

Question #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?

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When I was little, I was asked time and time again what I wanted to be when I grew up. As I grew older, and entered the education system, I began to obtain knowledge in various disciplines. My peers and I memorized knowledge concepts so we could regurgitate them on tests and we were told that one-day, this information would have real life applications. While this may hold true, this knowledge does not necessarily create real meaning in our lives. Meaning can be defined in a number of ways. Some place meaning in terms of monetary, social power, or recognition, while others place it in spiritual and emotional context. All knowledge creates some degree of meaning and purpose, but the extent to which the impact it has on our personal lives differ for individuals. Purpose can be defined as the final objective that is hoped to be the outcome of certain actions. To state that the “whole point” of knowledge is to create meaning and purpose within our personal lives suggests that unless there is a meaning or purpose for an individual’s own gain, there will be no attempt or search to acquire knowledge. Therefore, to what extent is the only drive for acquisition of knowledge across history and science a desire to yield meaning or purpose purely in our personal lives?

History is the study of past events, using facts to shape conclusions, to bring the implications of these events and conclusions into modern day society. However, no formal definitions included the impact history has on our personal lives. Growing up in Colorado, there weren’t a large number of Asians, and all the portrayals I could see of Asian individuals were from Western perceptions of the Asian culture. The Western world has always had a very anti-communist approach, and this rubbed off on media’s portrayal of Asians, which only focused on stereotypical aspects of being Asian. With all these portrayals, I saw my Asian heritage as something that was laughable and almost shameful. After moving to China, I can confirm that Chinese drivers are insane, the food that people eat can get pretty weird at times, and yes, I eat rice basically every day. However, behind these stereotypes exist billions of unique individuals and thousands of years of culture. As an IB HL History student that has attended an international school for six years in a country that my family originates from, I’ve had a unique opportunity to truly immerse myself in the culture that my family originates from, through learning the history of a time period through both my academic teachers as well as my grandparents.

My family members were Chinese residents in Vietnam that were persecuted in the aftermath of the Vietnam War for being “capitalists” in a socialist society. When I interviewed my grandfather for my history IA this past year, he still vehemently denounced the Gang of Four and in particular, Yao Wenyuan who, my grandfather claimed, encouraged the widespread persecution on Hoa conducted by the Vietnamese government. Because members of my family were taken by the government and executed on the way to “reeducation” in the countryside, there are still bitter memories when it comes to this portion of history. When learning history from my grandfather’s personal experience, the language that was used to relay the information was emotionally charged and extremely biased. For a long time, this affected the way I viewed this particular time period within history. I placed much blame upon both Yao Wenyuan and the Vietnamese government for the persecution of my ancestors and people of similar backgrounds. However, after conducting investigation, I found that it was not the actions of Yao Wenyuan, but rather a culmination of factors, the main being long-term conflicts between the Hoa and Vietnamese communities. In understanding this, I realized that misunderstandings are the main causes hatred and conflict, and that these misunderstandings cause continued hatred and conflict, even years after these events occur. Growing up, I was taught that I should hate the Gang of Four for what they did to my family, and the hardships that many people had to endure under their rule. Before I moved to China, none of this seemed like it mattered because I could not see how any of this information pertained to me. However, after moving to China in 2008, I started to understand the history of China more, and I got the chance to come in contact with the culture in a more in depth manner. I began to see certain aspects of the culture and the influence of history behind the facets of the Chinese society we know today. Similarly, a show on PBS called “Finding Your Roots” focuses on helping people understand their family’s past in order to help them understand their own identity. In one episode, rapper Nas received information on his ancestors. After finding out his great-great-grandmother was sold for \$830, Nas says quietly, “I got more than that in my pocket right now.” He continues saying, “to see that, that hurts.” Despite not knowing his ancestor directly, by understanding her struggles, he was able to connect with this aspect of his history. This is further emphasized when he states, “Now I’m looking into their world.

Now I can see where they walked, what they saw” (Watch). This knowledge of his past clearly held personal meaning for Nas as he became more emotional after understanding his family’s history. History has been the medium through which people’s memories are passed on from one generation to the next, and it is up to the descendants of these individuals to interpret and draw conclusions from. Causes of hatred between countries and groups of people are distanced from the current generation, and so they do not understand why it exists. Should we continue this hatred if the reasoning behind it is archaic and nearly forgotten.

All these seemingly unrelated historical facts in fact helped me come to terms with my identity as an American Born Chinese individual. Without proper understanding, I would not have been able to accept that aspect of my identity. Similarly, the rapper Nas came to understand his own family background. To younger generations, ignorance of our family backgrounds distances us from who we are and our origins. Only through deeper understanding do our backgrounds and identities begin to feel more connected to who we are today. In this regards, the acquisition of this knowledge has created meaning in my personal life, and in this manner, it has also created meaning in the lives of individuals such as Nas. Though we are different in background and upbringing, the acquisition of history still managed to have a profound impact on both of us.

Contrarily, there are cases where the drive behind knowledge cannot purely be to create meaning and purpose within our personal lives. There must be a greater reason that pushes the drive to obtain knowledge in the natural sciences that does not merely create meaning to our personal lives. This past year with the outbreak of Ebola, nearly ten thousand individuals have died from this deadly disease. Ebola as of now has no known vaccination, and yet, there are still doctors who are willing to treat Ebola patients and attempt to save those affected. There have been doctors who have died as a result of these efforts to save and develop a cure for patients of the disease (Ebola). Those who are attempting to develop a vaccination have died in the efforts. Logic and reasoning cannot provide an extremely adequate answer for how these actions that lead to their deaths have benefitted these individuals’ personal lives in terms of creating meaning and purpose.



These selfless actions create meaning and purpose in our shared lives, as the development of vaccinations would allow for society as a whole to benefit more than the individual. Therefore, the perilous pursuit for certain knowledge within society to the individual seeking it cannot purely be for personal meaning and purpose.

If meaning is knowledge that purely results in economic gains or merely for the sake of achieving high scores on assessments, I do not define this as creating deep meaning in my personal life. To me, real meaning in our personal lives is when we believe the knowledge obtained creates a profound impact in our lives, whether it is helping us shape and define our identities or helping us realize what our purpose in life is. In that definition, knowledge that creates meaning is extremely subjective based on what the individual themselves feels is important. For individuals that live in a country outside of their heritage roots such as myself, the pursuit of knowledge in history is driven by the desire to create meaning and purpose within my personal lives in an attempt to understand my own place within society. However, if everyone in society were to focus purely on creating meaning and purpose within their personal lives, society would cease to function and develop properly. If only personal meaning and purpose is created, no individual would be willing to place themselves in danger for the advancement of society. That being said, all knowledge still does create a certain degree of meaning and serves various purposes, and only the impact upon our personal lives truly varies. This means that our quest for knowledge is not one that is futile and selfish, but instead, one that holds deeper meaning. Should we be able to understand the profound impacts that knowledge has on each individual, it can be utilized to motivate individuals to achieve their best and inspire innovation.

Word Count (1599).

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