

# ALCIPHON

The Philosophy Club has organized this forum for discussion of informed student viewpoints on matters relating to their intellectual experiences while at University. The first essay is the work of Freshman Gerry Lee enrolled in the Philosophy 101-2 course. It is hoped that this and other papers will stimulate responses which could be published in the next edition of the Cadre.

## The Search for Meaning

### THE SEARCH FOR MEANING BY GERRY LEE

Since the beginning of time man has sought to find meaning in his life. Unlike lower animals he is incapable of being without an ultimate and or lesser ideals to believe in. His search is summed up by the two questions, Who am I? What shall I become?

In his search for meaning and ideals, every man must make choices. These choices can be distinguished into three main levels, starting with the most fundamental one--the choice for or against being: Each of us must face up to whether we want to live, die, or live a life tending towards nothingness. The last two choices constitute choices against being. To live a life tending towards nothingness means simply that one rejects all positive value orientations while continuing to exist.

If one makes a choice for being one must move to the second level of choice involving commitment to one or more ideals in order to satisfy one's search for meaning. Not to choose any ideal to believe in or goal to achieve is the same as choosing a life tending towards nothingness and denying any meaning to life. The choice of a way of life is constantly repeated in little everyday choices.

While it is easy enough to understand the position of one who chooses to be, understanding the person who chooses a life leading towards nothingness is more difficult. It is hard to imagine a person who does not kill himself and yet chooses not to be. Fortunately, Fyodor Dostoevsky in his Notes from Underground manages to describe such a man.

The hero, or anti-hero of Notes from Underground is a man who cuts himself off from the world. This underground man chooses against rationality, goodness progress. He has no goals, no morality, no beliefs, is deliberately

contradictory and arbitrary. The answer he would give to the questions Who am I? What shall I become? would be nothing. The Underground Man wants only independent choice.

In the creation of Underground man Dostoevsky had a definite purpose in mind. He wanted to take men along the ways of wild-er self will and revolt in order to show them that they lead to the extinction of liberty and self-annihilation. This road of liberty can only end either in the deification of man or in the discovery of God's earthly image. In this way Dostoevsky uses the examples of the Underground man as a warning against the pursuit of freedom for its own sake.

As is obvious by now, the use of choice is vital in the search for meaning. But if be genuine, a choice must satisfy at least four conditions. For one thing, a choice must not be made blindly. The person who makes a choice has to be aware of what he is doing. The choice must not be pre-determined, that is, one must be free to do otherwise. Another condition is that it must come from the inner self, and not be externally imposed by conditions. Finally, the choice of a life-style cannot be arbitrary. One must have a goal in mind to choose for, and not just against. This is why the choice of the Underground Man is not a genuine choice. Only if all these conditions for genuine choice are met can one choose an authentic life-style.

Having defined the terms of genuine choice, let us look at some other aspects of man's search for meaning. Another choice that must be made is the choice to be moral as opposed to amoral. When one chooses to be, he must decide how he will treat himself and others in his environment. He must also tailor his behavior to the demands of his ideals, goals, and beliefs. To behave in a moral fashion, is to justify one's life by making his

conduct harmonious with the image he would like to become. In turn, the image of what he would like to be is based on what he considers to be the most important things in his life.

Having found meaning to existence or lack of it, and made the choices which have to be made, the result is a personal lifestyle. Lifestyles vary a great deal. The following examples, of Camus and Kierkegaard, are variations of lifestyles based on existential beliefs.

The lifestyles of Kierkegaard combines a form of Christianity with essential philosophy. The world is absurd to Kierkegaard, and only faith in God can see man through it. Reason and strictly rational ethics restrict man too much, and they cannot help one find meaning in this world. It is this view that forces Kierkegaard to rely on faith as the basis of one's life. Thus for Kierkegaard assumes primacy over reason and humanly based morality whenever there is conflict between the two. To illustrate this, he used the example of Abraham and Isaac in the Bible. Abraham when called upon by God to sacrifice his son Isaac, suspends his reason and relies totally on faith in God.

Camus' position differs a good deal from Kierkegaard's in that his lifestyle is guided by his atheistic existentialism. While for Kierkegaard life appears absurd but retains a hidden meaning, Camus searches for an ultimate meaning and finds there is none. Kierkegaard relies almost completely on faith as opposed to a limiting reason; Camus sees that there is no God, and there is no room for faith. The absurd hero of Camus' world, Sisyphus who is condemned to forever roll and rock up a mountain is amoral, he is concerned only with living a life based on rebellion against the absurdity of his situation. He wants to affirm him-