

Philosophical Reflections



These philosophical reflections are my thoughts on; truth, success, purpose, death, thinking, and worldview. They were written with the intention to express my initial thinking that led to my current conclusions on life. I have deliberately ended on questions rather than answers, as I wanted to provide a conceptual framework for readers who may not share my worldview, and to seek the answers for themselves. Relevant Quranic verses have been included as introductory literary devices to evoke thought and set the mental scene. This approach is a major theme in the Quran, as it frequently mentions, “Do you not reflect?”

There is an African proverb that states “He who asks questions, cannot avoid the answers”, so I hope these reflections will evoke thought and facilitate guidance for all those who seek it.

Truth

“The truth is from your Lord, so on no account be among the doubters.” (Quran 2: 147)

“Do not mix the truth with falsehood, or hide the truth when you know it.” (Quran 2: 42)

The question of truth has perplexed the mind of nearly every human being that has lived on this planet. What is truth? How do we get to know truth? Is there such a thing as truth? This type of thinking dates back to the ancient Greek Philosopher Socrates, as a young man he endlessly questioned and sought after the truth. However, in our day and age we do not really think about concepts such as truth. We may have argued, “tell me the truth!” if we suspect our friends of betrayal, or we “swear to tell the truth” in a court of law, but when it comes to our existence, and questioning what it means to be a human being, we forget about truth and adopt skepticism as a philosophy.

Skepticism answers in the negative the following question: can we know anything? It essentially implies the belief that the truth about life and the universe will never be known. Founded by Pyrrho of Elis, Skepticism was advocated and put into writing by the Greek Philosopher Sextus Empiricus who was the first to detail and codify the doctrine. This school of philosophy is common in today’s society,

however, its approach regarding truth is unwarranted because we can discover it, and the only way to do that is by endless, insistent questioning. Socrates was great at questioning and by doing so he would bring his opponents to realise the truth, and this is because he believed the truth was already within us. For example, there are many universal principles that we can never deny, and to deny them would deny knowledge itself. For instance, take two planks of wood that are equal in length: do we know they are equal because they are the same length or do we know what the concept of equality is prior to our experience? It is because we have the innate, inbuilt concept of equality that enables us to see that the planks of wood are the same length. Also, we know that half of something is less than its whole, and we know the truth of the fact that all fathers are men. These innate ideas and concepts are known in epistemology as a priori, which means knowledge independent from experience.

From a practical perspective the skeptic's position is untenable, because we know the truth of the laws of physics that enable bridges to withstand heavy loads, including the laws that keep boats afloat. If a skeptical position was assumed when building our houses, would we agree to implement the architect's design? The Polish Philosopher Leszek Kolakowski writes,

“We might say: well, since we know nothing, what is the point of constructing theories that have no foundation? But if philosophers and scholars had seriously attempted to achieve such self-satisfied serenity, would they have been able to build our civilization? Would modern physics have been invented?”

So there are some universal truths that we can feel secure in accepting, and the way to find out further truths is to use these universal truths as a starting point, which is called epistemic foundationalism in the language of philosophy.

The importance of truth has been emphasized by many thinkers past and present. Plato the ancient Philosopher said “And isn't it a bad thing to be deceived about the truth, and a good thing to know what the truth is? For I assume that by knowing the truth you mean knowing things as they really are.” So why is the search for truth important? The significance of truth is not only intuitive; it is something that gives us a sense of reality, that things are real. In absence of truth life on occasions can seem unreal and illusory in a certain sense. Additionally, many psychologists have acknowledged that human beings want to be right and seek to learn from social norms when they are unsure about things, this psychological process is known as ‘Normative and Informational Social Influence’. In this view the search for truth is very important as it has the possibility of shaping who we are or the person we want to be.

Another way of looking at this is that not searching for truth is tantamount to lying to ourselves, or even accepting a lie, because anything other than truth will be accepting it's opposite. So the search for truth would be a means of trying to be more sincere with our own existence, as we would be seeking to establish the truth of who we are and the life we are living. Finally, holding on to the skeptical view that there is no truth is self-defeating, because the claim that there is no truth is actually a truth claim, so how can anyone claim that skepticism is true but everything else is not? This is the inconsistency of the skeptical view; a skeptic would claim the truth of

skepticism but would deny all other truths! Consequently no matter what position we hold we still have to accept a truth, and in this light, let the search for truth begin!

