Evan Stein

Philosophy Essay: Essay 1

 Samelson starts the chapter (titled portrait of you as Odysseus) by explaining the importance philosophical questions have to humans. He cites many examples of this throughout the chapter to prove his point. He shows why this makes us different to other animals and how it gives our lives more meaning. However, fault can be found is his explanation as to what makes good philosophy, as his explanation seems to broad.

Most animals grasp the concept of rationality, being able to make decisions that they feel benefit them the most. The one difference humans have with separates us from all other animals is the ability to ask philosophical questions and have consciousness. This along with things like art, music and other ways of expression give us humanity. Humans seem to be the only animals that search for meaning in their lives; Survival is not the only thing we strive for. He uses a story of a squirrel to show rationality in other animals. In the story, a cat chases the squirrel up the tree and has him stuck at the end of a branch. The squirrel looks and the cat, looks at the ground, then jumps. This shows rational thinking in the squirrel as he takes his best bet at living by jumping from the tree. If this type of thinking isn't what makes us different from animals, then our philosophical thoughts and ideas must be. But is this thinking rationality? Samuelson goes on the explain the difference between mental calculations and true rationality. According to Aristotle, rationality is also is having the ability to change our values “ Our rationality involves a strange looping in our nature. We’re capable of revising our very being, of reordering our values, of turning our calculated abilities back onto us”(7). Philosophy is only one of the ways humans are rational.

Samuelson goes on to make the argument that all philosophy should be judged on how it makes someone live”well”. He cites past examples of people turning to philosophical ways of thinking in times of worry. Although science and morals are a big part of philosophy, it all comes down to the search for a good way of life. During these times, philosophy becomes a need rather than a practice. This has caused philosophers like Confucius to try and seek for a better culture to live in. It seems the darkest times have created some of the greatest Philosophical ideas.

The chapter ends with the story of Odysseus death. In death, four warriors were given the option to choose what they wanted to be reincarnated as. The first 3 warriors choose animals due to they things they faced in their human lives. Odysseus choose the average man to come back as. This shows that the same philosophical ideas can be applied to two completely different lifestyles. Odysseus grew up a great leader with a full life, yet it seems the most valuable thing he got in life was his ways of moral philosophical thinking, Samuelson uses a quote from Montaigne to show this, “you can attach the whole of moral philosophy to a commonplace private life just as well as to one of richer stuff”(14). The chapter ends with an intriguing poem from Cavafy which uses the story of Ithaca to represent life. To summarize, it says that Ithaca is the ultimate goal, but travel slow because the real riches are achieved on the journey. The interesting part about this is Ithaca in the Odyssey was always the end goal for the book. Yet Cavafy says that the real purpose of the journey came from what happened along the way. The journey to the finish is one that should go untimed. The quote can be related to our lives, as we tend to rush through life. We should instead take life slow and enjoy the little things.

The one flaw that can be found is Samuesons writing is the idea that good philosophical writing betters one's life. This can be a misleading statement as people will follow a philosophical way of thinking due to its appealing nature rather then the more truthful path. The statement makes it seem that ideas that lead to better lives are better when evaluating its worth. But does truth not play a role in this? The concept of Philosophy doesn't seem to have a right or wrong, but there can be a more truthful way of thinking based on facts and evidence. Based on Samuelson's evaluation of different texts in the chapters, he shows he can decipher right and wrong, so truth should have been stated in the argument for what makes good philosophical ideologies. Despite this, he makes a good argument for what the purpose of Philosophy is and its worth in today's society and what its done in history. Scott cites events like the warring states and the Greeks loss to the spartans as sparks for great philosophers to give people ideas to give life meaning. At those points, it becomes a necessity instead of a practice. This is where it was clarified what his argument is about true Philosophy. However, truthfulness is not mentioned at all, nor the logicality of ideas. The concept of giving meaning to people's lives should have been accompanied with the idea of it being backed with evidence and sense. Humans by nature seek the right answer instead of the most attractive. During times of distress people or more likely to move towards concepts that better suit them, because they are desperate for meaning. While this may help with the morale of civilizations, it can stray people farther from rational thinking. Rational thinking is what differentiates us from other animals, so it's important that it is maintained no matter what the circumstances. Unfounded ideas during times of desperation could create illogical thinkers who are zombies to fulfilling ideas. A concept with sense that can also make someone life a better life seems to be worth the most. While Philosophy can lead to a better life, it seems the search for truth is more important than this, which is failed to be explained in the chapter.

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Essay 2

 The chapter (the ecstasy without a name), stays focused on the concept of religious ecstasy and feeling the presence of god. Scott attempts to prove that just because you cant see God, doesn't mean he can’t exist. It is a simple premise, but he uses a story of al-Ghazali and his journey to becoming a wise man as an example to further this idea.

