



First World Problems

Paul Froese on the problem of finding meaning

Those of us lucky enough to live in parts of the world that are blessed with economic prosperity, modern medicine, and the latest technological gadgets often chide each other when we complain about our petty troubles. Aren't most of our struggles just self-centred 'First World problems'? People living in the worst conditions around the globe, we think, would kill for the comfort and ease we take for granted. Currently, tens of thousands of refugees are clamoring to get into post-industrial countries and hopefully escape their dreadful Third World problems.

Still, not all First World problems are trivial. Data from the Gallup World Poll, which includes over 140 countries, indicates that people living in the wealthiest parts of the world are the ones *most* likely to feel that life does not have a purpose. A purposeless life is more than just a philosophical conundrum; it is an indicator of poor mental health, poor self-esteem, and deep feelings of depression and fatalism. It appears that all of our riches, technologies, and easy living have done little to address the age-old question 'What is the meaning of life?'. In fact, our 'progress' has somehow made it more difficult to come up with a satisfying answer.

A multi-faceted industry has been created to solve this problem. Positive psychologists, religious proselytizers, self-help coaches, and inspirational memoirists have all stepped into the breach, offering to help us find a purpose-driven life. We have Rick Warren and Deepak Chopra, and if all else fails, Oprah. Yet somehow, the poorest of the poor in places where they've never heard of Tony Robbins have a much better sense of who they are and what they should be doing.

Perhaps this is not so surprising. Tragedy and hardship might make life's meaning clearer. One's purpose is to simply survive. This is how humans have been living for thousands of years. Through the great ordeals of history—famine, war, natural disaster—humans have always found reasons to persevere. And when you are worried about finding food, water, and shelter, your life's goals become focused and definite.

The modern luxuries of individual choice and religious freedom have created a new reality, one in which life can have multiple meanings. As philosopher **Charles Taylor** notes, modern living brings with it the ability to believe in one, none, or many philosophies of life.

Today, nearly three out of five Americans say they are currently trying to 'find themselves'. The search for self has become the central problem of First World living. This explains the enormous popularity of the self-help industry and the fact that so many people in wealthy countries say that they feel adrift and without purpose.

Social theorists and critics have long feared the rise of meaninglessness in modern societies. In the early Twentieth Century, sociologist **Max Weber** warned that science and rationalization would create a disenchanted world, rendering mysticism and wonderment obsolete. By the 1950s, psychologist **Rollo May** diagnosed an epidemic of existential 'emptiness' spreading throughout the United States. They had helped win WWII and were in the midst of an economic boom, yet many Americans supposedly felt that they lacked purpose.

Today, individual disenchantment is common. We are inundated with extreme stories of disaffected loners who turn their emptiness into inhumanity—from internet trolls bent on spreading anonymous hate to crazed gunmen killing indiscriminately. But most who are existentially lost don't turn to such exaggerated forms of viciousness. Rather, their loss of purpose leaves them listless, bored, and adrift. They are not hostile to the world but despondently fatalistic.

Are these people's lack of purpose a function of cultural secularization? Here are three clear trends:

- Wealthier countries, on average, contain fewer purposeful people.
- Wealthier countries, on average, contain fewer religious people.
- Countries with a lot of religious people, on average, tend to have a lot of purposeful people.

But these distinct relationships are not explanatory. Not all religious people feel purposeful and not all secular individuals are without purpose. In fact, in some very religious countries, like Poland, a substantial proportion of people (16%) say that they lack any sense of meaning in their lives. The case of Poland indicates that the growth of meaninglessness is not only about a culture losing its religion. In fact, secular communities can be entirely purpose-driven and religious groups can drift toward despair. It is not religiosity or secularity per se that creates a world devoid of meaning, but the complications of pluralism.

The First World citizen ponders the meaning of her life fully conscious of the plethora of options. She is *free* to become a Christian, a Muslim, a Buddhist, a New Ager, a Secular Humanist, a New Atheist, a careerist, a lover, an artist, and even a nihilist. This freedom is a wonderful blessing. In traditional religious cultures, the purpose of life is ordained. This lack of choice can be oppressive and limiting, assigning women, minority groups, and outsiders roles of servitude. But freedom always comes with a cost.