Success

“...they are the ones who are successful.” (Quran 7:157)

**“Truly, this is the supreme success!”
(Quran 37:60)**



One of the best definitions I have found of success is “the completion of what is intended”. For example, if I were to intend to learn how to drive, and I passed my driving test, that would be a success. As human beings we intend to achieve things all the time; to get a promotion; to be our own boss; to be a good father and husband; to travel the world or to write a book. If we achieve or complete our aims and objectives then it can be argued we have been successful. However is this view of success meaningful? I would argue it is not.

If we live our lives to complete the things that we intend to achieve, without even questioning the intention of our own existence, we will have not found any ultimate meaning to our own lives. Therefore our view of success is almost baseless and devoid of real value. If each person completes his life by intending to achieve all of the things we mentioned, and he or she didn't even complete the intended meaning for his or her life, then can we call their lives successful? We can even ask: does it really matter whether they ever existed at all? His or her life may be of some importance relative to the things they want to complete, but what is the ultimate significance of completing their own lives?

Let's look at it from a scientific perspective, our children, our actions, our loved ones and everything we do are just arrangements of molecules. Carbon and other atoms in various combinations make up our lives and even the things we intend to complete. From this perspective mankind is thus no more significant than a swarm of flies, or a herd of sheep, for their makeup is all the same. Also, if we follow the scientific line of thought our end is also meaningless, we just die and that's it. This is true for each individual person. The amazing achievements of the scientist to the advancement of human thinking, the on-going research of bio-medicine to find the cure for cancer, the efforts of the politician to establish justice and peace in the world, all these come to nothing. Even if human beings were to exist forever, the mere infinite duration of our lives would not make them any more meaningful, there would still be no ultimate significance.

Existentialists such as Jean-Paul Sartre and Albert Camus understood the meaningless reality of life in absence of acknowledging the intention of our existence. This is why Sartre wrote of the “nausea” of existence and Camus saw life

as absurd indicating that the universe has no meaning at all. The German Philosopher Friedrich Nietzsche argued in clear concise pronouncements that the world and human history does not have any meaning, any rational order or aim. Nietzsche argued that there is only a mindless chaos, a directionless world tending towards no end.

If we found the intention of our existence, thereby giving our lives ultimate meaning, and we were to achieve and complete what was intended – that would indeed be true success. In contrast to this type of thinking someone may contend by stating that this whole discussion assumes that some metaphysical entity created the whole universe with some sort of purpose. This is true, but by removing this assumption we will only be presuming atheism to be true. Additionally, the logical conclusion of atheism is that our very existence is pointless, which is a conclusion not many atheists would like to follow through due to it being at odds with our innate nature and psychological disposition. So the following questions naturally follow, what is the intention of our existence, and what outlook would make sense of our continuous search for ultimate meaning and success?

Purpose

“So where are you going?” (Quran 81:26)

**“Our Lord! You have not created all this without purpose”
(Quran 3:190)**

**“God did not create all these without a true purpose; He explains
His signs to those who understand.” (Quran 10:5)**

The Austrian philosopher Ludwig Wittgenstein, who inspired two of the 20th century’s principal philosophical movements, once said, “I don’t know why we are here, but I’m pretty sure that it is not in order to enjoy ourselves.” Wittgenstein did not have the answer to the perennial question of what is humanity’s purpose, but he did indicate that there must be one, even if the answer could not be discovered intuitively. However, it can be argued that the assumption that there is a purpose may be false, and if it is false, then there is nothing to be bothered about, and we should all just carry on living. As Albert Camus, the French Algerian philosopher and journalist, who was awarded the Nobel Prize for Literature, explained “You will never live if you are looking for the meaning of life”. Camus’ point is not ontological, it doesn’t probe into the nature of reality, and his concern seems to be an existential one, meaning that the important thing is how life works for you, the life of individual; regardless of any truth behind existence. So in light of this we must ask: is it reasonable to believe we have a purpose?

