

Hear the Howl: The Existential Cry of this Age

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Howl

verb \ˈhau(-e)\

: to cry out loudly and without restraint under strong impulse (as pain, grief, or amusement).

The 21st century person faces an existential crisis.

For 150 years the Darwinist narrative that human life is a product of a mindless, unguided process – a fortuitous cosmic accident – with no ultimate meaning, value or purpose, has been disseminated in western culture through our universities, schools, media, entertainment, state, medical and judicial systems.

Thus while our scientific age has led to exponential increase in knowledge about *how* the universe functions – from telescopic insight into distant galaxies to the microscopic complexity of the human cell – our so-called ‘Enlightened’ era (of humanity supposedly liberated from the constraints of a transcendent Creator and his moral law) has left humankind alone, in an indifferent universe, without answers to *why* there is a universe to begin with.

Despite the evolutionary narrative that, in a universe produced by Chance, there is no meaning to life, we are yet powerless against the gravitational pull for meaning, an irrepressible necessity to understand: *Why* is there something rather than nothing? *What* is the meaning of it all? *Why* is there both beauty and barbarity in life? And if we’re simply determined by our genes or environment for survival *why* should we even care about virtue, truth and self-sacrificial love?

An age of normal nihilism

The fatal consequence of the ‘Enlightened’ age of optimism in unbridled human progress has been luminously exposed in the 20th century’s socio-political agendas having amounted to the bloodiest century in human history. The failure of humanistic utopian ideology has led to postmodern pessimism, expressed in rejecting the assumption of a universal norm, abandoning any rational hope of a unified answer to life, resulting in the current cultural fragmentation, relativism and existentialism.

And yet, despite this rejection, the postmodern era retains the Enlightenment’s basic humanistic presupposition: *the cosmos is all there is* and *the autonomy of human reason*. Thus the contemporary existential crisis – an age of normal nihilism – fashioning children of Chance in the image of an indifferent universe, where everything is ultimately meaningless and facing extinction.

Allen Ginsberg

In 1955 Allen Ginsberg (pictured right), American poet and one of the leading figures of the Beat Generation precipitating the 1960’s countercultural revolution, captured the sense of this corrosive futility and cultural fragmentation in the West with his frenetically lurid poem “Howl”. The opening line, with a matter-of-fact staccato rhythm, recalls:

I saw the best minds of my generation descend into madness,

encapsulating how Chance opens the universe not to reason, meaning and purpose but to absurdity.

Ideas and their consequences

Even so, the absurdities in our present cultural moment, are not merely a ‘madness’. Rather they are the logical, rational and systematic outworking of humanistic man’s basic ‘religious’ presupposition about reality and himself.

Humanism is itself religious, providing a framework for interpreting the world. There is no neutral realm of knowledge—no

person is a dispassionate and entirely objective observer. Rather, each individual understands the world in terms of their 'worldview'; a set of presuppositions, which may be conscious or unconscious and held consistently or inconsistently, about what the world is like and how it functions. It is these pre-commitments that determine the range of possible questions, explanations, evidence and conclusions. Thus everyone is religious. Religion is simply a commitment to a particular set of values and belief about the world that answers the ultimate concerns about origin, meaning, morality, destiny.

The consequence of beginning with a false premise concerning the world and humanity, when it is consistently applied, is that it will end up destroying mind and reasoning, choice and freedom, truth and moral ideals, and thus, any unified field of meaning. From the biblical perspective this is because, as the apostle Paul explained, fallen humanity seek to be 'like god' – the epistemic source for interpreting the world – suppressing the inescapable knowledge of God revealed through man's outer and inner world and exchange 'real reality' for an unreality, that is, a lie! Thus unavoidably constructing incoherent interpretations of the world and becoming, "futile in thinking" (Rom 1:21).

The Incoherence of Modern Life

Leon Kass, a contemporary American public intellectual, explains the modern West's predicament "as children of privilege, highly educated in [lands] of liberty, well-fed and well-travelled, sophisticated in the arts and sciences, emancipated from prejudice and superstition, super stimulated and super satiated" but feel "especially poignantly the incoherence of modern life".

What is this incoherence of modern life? Kass goes on to define it, not as:

economic or political, [but] intellectual, moral and spiritual. Our souls still crave the drama of what Tolstoy called "real life": immediately meaningful work, genuine love and intimacy, true ties to place and persons, kinship with nature, family and community, dignity, understanding and openness to the divine. But real life has become nearly impossible as we have ceased to know and honour its forms. We are, of course, too sophisticated to allow ourselves to be self-deceived, to embrace any grand illusions ... [So] we fuss over our decadent art, our atonal music, and our haute cuisine. But when the lights grow dimmer and we look into the mirror, we do not like what we see: We look even to ourselves like hungry men who have been offered nothing but sawdust and tinsel.

'Howl' poignantly expresses the sound of the unrestrained cry from a generation who has been fed nothing but sawdust—starved of true substance. Our modern malnourishment and logical incoherence is the direct consequence of idea's that have turned in upon man, devouring humanity's humanness—bereft of spiritual, moral and intellectual resource.

The question, within a world where man is mere matter at the mercy of mindless Chance, is not *why* howl, but *why not*?

The Christian Worldview

As Christians in the present milieu we of course need to grapple with the predominant worldview's that compete for the allegiance of our minds and hearts, understanding their implications for understanding humanity and the world. Yet while it is important to understand why humanism, in its various expressions, is unable to coherently explain the fullness of human experience, it is even more integral to renew our understanding as to why the biblical worldview – predicated not in the finite mind of man but in the mind of the infinite personal God – provides a coherent account of reality that infuses all *matter* with *meaning*, answering the irrepressible 'howl' in this age amidst the despair of an indifferent universe.

We need nothing short of a renaissance in biblical thinking and application as not only having *explanatory* power but also *reconstructive* power to restore human flourishing to all areas of life—science & ecology, work & recreation, economics, media & arts, politics & law, ethics, family & sexuality.

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