The modern seeker can't take it for granted that her life will have purpose. She has to discover one for herself. Countless paths are available, but so is the prospect that life will have no meaning. That burden is hers alone to bear. This is the unhappy side effect of pluralism and choice.

What's more, even the most determined seeker is helpless without social support. Individual purpose has always been a collective project. In rich and poor countries alike, the main predictor of whether a person feels a purpose to life is the extent to which she also feels part of her community. So the poorest of the poor around world retain their sense of purpose when they still feel like a significant part of a common culture. These statistical relationships confirm something that **Emile Durkheim** told us a century ago; that is, social integration is the very foundation of human meaning.

So who lacks integration and why? It is largely the poor and elderly *within* the post-industrial world

who feel the loss of meaning most. Third World poverty clearly deprives individuals of basic needs and wants. But in the First World poverty routinely deprives individuals of purpose because it divests them of moral integration into the social whole.

Modern existential emptiness has been incorrectly assumed to infect the intellectual or elite classes first. Aren't they the ones most knowledgeable about the fathomless approaches to life? Aren't they the least likely to accept traditional beliefs and values? In the United States, wealth and education strongly predict a rejection of the idea that one's life is given meaning by some larger cosmic plan. Citizens of very poor societies, by contrast, tend to see their struggles in more cosmic terms. Yet those at the top still tend to easily find and express a life purpose, be it secular, professional, or other. This is because they continue to feel at home within their post-industrial cultures and communities.

The spiritually-vacuous CEO and the nihilistic college professor retain a sense of individual purpose to the extent that they live within supportive communities. These individuals may not be religious or even optimistic, but they have social support that gives them a deep sense of individual significance. Their purposes, the pursuit of profit at all costs or the proselytism of life's futility, are rendered meaningful because they are confirmed within a community that celebrates these activities. It is the not content of belief that matters most, but rather the fact that it is shared.

But the post-industrial poor do not find similar comfort. They experience a relative deprivation of the existential kind. Not only are they professional failures compared to their compatriots, they must also suffer the slings and arrows of a public discourse determined to legitimate their lowly fates. Their eroding faiths are routinely ridiculed by erudite intellectuals who point out the naivety of traditional belief. Their pleas for higher wages and job security are deemed unmerited by their economic betters. All the while, media pundits sneeringly celebrate the fact that the poor in the West have things like electricity, running water, and appliances unknown to many in the Third World. See, their First World problems are nothing but belly-aching!

What is rarely discussed is how the underclasses and isolated of the post-industrial world struggle in ways that are hard to see or quantify. Emptiness, obsolescence, and isolation are not cured by refrigerators, air-conditioning, or iPhones. Our collective material abundance is meaningless when you are powerless and socially derided. While our poor enjoy many modern comforts that come from living within the First World, they still pay for it with a loss of existential significance.

Economic progress in post-industrial societies has left many isolated and obsolete. That, combined with a culture teeming with cynicism and condescension, creates a disenchanting world and lives devoid of purpose. All of our so-called progress produces new and improved modern conveniences but fails to produce any sense of what it all means.

In fact, our mastery of the material world has created something new and awful—the full realization of meaninglessness. But this terrible feeling is unequally distributed. It largely bypasses the Third World that is constantly engaged in an existential struggle of the physical kind. The poorest of the poor are insulated from meaninglessness within their religious cultures and their tight-knit communities. Lacking a purpose to life is a fate that befalls mainly the First World individual.

First World problems come in many varieties. Some are just petty complaints from those who already have too much. But others are noteworthy and frightening. Terrorism, xenophobia, and random violence are problems clearly felt in the First World. We are no longer insulated from these basic evils. But the problem of meaninglessness is another facet of the First World that is equally troubling. This silent and gradual malady is largely forgotten in our sensationalist news cycles, but it denotes the erosion of social order as much as any explosive event.

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