

# Why the Indifference of the Universe is Irrelevant to Life's Meaning

## Summary

In this paper, Brooke Alan Trisel argues that despite their being no ultimate purpose to human life, this alone does not entail that there is no meaning for humans in their lives. Such an entailment requires certain assumptions that Trisel finds problematic. In fact, Trisel ultimately argues that even if the universe cared about us, or had preferences for how we live our lives, that this likely would not enhance the quality of our lives.

## Section Summaries

### Introduction

- Many existentialists claim that human life is meaningless and that the universe is indifferent to us.
- Existentialists use the word “indifference” in two different senses:
  - A general lack of concern.
  - Lacking a preference for one alternative over another.
- Trisel argues that the lives of many individuals are meaningful and that human life, in general, is somewhat meaningful, despite the indifference of the universe.
- Trisel also argues that even if the universe cared about us, or had preferences for how we live our lives, that this likely would not enhance the quality of our lives.

### The Meanings of “Cosmic Indifference”

- Trisel begins by clarifying the two relevant meanings of “indifference”:
  - A general lack of concern.
  - Lacking a preference for one alternative over another.
- Trisel notes that when people claim that the universe is indifferent to us, they forget that we are a part of the universe.
- Trisel then clarifies what is meant by the claim that the universe is indifferent, namely, that the *rest of* the universe is indifferent to us.
  - Trisel uses an analogy of a comatosed friend to show that feeling disappointment or anger at the universe for being indifferent to us is inappropriate.
- The universe is indifferent to us because it is non-sentient and incapable of caring about

anything or having preferences.

## Attaining Meaning Despite the Indifference of the Universe

- Objective naturalists, such as Trisel, believe that meaning is attained in our lives by engaging with natural, mind-independent, and intrinsically valuable goods.
- The lives of many individuals are meaningful, despite the indifference of the universe.
- Humanity stands out and matters from the cosmic perspective by having made some remarkable, transcending achievements.
- We did not need the universe to care about us or to have preferences for this to occur.
- “Some examples of these ‘transcending achievements’...include formulating the laws of motion, the theory of relativity, and the Big Bang theory of the origin of the universe.” (pg. 456)

## A Thought Experiment

- Trisel engages in a thought experiment to show that even if the universe cared about us or had preferences for what we do in our lives, that would not likely enhance the quality of our lives.
- Trisel begins by supposing that the universe cares about us, but that it lacks the capability to do anything about what we experience in our lives.
  - Trisel argues that a caring universe would serve as a poor motivator.
- Trisel then supposes that the universe has preferences for what we do in our lives.
  - Trisel uses the **Euthyphro dilemma** to show that we have no reason to trust the preferences of the universe.
  - “Is an action morally right because the universe prefers it, or does the universe prefer it because it is morally right?” (pg. 458)
- Trisel concludes that a universe with preferences would only be beneficial to us if those preferences were more trustworthy than our own decisions, and individuals chose to follow the guidance reflected in those preferences.

## Relieving Existential Anguish

- Trisel argues that some of the pessimist’s suffering is self-inflicted and occurs by acquiring, and then firmly holding on to, unattainable desires.
- Pessimists focus on what is lacking in this world and have had their expectations shattered twice:
  - With the collapse of belief in God.
  - Through their later realization that the universe was incapable of standing in as a personal god.
- We can relieve some of our existential anguish by letting go of the anxiety-producing desires for God or the universe to care about us, relieve suffering, and provide us with moral guidance and everlasting life.

## Conclusion

- Trisel concludes that there is no justification for being concerned that the universe is indifferent to us.
- The indifference of the universe does not prevent us from leading meaningful lives.
- Even if the universe had the capabilities to care about us or to have preferences, this would not likely enhance the quality of our lives.
- There are some actions that can help to relieve existential anguish, including:
  - Letting go of the desire for the universe to take on the role of God in his absence.
  - Accepting the universe as “our home.”
  - Appreciating what the universe has to offer us.