

6. “The whole point of knowledge is to produce both meaning and purpose in our personal lives.”

To what extent do you agree with this statement?

All mimsy borogoves are mimsy. Is this knowledge? Does this add purpose to our lives?

The point of knowledge is the reason it exists. I believe that humans create knowledge for many different reasons, and producing purpose in our lives is not the *whole* point of knowledge. These reasons are particularly diverse for knowledge in history and arts, created through emotion and sense-perception. This title is broad enough even without discussing meaning and personal lives, so I will only focus on purpose in *our* lives: the reason why we, plural, want to live.

At the level of this essay, an adequate definition of knowledge is justified true belief. Belief needs human thinkers, truth needs human testers, and justification needs human translators. These thinkers, testers, and translators all help create knowledge, and their reasons for thinking, testing, and translating are often different. Different people who do not communicate with each other can independently reach the same knowledge, through different reasons. Although the Penrose triangle is associated with Roger Penrose, who designed it in 1954 out of mathematical curiosity, Oscar Reutersvärd had created such impossible objects since 1934, as an artistic pursuit (Alexeev). Both reasons may produce purpose in our lives, but they are *different* reasons.

These different reasons may not be to add purpose. Imagine that “mimsy” is an adjective and “borogoves” a plural noun. “All mimsy borogoves are mimsy” is a belief. If we accept the truth of “all [adjective] [plural noun] are [adjective]”, then it follows that all mimsy borogoves must be mimsy, and the belief becomes knowledge. But how does this affect our lives at all?

Latin is a historically important language that added purpose to many lives by uniting a culture through common communication. However, Latin is now a dead language; knowledge of Latin cannot add purpose to anyone's life by improving communication anymore. Yet, there may exist scholars so enthusiastic that their *pursuit* of knowledge about Latin is why they want to live.

The creators of *Plan 9 from Outer Space* likely made the movie for profit and not to produce purpose in us viewers' lives. However, it has a dedicated cult following, some members of which—namely me—have changed their perspective on life from the emotional effect of its sheer incompetence. But a movie is not knowledge, so this is not really an example of knowledge that was not created to produce purpose in our lives. What this is, is an example of how we can find purpose in our lives from *any* knowledge, regardless of *why* the knowledge was created.

The mimsy borogoves in “Jabberwocky” affect our lives because they give us a playful sense of whimsy, from which enthusiastic readers may derive in their lives some purpose. Perhaps then the whole point of knowledge really is to produce purpose in the lives of these impressionistic people. But is that the *only* possible reason why someone created that knowledge?

Creating knowledge is different from receiving knowledge. When we receive personal knowledge through language, we are given a belief without choice, a truth without testing, and a justification based solely on credibility. In contrast, creating new knowledge involves finding a belief, testing for its truth, and deriving some justification. There are reasons that influence our actions at each of these steps, many of which do not consider producing purpose in our lives.

We must choose something to believe in before we can investigate its validity as knowledge. Sometimes these choices serve to produce purpose, as when Plato pondered the nature of justice in life. Sometimes these choices unintentionally produce purpose, as how astrology focussed stargazers' attention on horoscopes and fortunes until the advent of astronomy. Sometimes these choices produce unwanted purpose, as emotion—my fascination with

philosophy—made me question my purpose in life when my initial objective was to solidify it. Sometimes these choices are not choices at all. If we believe what we see, every object we see through sense-perception creates a new belief: that it exists. Although we could close our eyes, we cannot with eyes open focus only on sights that produce purpose in our lives. Sometimes, I see a green hill, know it exists . . . and continue on. I create knowledge from sense-perception, but not *only* to produce some purpose in my life. The knowledge just exists, without any point.