To answer this, take the following points into consideration:

You are probably reading this in your bedroom sitting on your chair, and you are definitely wearing some clothes. So I ask you a question: for what purpose? Why are you wearing the clothes and what purpose does the chair fulfill? Since these are rhetorical questions you don’t have to answer, because we all know the answer. The chair’s purpose is to allow us to sit down by supporting our weight, and our clothes fulfill the purpose of keeping us warm, hiding our nakedness and making us look

good! Now from your bedroom let me transport you to a forest somewhere in the world, now this forest obviously has trees and on a particular tree there is a moth. This moth is on this tree drinking its sap, underneath that moth there is another moth and its role is somewhat bizarre, it drinks the excrement of the first moth. This is because the first moth almost instantaneously removes its waste while drinking the sap. You are probably thinking where I am going with this, well; firstly let us discuss what the purpose of the second moth is. Its purpose is to clean up the excrement of the first moth in order to prevent it trickling down the tree so that ants, and other insects, would not be encouraged to travel up the trail and in consequence eat the first moth. So in simple terms the second moth is the first moth's insurance policy!

Now take this into consideration, you probably didn't know anything about this moth three minutes ago, in fact if moth genocide were to occur, you wouldn't really care – well most of you anyway. However, we attribute purpose to such an insignificant creature, and coming back to our clothes and the chair, which are inanimate objects with no emotional and mental faculties, we attribute purpose to these too! Still, we do not attribute purpose to our own existence? Is this not absurd?

Believing that we have no purpose is not only irrational, it is practically problematic because it presents an indication that a lot of the things we have achieved as humans beings most probably would not have happened as many of the people who have accomplished amazing achievements, including the discovery of penicillin, would not have had the drive to attain what they did. This is because these very people had a purpose driven approach to life, without which we would be just like animals obeying our instincts, in other words chemical robots wandering around waiting for the battery acid to dry up! The realities of a purposeless existence was also highlighted by the Philosopher Arthur Schopenhauer who claimed that the world is bankrupt and there is no reason to rejoice in its existence, he even argued that it would be better if it did not exist and questioned whether suicide was a plausible solution.

So why is it irrational? Well, it is irrational because if everything complex and designed that we discover seems to have a purpose, including the insignificant moth, as well as the things we develop and create, then it logically follows that we have a purpose too. To deny this would be tantamount of believing in things without any evidence, as there is no evidence to say we have no purpose, on the contrary we have evidence to say that things have a purpose and we can infer that about ourselves too. Even scientists indicate that it is irrational to assert that our universe is impersonal and the product of blind chance. Interestingly they have explained that the physical processes in the universe have some sort of purpose, for instance the Astronomer Sir Fred Hoyle described the universe with the attributes of God, and the physicists Zeldovich and Novikov asked why did nature choose to create this universe instead of another?

Finally, we can argue that without a purpose we do not really have a deeper profound meaning to our life. For instance if we take the logical conclusion of an apathetic scientific view on our existence, we are on a sinking ship. This ship is called the universe, because according to scientists the universe is going to suffer a heat death, and one day the Sun will destroy the earth. Therefore this ship is going to sink,

so I ask you, what is the point of reshuffling the deck chairs or giving a glass of milk to the old lady? As Fyodor Dostoyevsky, the Russian writer and essayist said, “Without some goal and some effort to reach it, no one can live.”

Various contentions can follow from this discussion; firstly a purposeless worldview gives us more freedom to create purpose for ourselves. To further explain, some existentialists have argued that our life is actually based on nothing, and from this nothingness we can create a new realm of possibility for our lives, and therefore create purpose for ourselves. This philosophy rests on the idea that everything is meaningless and that we should create a new language for ourselves in order to live fulfilling lives. The flaw with this approach is that it uses meaning to claim meaninglessness; it also represents a self-delusion as they deny purpose but create one for themselves. Additionally it implies that there are no objective moral values and truths because an ontological foundation is absent. This is counter-intuitive and opposes our cross-cultural consensus of our moral thinking. The philosophy of war is a good example to show this type of moral consensus. For 2,500 years there was a cross-cultural agreement that poisons should not be used in war, even if you were being defeated. Although in practice people did not always conform, but they did however agree to this rule.

