

**Meetup Lesson 3 Outline:  
The Human Quest for Meaning: When We Ask “Why” Questions  
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**Introduction**

At our last Meetup, we concluded that there are so many forces beyond our control, but we are still responsible for our own decisions and actions, as well as our own future, because of the gift of free will and human agency. We also stressed the importance of understanding the fundamental principle of personal autonomy within the constraints of the larger scheme of things.

**A Time for Everything**

Basically, we have little control over what happens to us. There are good days and there are bad days, but they are not in our hands. Solomon points out that there is a time for everything (Ecc. 3:1-9, NIV):

“A time to weep and a time to laugh  
A time to mourn and a time to dance

A time to search and a time to give up  
A time to keep and a time to throw away”

**What Are You Seeking?**

- Everybody is after something.
- Are you looking for happiness and love?
- Are you seeking wisdom and understanding?
- But at times it may be better to stop the search.
- Sometimes “waiting” or “doing nothing” may be the best.

**The Quest for Meaning Scale (QMS)**

The 8 major existential questions are:

1. Who am I?
2. How and where do I find happiness?
3. What should I do with my life?
4. How can I avoid making the wrong choices in the major areas of my life?
5. Where do I belong?
6. What is the point of all my striving?
7. What will happen to me after I die?
8. What would make my life more meaningful and significant?

### **Three Types of Responses**

There are three types of responses to existential quest:

1. Not searching – i.e. existentially indifferent.
2. Actively engaged in different stages of the meaning quest.
3. Suspension of the quest because “I have found the answer.”

### **Luck and Fate Intervene**

“But time and chance happen to them all...  
 No man knows when his hour will come...  
 As fish are caught in a cruel net  
 Or birds are trapped by evil times,  
 So men are trapped by evil times  
 That fall unexpectedly upon them”  
 (Ecc. 9:11-12, NIV)

### **Free Will and Human Agency**

Fate may dictate what happens to us and God may preordain our steps, but our happiness, well-being and our future depends:

- How we react to events that happen to us.
- How we relate to God and others.
- How we make sense of life.
- How we answer existential questions.

We need to take ownership of our own lives and decide how to move forward.

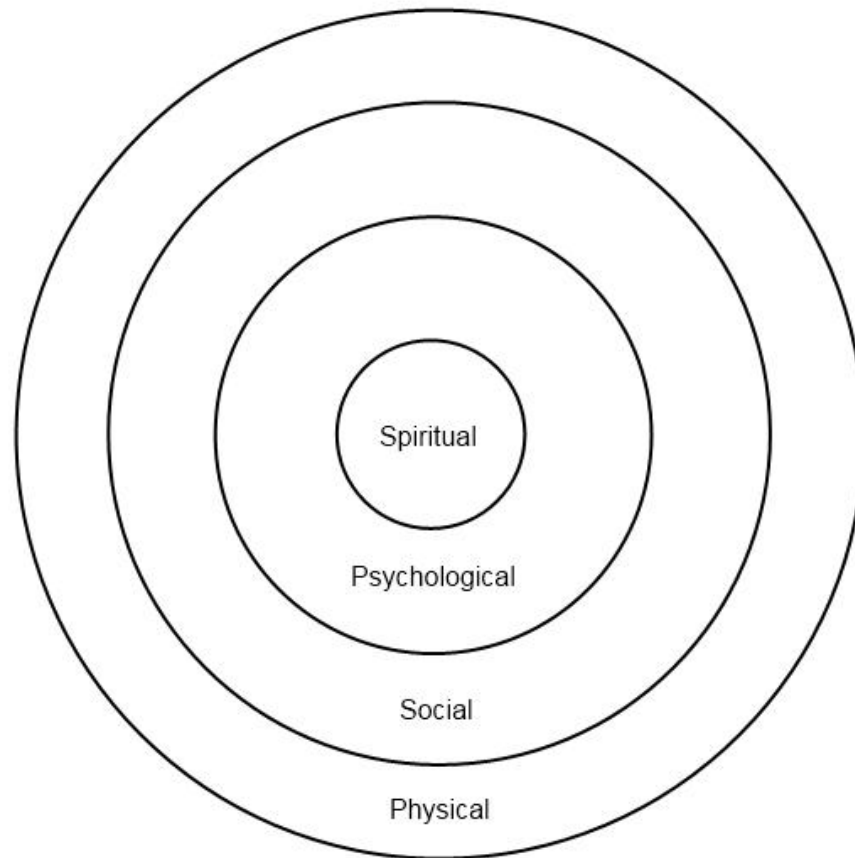
### **The UCLA Study on Spontaneous Attribution (Wong & Weiner, 1981)**

- People do engage in spontaneous attribution searches.
- When the outcomes are unexpected or negative.
- Causal versus existential attributions.
- People are lay scientists and lay philosophers.

### **The Human Quest for Meaning**

- The ability to ask “why” questions sets us apart from animals.
- Primates and infants may develop self-awareness: “The Mirror Test”.
- Asking, “Who am I?” is a sign of self-consciousness and cognitive development.

### The Four Dimensions of the Self



### Self-Inquiry and the Spiritual Self

- The real self is the spiritual core of our being consisting of our fundamental beliefs, core values, ultimate concerns, and the essence of personal history.
- Who we are to others may be different from who we really are on the inside.
- Spiritual beliefs provide a sense of order or coherence in the midst of uncertainties.
- Spirituality enables us to create meaning and understand the mysteries of life.

### Loss of Innocence

*“Then the eyes of both of them were opened, and they realized they were naked... and they hid from the Lord God.” (Genesis 3: 7-8)*

- After eating the forbidden fruit, Adam and Eve became self-conscious.
- Became aware of and embarrassed about their nakedness & sinfulness
- Knew “experientially” the evil of violating spiritual law and the consequence of shame, guilt, fear, confusion, lostness, and alienation.

### **Restoring a Healthy Sense of Self**

- “The unexamined life is not worth living.” (Socrates)
- “Know thyself.” (Socrates)
- Confronting the dark sides of the self.
- Reconciling the negative and positive aspects of the self.
- Avoiding illusions and delusions of the self.
- Make sense of the self and one’s role in the world.
- Self-concept is an ongoing process of meaning-making and meaning-reconstruction.

### **The Need for Self-Reflection**

Self-reflection on our experiences enables us to:

- Go beyond the mechanical and instinctual level of existence.
- Cope with the predicaments and paradoxes in life.
- Discover what really matters.
- Develop an open and healthy sense of self and one’s place in the world.
- How we see ourselves is more important for our well-being than what we are or what we possess.
- A sense of emptiness and uselessness can result from the absence of a consistent sense of self as a worthwhile person.

### **Reflection Questions**

- Reflect on one unmet need and discover something new about yourself.
- Can you articulate your worldview or philosophy of life?
- In hindsight, can you detect any defensiveness or denial in your responses when you completed the QMS?
- Do you think that you now have a better sense of who you are and your place in the world after this lesson?