

The freedom in a meaningless life

«Worries about... «objectivity» are characteristic of a secularized culture in which the scientist replaces the priest. The scientist is now seen as the person who keeps humanity in touch with something beyond itself.»

Richard Rorty: "Objectivity, Relativism and truth", Cambridge University Press, 1991: 35

The quote from Richard Rorty claims that worries about objectivity, the outside world, is the attempt of a secular culture to "keep humanity in touch with something beyond itself.". When he says that the scientist *replaces* the priest, it is clear that he is claiming that the absence of the priest, that is to say the absence of religion in a secular culture, has left a void. A function, which was previously done by the priest, is now being done by the scientist. The function being, according to Rorty, to keep humanity in touch with something beyond itself. In this text I will discuss whether the scientific search for objective truths is a successful one, or if it is simply an attempt of reaching towards something beyond ourselves. Additionally, I will discuss what the alternative, to insist on the epistemological skepticism that no truth can be known, would entail.

"God is dead", said Nietzsche, and found himself on unsure grounds. All fundamental questions that had previously been answered by religion was suddenly unanswered, and the existential responsibility that it is to justify one's life, and therefore the meaning of it, was laid upon him. Secularity spread across the western world, and more and more people were forced to take on this overwhelming responsibility. The solution, following the Age of Enlightenment, had been to rely on reason. Reason would guide us, to truth, morality, and meaning. The belief in true knowledge was strong. Now, the scientific advancements that humans have accomplished in the last century are so incredible, that it seems foolish to doubt whether science is a gateway to the objective reality. Of course it is, how else could we have gotten to the moon if we didn't know the laws of nature, and the mathematics behind it? Without knowledge of the objective reality, such an achievement seems impossible. However, such an argument relies on a false assumption: that we can only function in the world if we have true knowledge of it. Let's use electromagnetic waves as an example. The reason they are called electromagnetic is because two theories has been laid out for the phenomenon that is now called electromagnetic waves. Two separate theories, one explaining the phenomenon in terms of electric waves, the other in terms of magnetic waves. It became evident that the most precise way of viewing and calculating with such a phenomenon is to use both theories, hence electro-magnetic. The "waves" are, of course, not both electric and magnetic at once: it is rather a result of our need to put natural phenomena into categories (such as magnetic or electric) and the incompleteness of such categories when nature becomes too nuanced. Magnetic and electric are not real, objective features of reality, but they are very useful ways of *interpreting* reality into understandable, and *useful* ways of understanding reality (as we perceive it).

This radical epistemological skepticism does not entail that there is no value in science, but simple that there is no link between science and objective truths. The interpretive

understanding of science is strengthened by the impossibility to prove that our reality is not radically different than what we think it is. There is no way of refuting the hypothesis that we are all simply dreaming, that we belong to a completely different reality and that what we perceive is simply a result of stimulated brain activity. Such a hypothesis is extremely far-fetched, of course, but the point is simply to show that everything that is believed to be true, can be false.

Thomas Nagel points out this epistemological skepticism in his essay *The absurd*. The fact that we cannot know whether we are dreaming, or actually in the world we perceive, is a fact that is transferable to the feeling of absurd, he says. The things that we think are meaningful (objectively) in life, must be justified. In religious parts of the world, God has been the ultimate justifications of one's actions, but the withdrawal of the priest has left the responsibility of this justification unto the individual. The justifications that we have for our actions can be doubted, we can take a step back and question everything that we believe. What we find is that there is no satisfying justification, since the step back excludes one from the point of view where the justifications were made. The chain of justification must be justified outside of itself in order for the thing that is being justified to have intrinsic value, a justification which must also be justified, and so on. Our justifications collapse if we take away the premises that they are built upon. This collapse of our justifications is the root of the absurd: the sense of absurd comes from the collision between our expectations of a world with intrinsic value and the reality - which is devoid of any such thing. Moreover, Nagel points out that it is not the case that *this* world doesn't meet our expectations, because a world (that includes us) with intrinsic value is an impossibility. Objective meaning must be justified, and as Nagel has shown, every justification must also be justified, leading to an infinite regress of justification. This impossibility of a world with objective meaning is an aspect of the absurd which I think deserves more investigating than Nagel provides in his essay.