Another contention includes the evolutionist’s stance that our purpose is to propagate our DNA, as Richard Dawkins in his publication ‘The Selfish Gene’ states that our bodies have been developed to do just that. The problem with this analysis is that it relegates our existence to a random accident via a lengthy biological process, in essence the value of our life loses its meaning and morality is relegated to individual taste, as Michael Ruse a Philosopher of Science states,

“Morality is a biological adaptation no less than are hands and feet and teeth... Morality is just an aid to survival and reproduction and any deeper meaning is illusory.”

The evolutionary perspective creates more problems than it solves as it cannot provide an adequate explanation for consciousness and the presence of our rational faculties. Taking consciousness as an example, how can a subjective immaterial reality come from a material substance? Consciousness is not a physical thing; it is not contained in any cell or biological structure. The most unchallenged and intuitive reality is that we are all aware, but we cannot describe or explain what this awareness is. One thing that we can be sure of is that consciousness cannot be explained biologically or chemically, the main reason for this is that evolution doesn’t discover consciousness; it’s actually the other way round. For evolution to try and explain the truth of consciousness would be tantamount to arguing in a circle! Even scientists recognise this, the physicist Gerald Schroeder points out that there is no real difference between a heap of sand and the brain of an Einstein. If those advocating a physical explanation for consciousness, bigger questions would need answering such as ‘how can certain bits of matter suddenly create a new reality that has no resemblance to matter?’

So if consciousness cannot be explained physically then the next question must be asked, ‘how did it come to be?’ The history of the universe indicates that

consciousness just spontaneously arose and language emerged without any evolutionary forerunner. Even the neo-atheists have failed to come to terms with the nature of consciousness or its source, because no physical explanation is coherent enough to convince. Even the neo-atheist Richard Dawkins admits defeat concerning consciousness, he states “We don’t know. We don’t understand it.”

In conclusion there are more reasons to believe that we have a deeper purpose rather than the other options of purposelessness and the cold valueless propagation of our DNA. Realising that we have a purpose is the best explanation via the inferences we make concerning the universe and the things around us. Even the Scottish Philosopher David Hume was attributed of saying “A wise man proportions his belief to the evidence”, so in this case, it would be wiser to conclude that human beings must have a purpose, and let us not forget that it nourishes us with a more significant explanation for our existence. However, the following question naturally arises: what is our purpose?

Death

“Every soul is certain to taste death.” (Quran 21:35)

“Death will overtake you no matter where you may be” (Quran 4:78)

Death is something we as living beings do not enjoy thinking about. It creates the realisation within us that all of the attachments we have built in this world are no longer going to be. Significantly, it awakens us to the brutal fact that we will no longer exist on the planet. There have been many philosophies on death, for example thinkers discussed that death is an interruption to life, like sleep or a disease, only permanent. Others explained that death is to be considered as part of life, something which every person has to come to terms with in order to live well; part of what is involved in accepting our finitude. Some thinkers claimed death is to be considered as a transition from this life to an afterlife, the eternal life of bliss or pain.

Whatever our views on death are, one thing we can all agree on is that it is something that we do not think about enough. This may sound morbid but there is a profound value of reflecting on death, it brings about the actualisation that we are all human beings with a short life. Our egos will no longer seem that important, our attachments and desires to the material world are put into perspective, and our lives are questioned; all of which is a source of great benefit, as the 11th century Theologian and Philosopher al-Ghazali said, “...in the recollection of death there is reward and merit.” Contemplating about death provokes thought and give us that window in our lives to really reflect on the ephemeral nature of our existence.

In light of death, how should we view life? What does it tell us about the importance we attach to things, and how does it deliver meaning to our existence? If we view life through the lenses of death we seem to be in an emotional and intellectual space where we can really assess our situation on this planet. How did I come to be? What should I be doing here? Where am I going? Death is the driving

force behind these critical questions, because the moment we recognise that this life is short and that we will breathe our last one day, it puts everything into perspective.