Samuelson starts the chapter by using Santa Claus as an example of how belief in religion works. He asks his class if they should subject their kids to the idea of Santa Claus. The kids that believe they should teach Santa Claus grew up with the idea, while the kids who disagree grew up not believing in Santa Claus. He uses this as an example of how we are predetermined what to believe something based on what are parents teach,”When I ask my students if it worthwhile to perpetuate the myth of Santa, almost to a person all who once believed think they should, and those who never believed think they shouldn't”(82). The example is what is called a epistemological crisis. What one person's natural, someone else could find preposterous. This baffles Scott as people understand this yet remain in their ways. He uses the metaphor that these people are groundhogs who come out, see their shadow, then go right back in. Samuelson then goes into the story of al-Ghazali. al-Ghazali was born in 1011 AD.He was a well off Muslim man studying Islamic law who eventually became an advisor to the King. His life was going great for him,until it struck him he didn't know the true meaning of Islam. He knew Islamic law backward and forward, yet he still a void in him. The premise of parents determining our beliefs haunted him, so he sought out further knowledge.

First, al-Ghazali begins by questioning sense data, facts observed using the 5 senses. This is the main argument used against religion by Atheist. They claim since god cant be seen, he must not be real. al-Ghazali debunks this by showing that senses are not the most reliable. The examples he uses show how a trees shadow looks like it is completely still to us, yet it is always moving. Also, he uses the example of how stars look little to us, but are in fact huge. He claims that just because we can't fathom the sight of a higher power, doesnt mean theres no possibility of its existence.

 Samuelson's understands the concept of our senses not being completely accurate, but he still can’t fathom how we trust the tales of angels and holiness. al-Ghazali also becomes sceptical, which leads him into more despair. He then starts to move to different religions and philosophy schools in search of the truth. To his dismay, all he finds is more leaders and holy text. Samuelson explains how people who seek the truth end up resorting to the easy way out and simply choosing something to follow. To find the god, one must push their limits.

 After constant search al-Ghazali finds a group called the Sufis. They believe the only way to truly believe is to be in a state of certainty. To do this he must go through a ten year soul cleansing to prepare himself to be in god's presence. When he subjected himself to this he found god. The state he is put in cannot be explained by words, so it's hard to comprehend . It can be compared to two people falling in love. al-Ghazali is a hopeless romantic in search of a true love. Someone who will endlessly search for this love and refuse to come up short. This analogy summarizes how the spiritual journey should be. If someone lacks the effort and “falls in love” with the first person they get into relationship with, it is not true love.

 The idea of conforming versus actually believing is the idea of a conformist and a mystic. As Samuelson says, a conformist opens up holy text and accepts it because he is told so. A mystic opens it and comprehends it because they truly believe it is holy. After al-Ghazali goes through this transformation, he finds it hard to go back to his normal life. He feels it's his duty. Doing so will move him from being a learner to being a teacher, or more like a doctor He is a doctor that can analyze and prescribe medicine based on his past experiences.

 A study done at Laurentian University shows how a helmet with electromagnetic coils can trigger a person brain into believing another presence can be found in the room, some say it feels like god. For some Atheists, this is enough to prove religion as only a delusional process our brain does. Mystics would not find this to be surprising as they know a change in the body must be performed to feel this presence. Samuelson believes the argument that not being able to see or feel god cannot debunk existence, feeling the higher power may be something our simple minds and limited energy cannot achieve.

 The chapter ends with the author stating that most people have experienced some form of religious ecstasy in their lives. Whether it is a true connection or simply observing the beauty of life and nature. People tend to not communicate these feelings or experiences, due to them being beyond nature. He tells a story of a girl named Pam who he felt attraction toward. As they were playing in the snow, she fell backwards into him, he embraced her as they both started to tumble down the hill. Right before they ground it seemed as if time slowed, and he felt this amazing sensation of love which can not be explained. Having this experience at a young age of 9 years old is quite mystical as a 9 year old would have no experience to grasp this feeling yet he did.

 The one issue to be had with the argument is the attack on sense data. al-Ghazali uses the example of stars and a tree shadow as examples for how our senses can trick us. The problem with this argument is the two things stated can still be proven with the senses. For example, simply measuring where the shadow is and observing it proves that it is moving. Calculating distance and the size it appears can get the true size of the star. These premises can be calculated, while the existence of god cannot be proved or measured. Comparing these things are like comparing apples to oranges. Now maybe it wasn't meant to be directly compared, but just an example. Yet it still was a big part of the argument that was a weak point.

 The one issue I had with the chapter was the fact that the spiritual journey could come short. Many people have searched far and wide for their spirituality but come up short in the end. When you've tried your best and all you've ended up with is despair, was it worth it to go in the first place. This is a risk that should have been mentioned in the text as it's a common occurrence. The rigorous spiritual journey should only be for those whose life goal is to find the higher judge. For the average person, spending 10 years away from your life to attempt and find this is not worth it. While the story of al-Ghazali and his finds are intriguing, at this point in life it seems out of reach to achieve. This eliminates the purpose of the story, as the story was meant to intrigue the reader. Yet it's only left more questions and doubt.