So far, the ground beneath the secular individual that has acknowledged epistemological skepticism, and therefore renounced both the priest and the scientist as gateways to something beyond themselves, is almost non-existent. There seems to be nowhere to turn. Everything: meaning, truth, morality can all be doubted, and no absolute truths are to our disposal. All that can be known, is that nothing can be known. Seemingly, a grim realization. However, the impossibility of a world (with us) which entails objective meaning is a fact that can help us shift our intuitions on the matter. Our baseline thinking is that there *should* exist objective meaning. Now we can see that this expectation is not only too demanding of the world, but actually illogical. What could it possibly entail that our lives are objectively meaningful? That we could be told this secret, the "meaning of life", and then finally be at ease? The objectivity of such a meaning would be fundamentally separated from the individual, since our subjective experience of the world is interpretive, and therefore separated from reality itself. Insight into such an objective meaning would therefore only be defeating, since it would be impossible to obtain. The illogical aspect of demanding a life with intrinsic value should stop us from deifying such a life.

The deifying of intrinsic value is something that is essential in our lives. In order to escape the existential dread of having to justify our lives, we base our lives on something beyond ourselves, which we give intrinsic value: money, beauty, truth, art. We all need to pursue money, but only because it has instrumental value: it lets us buy things such as food and is

therefore crucial to survival. There are however many examples of people who pursue money to a degree where the pursuit can no longer be justified by its instrumental value. They have started to pursue it, for its own sake. All of the aforementioned examples (money, beauty, truth, art) have instrumental value, and by instrumental value, I do not mean that they can only serve as a tool for survival, or of happiness. They can also be of instrumental value because they can give a sense of *subjective* meaning. If one finds subjective meaning in pursuing something beyond themselves, the pursuit can be justified. Then the justification of one's action is simply that it gives a sense of meaning. Such a justification cannot be doubted since it does not claim that the action is objectively meaningful, only that it is meaningful for the individual. The important difference lies in the dept of one's seriousness. If one were to lose a lot of money or scar one's face severely in a car crash, the lack of intrinsic value in money and beauty means that the events haven't reduced any meaning. The amount of objective meaning is still the same: none. Here lies the superpower of the epistemological skepticism: it is always possible to trivialize a bad situation by taking the step back and see it as insignificant as it is. The only value that the situation had was in the subjective sense of meaningfulness, which can always be transferred to a new project.

In contrast to Nagel, I do believe that we should face our lives with seriousness in the sense that we should strive for achieving a sense of subjective meaning. This is a seriousness that can not result in a sense of absurdity, since the source of subjective meaning actually is real, and a step back to doubt such a claim does no harm to it. Nagel argues that taking ourselves this seriously is in contrast to reality, because nothing we do matter, ultimately. However, the only way that we don't matter, is in contrast to a possible world where we would matter, ultimately. As we have shown, such a world could not exist, and such a thought is illogical. Therefore, we have to reevaluate what it means to *matter*. The separated realities of objectivity and subjectivity makes it irrational to transfer objective criteria unto subjects. Therefore, mattering depends only on the subjective feeling of meaning.

In conclusion, it is a human need to make sense of the world. It is essential to categorize and interpret reality in order to function, and as to not lose our grip on the outside world. This is why scientific interpretations of reality is sometimes, falsely, thought to be reality itself. The epistemological skepticism is therefore not a theory to base one's identity on. Rather, it is an acknowledgment of our uncertainty that helps us from pursuing a life in which we expect something outside of ourselves to give us a sense of meaning. The sense of meaning comes from within, and the pursuit of a life with intrinsic value will therefore be unsuccessful. The fact that life is devoid of objective meaning gives us the freedom to pursue it ourselves, as we want to.