So let us reflect on death; imagine you are here one minute and the next you are no more. You have probably experienced loved ones that have passed away; how did you feel? Was there not a sense of loneliness, emptiness and lack of attachment to the things we used to take so seriously? Now if you were to taste death right now, as every human being will, what would that mean to you? What would you want to have done differently if you were given the chance to go back? What thoughts and ideas would you take more seriously? And what would your outlook be if you could re-live your life once experiencing the tragic reality of death?

The sad thing about death is that we can't go back to change our perspectives, or to think about life, or to challenge our outlook and detach ourselves from the empty nature of worldly life. The good thing though, something that we can begin to do is to take the brave step to deeply reflect on death, and best of all we could make all of these changes now, right this minute.

Thinking

“...for those who reflect.” (Quran 10:24)

“...and he taught Adam the names of everything...” (Quran 2:31)

“Do they not use their minds?” (Quran 6:32)

“Do they not reflect within themselves?” (Quran 30:8)

How should we think? How can we understand the world around us? What methods should we use to gain a true understanding of the world? These questions have puzzled the minds of many great thinkers throughout history. Our human tradition is full of debates and discussions trying to find answers. The likes of Locke, Hume and Kant, and many others have tried to provide answers to shed light on the perennial debate concerning our understanding of the world. Some of these thinkers, such as Locke, claimed that our knowledge of the world is limited to our perceptions only, in other words knowledge is dependent on our sense experience, also known as a posteriori in epistemology, which forms the empiricist tradition in philosophy.

Locke argued that our minds were a blank sheet, a tabula rasa, waiting to be written on by experience. Other thinkers like Leibniz argued, in his ‘Nouveaux Essais sur l’entendement humain’, that as human beings we have innate concepts and ideas that are necessary to understand the world around us, known as a priori in epistemology, which means that knowledge can be gained independent of sense experience, and forms the rationalist tradition in philosophy. Leibniz’s view seems to be a stronger position as it makes more sense, however some philosophers and scientists deny this and claim that you can’t think of examples of things we can know independent of our sense experience. This is not true; take the following examples into consideration:

- Circles have no corners.
- $4+4 = 8$.

- Time is irreversible.
- Everything that begins to exist has a cause.
- The whole is greater than its half (just eat half an apple!)
- Causality

Let's take causality as an example to illustrate that we can't just rely on sense experience. Causality can be known without experience because we bring it to all our experience, rather than our experience bringing it to us. It is like wearing yellow-tinted glasses, everything looks yellow not because of anything out there in the world, but because of the glasses through which we are looking at everything. The contention that this is just an assumption is not true because without causality we would not be able to have the concept of the real world, and we would not understand our sense experience. Take the following example into consideration; imagine you are looking at the White House in Washington DC. Your eyes may wander to the door, across the pillars, then to the roof and finally over to the front lawn. Now contrast this to another experience, you are on the river Thames in London and you see a boat floating past. What dictates the order in which you had these experiences? When you looked at the White House you had a choice to see the door first and then the pillars and so on. However with the boat you had no choice as the front of the boat was the first to appear.

The point to take here is that you would not have been able to make the distinction that some experiences are ordered by yourself and others are ordered independently, unless we had the innate idea of causality. In absence of causality our experience would be very different from the way it is. It would be a single sequence of experiences only: one thing after another.

So it seems that the correct way of forming conclusions is by using our innate ideas and the experiences of the world around us, in other words using rational thought or what some people call reason. Just relying on our experience of the material world would not be sufficient as a method of thinking as it would not be able to confirm political truths, moral truths, mathematical truths, logical truths, and let's not forget to mention a fundamental truth like causality.

Though we can understand the world around us using rational thought, how can we formulate an argument or verify our conclusions? Well, this lies in the study of logic which essentially means the principles of reasoning, with particular emphasis on the structure of our arguments.

Let's illustrate the use of logic in the following example: if our friend Mary says "John is coming to dinner tonight", and David says "Mary is not coming to dinner tonight". Is what they say consistent? Well, logic would tell us that if they are referring to the same person and the same day then no, their statements would not be consistent. However if they are referring to a different person or a different day then yes their statements would be consistent.