So we cannot really control what we know, not in the sciences, not in everyday life, and certainly not in history, where the only beliefs we can consider are taken from historical records. I doubt the knowledge in these records is always recorded to produce purpose in, not their past, but our present lives, especially in mundane land titles, wills, and so forth. In historical literature too, Homer's *The Odyssey* began as an oral performance, so its content could only produce purpose for his contemporaries, not for us in the present, until it was written down. However, some historical records are written precisely for posterity, such as the diary of Anne Frank after she heard a radio broadcast on 1944 March 29 suggesting that people keep diaries during the war for future generations (Frank 244). Frank, recognizing the significance of her situation, decided henceforth to write her diary specifically to produce purpose in our present lives.

Did Lewis Carroll write *Alice's Adventures in Wonderland* for his friend's daughter, Alice Liddell ("The Background & History of Alice in Wonderland")? Or did he write it to produce purpose in our lives, 150 years later? Both are possible.

After we have chosen a belief, often without trying to produce purpose in our lives, we must investigate its truth to get knowledge. In the natural sciences, the scientific method works well to identify false beliefs. This is because reality is distinct from our beliefs: no matter how hard we wish a red pill to be a blue pill, the pill does not change. By testing to see if our beliefs correspond with reality, the scientific method ensures that we do not make up arbitrary reasons.

The reality of history and arts is less distinct from our beliefs. All we know in history are facts derived from observation, and even those we cannot really know: perhaps Anne Frank's diary was written by another. Similarly, the knowledge in arts that correspond to reality—the language of a novel, the pitch of an instrument, the style of a dance—are often insufficient for us to make any new conclusions. Instead of corresponding with reality, truth and thus knowledge in history and arts rely on forming theories whose explanations cohere with existing knowledge.

“Jabberwocky” is a nonsense poem in a whimsical book, *Through the Looking-Glass* (Carroll). I cannot test if this corresponds to reality, for I cannot quantify books' whimsicalness, yet I still know that nonsense books are not written to produce purpose in our lives. I know this because none of the nonsense books I have read have changed my perspectives, and because this coheres with my beliefs that nonsense is not serious and life purposes are. Is this knowledge?

It is knowledge founded primarily on a personal interpretation. Because historical and artistic interpretations rely on coherence, which varies drastically between individuals with different webs of belief, perhaps creators of knowledge in these areas *can* produce purpose in our lives. A Vietnam hawk, whose purpose is to justify his squad's casualties, points out how the United States forced North Vietnam to sign a ceasefire with Operation Linebacker II, ignoring the inevitable Communist reunification. An expressionist, aiming to rediscover beauty in the aftermath of World War II, denounces impressionist art as meaningless after such chaos.

But when knowledge is grounded in reality, as in the sciences, there is less freedom of personal interpretation and so less freedom to create knowledge to produce purpose in our lives. A physicist noticing that the period  $T$  of a pendulum increases in proportion to the square root of the length  $L$  of its rod cannot but conclude that the two are related:  $T \propto \sqrt{L}$ . A powerful scientific heuristic is Occam's razor, the principle that we should take the correct explanation with the

fewest assumptions. This is a pragmatic theory of truth, and ensured that heliocentrism, which relies only on the Universal Law of Gravitation, overtook geocentrism, which included complicated unexplained epicycles to account for the planets' irregular orbits. Art critics and historians who apply Occam's razor to their areas decrease our freedom to entertain elaborate explanations. When we consider all the knowledge we have about a situation, it becomes difficult to create an interpretation that *does* produce purpose in our lives.

We may justify beliefs in arts and history to produce purpose in our lives. But experts who borrow scientific methods may find only an explanation of facts, with no additional purpose. We may choose beliefs so that they produce purpose in our lives. But sense-perception and emotion make us consider purposeless beliefs all the time, much of which becomes knowledge. We may find, for every piece of knowledge, some people whose lives are defined by it. But when we create knowledge, we do not always add meaning to our lives.

Are all mimsy borogoves mimsy? Was Carroll trying to produce purpose in our lives? No. Lewis Carroll never wrote "all mimsy borogoves are mimsy". I created that knowledge to produce no purpose in our lives whatsoever. Though one may find some purpose in it, its point was not to do so. The whole point of knowledge cannot be to produce purpose in our lives, because the point of "all mimsy borogoves are mimsy" was to produce nothing.

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