself. Dasein has either chosen these possibilities itself or got itself into them...or grown up in them already’...To exist authentically is to be myself, to choose my possibilities of being.

...in existing inauthentically I am not being myself. I am my possibilities of being. To exist authentically is in some sense to choose these possibilities. The self of inauthentic existence is what he calls the One-self (das Man-sells). My possibilities are my being but when I am existing inauthentically, they are not chosen by me. They are determined not by me but by something he calls the One (the They)...

Gorner, Heidegger’s Being and Time,

Authenticity
— Uncover your true self —
Life goes on

This is not to say that you should drop out of society. Having an understanding of emptiness doesn’t mean that you become blasé; to the contrary, you develop a feeling of responsibility and compassion...on a gross level, you will still fight for your individual rights, hold down a job, be politically active within the system; but when the situation changes, either for or against you, you are prepared. You don’t blindly believe that everything you wish for and expect must materialize, and you’re not caught up in the end result.

Khyentse
Marcel’s Primary and Secondary Reflection

World as seemingly whole, functional: I-it

World as broken due to primary reflection

World healed through secondary reflection: I-Thou
Reflection on the Secondary Level: A Conclusion

Following Gabriel Marcel’s phenomenological investigation, the absurdity of life is found only on the first level of reflection.

If we follow this process of reflection, we may see that the existential claim that life is absurd rests only on the primary level of reflection. On this level, the Buddhist view does not differ from it. Life is suffering. Everything rests on nothingness or emptiness. And yet, Buddhism goes further. It reassesses this primary truth. Life is suffering, yes; but only because we are attached to the idea that it should not be the way it is.