So let's combine the two processes. John says "Whatever begins to exist has a cause and the universe began to exist, therefore the universe has a cause". Now from a logical perspective it is a valid argument as the last statement "therefore the universe has a cause" logically follows from the first two statements. But this doesn't mean it is rational or reasonable. In order to find out that it is reasonable we would have to investigate using our innate ideas and our sense experience to see if the first two statements are true. If they are, then the conclusion will not only be a valid argument but it would also be a sound argument.

Just relying on empiricism would not give us an answer as it would lead us to suspend judgment on whether the universe has a cause or not because it cannot be sensed. However this would be equivalent of denying the existence of your great great great great great grandmother, because there is no empirical evidence for her existence. You may argue "but I wouldn't be here today!", that is true, but that would be using rational thought to form that conclusion, as you would have deduced that you must have had a great great great great great great great grandmother as all human beings must have had a grandmother in order to exist.

This is how all of us should start to think about life and the universe, so we could form the right conclusions using valid arguments.

World-view

"But perhaps you hate a thing and it is good for you; and perhaps you love a thing and Quran it is bad for you. And God Knows, while you know not." (Quran 2:216)

Live and let live, don't harm others and you'll be fine. This makes sense, right? Even to the point that it shouldn't be questioned. But why is this? Why do we automatically accept some ideas and reject others? Why do certain viewpoints seem agreeable to us yet we disagree with others, all without really thinking about them?

The answer lies in the concept of a world-view. A world-view is a philosophy of living that enables us to make sense of life and our daily experiences. The world-view we adopt affects the way we process ideas, and allows us to understand society and our place in it. A world-view is important in particular association with our society today – this is because the contemporary world has had a huge effect on human psychology. We seem unable to deal with the unpredictable changes and increased complexity of life – subsequently stress, uncertainty and frustration become common and our minds are overloaded with information. A world-view is the framework that ties all of this together, and allows us to understand life's complexity and unpredictability, it helps us make the critical decisions that will shape our future and our own selves, and it aids us in providing a picture of the whole.

World-views vary and can range from being shallow to comprehensive. A shallow world-view is one that just gives us the framework to react to day-to-day experiences, such as work and friendships. This type of world-view is usually formed via our previous experiences in life and it develops by creating templates of understanding the world by contemplating on our history with it. This type of world-

view is problematic as it obstructs us from progression by maintaining an inflexible fixation on the past, with no possibility of viewing the world in a positive or different way that will enable our transformation. It is limited in its scope as it becomes only as comprehensive as your experiences, and individually our experiences are very limited.

A comprehensive world-view, as discussed by the philosopher Leo Apostel, encompasses everything in life and it includes various components, for instance it provides a model for the world by answering the basic question “who are we?” In addition it provides an explanation usually answering “why is the world the way it is?” and “where did we come from?” Another important part of a comprehensive world-view includes extrapolating from the past into the future to answer the question “where are we going?” It should endeavour to answer “what is good and what is evil?”, in other words to include morality and ethics, while giving us a sense of purpose, direction and goals for our actions. Additionally, the answer to the question “what for?” may help us to understand the real meaning of life and a comprehensive world-view must answer “how should we act?” thereby helping us to solve practical problems. Lastly a comprehensive world-view should answer the question “what is true and what is false?”, this is equivalent to what in philosophy is called “epistemology” or “the theory of knowledge”, therefore it would allow us to distinguish between what is correct and what is incorrect.

For any situation there are various possible outcomes all of which are dictated by the world-view that someone adopts. Instead of discussing the actions, or fruits, of a world-view the foundations of the world-view should be challenged and validated. So the world-view that is more correct or has stronger intellectual foundations should be the one to adopt.

This is why when looking into Islam the primary focus should not be an assessment of women’s rights, clothing and on instances sensationalized by the media, because the assessment of these will be biased and skewed in line with your existing world-view. But rather, the intellectual foundations of any world-view should be assessed for its truth, and the one with greater reasons to believe in its truth should be the world-view to adopt, because it will be in line with the principle of: whatever comes from truth is true.

So let the journey begin!