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Essay 3

 The chapter titled The terrifying distance of stars, is a misleading title as the chapter touches lightly on the vastness of the universe. The chapters main focus is the probability of a god. It also touches on how one who is sceptical should go about choosing what to believe.

 Samuelson starts off by explaining how mystical the stars were in medieval times. At the time, the only concept they had was up and down. It seems as if the stars had great height. But knowing what we know now, we measure stars by distance. This Distance has given some people a great anxiety for how small the Earth is compared the the universe.

 Scott then goes into the backstory of Blaise Pascal, the man who is the main focus of the chapter. Pascal lived a great life with many accomplishments. Along the way, his father suffered a injury to his hip. His doctors convinced the family to leave the Catholic church to move to Jansenism. The practice was banned by the pope due to its unorthodox nature. During the fall of 1654, Pascal had a mystical experience. His horses and carriage plummeted off the side of a large cliff before they came across a bridge. Pascal exited the carriage then fainted overwhelming nature of the incident. When he awoke, he wrote down in his notes, Fire. God of Abraham, God of Isaac, God of Jacob, not of the philosophers and scholars. I will not forget thy word Amen”(121). This pushed Pascal into being a more religious and devoted man of Christianity. He sought to defend Christianity and the laws of the bible. He went on to write two books on his thoughts and revelations.Pascal breaks down our lives to three parts, inconstancy, boredom and anxiety. When we feel anxiety towards death, we start to distract ourselves with things to do that makes us feel happy. This is similar to the Authentic response to Absurdity . After we become bored of these things, we get the anxiety back, so we find something new to distract ourselves. Although the process sounds monotonous and a waste of time, Pascal sees nothing wrong with this. He thinks we should try our best to ignore death and try to find happiness the best we can. Pascal goes on to explain the wretchedness of people and how the commandments go unfollowed. Following all the commandments is something that pretty much all humans on this Earth have not completed.

 Pascal also believes being agnostic is wrong and should not be done. His reasoning for this is that ether there will be a God, or not a God. So it doesn't make sense for someone to be on the fence. He says Agnosticism is just the denial of what you stake your life on. Pascal thinks an agnostic is an atheist who doesn't have the guts to say he is a atheist. Although he has no regard for agnostics, he still respects Atheists and their decision to live a life without god's guidance. The idea of going one way or another is much like a coin flip. But is this coin flip true belief or simply just commiting out of fear for god's judgement? Pascal believes if someone commits himself to religious teachings, they will eventually believe the teachings. The belief created from this seems artificial and simply a trick of the mind. Pascal believes the decision to be religious outweighs the atheist approach, “The mathematical point is that even if there are potential gains to being an Atheist, they are goods, whereas the good of god is infinite”(131). Atheists obviously disagree, they feel that choosing religious approach strips them of some of life's gifts. So in the end if there is no god, was it worth it to restrict our lives. The decision of choosing faith seems more like the lottery then a coin flip.A god or no afterlife are not the only two options. Due to the insane amount of options, its anyone's bet to what actually happens.

 Pascal finds a sense of Absurdity in human nature. Which is why he chooses Christianity as it account for this. He finds Islam and Judaism to “make too much sense”. Though Pascal believes that the commandments should be followed, it would make no sense for heaven to only take those who have done this. Heaven would be quite empty, “If obedience to God’s law is a necessary requirement of salvation, then heaven would self destruct”(133). This is where his attraction to christianity comes from. He feels that Christianity understands these natures and provides salvation for those who violate yet still seek God's love.

 The chapter ends with writing from one of Samuelson's students. The student claimed he attempted to fake it and become Christian, but did not feel right. This is Pascal's statements main flaw. Simply reiterating scripture and participating in church does not turn into belief. The decision to commit is not that simple, and it's ignorant to think choosing will always lead to belief in the end.

 Pascals views on religion and decision were all over the place with no real backing. His disregard for those who are confused has made his opinions on belief obsolete. The truth is many people don't know what to believe, so they remain open minded and wait to decide what they find to be truth. Where is the ignorance in this? There isn’t any. In the modern day where everything is based off fact, it's hard for people to rely on faith to dictate how their lives are lived. This has made his writing on religion intriguing, but obsolete in the modern day.

 Samuelson seems to agree that Pascals view is flawed, yet I don't think the choice of religion is as simple as a gamble as stated by Samuelson. I think experiences can play a part in the gamble for some people. Although there will still be the possibility of no afterlife, having a experience where someone feels a godly change the odds for them. We can only gain these odds if we too experience this. Hearing a mystical story does not change anything for humans as we will always feel Scepticism towards these stories. The feeling of certainty in religion does not change odds, it just gives the people who have it a more relief and trust in the decision they've made. It makes the journey to being spiritual even more important, as it seems afterlife isn't the most important thing people seek. It is the calm sense of mind it gives people to live their lives with more meaning. Our time on this Earth is limited, so when we commit ourselves to a search for meaning, it's important we don't devote our whole life too this search. If we don't have distractions to give us happiness, despair will creep up quick.