

Et Quaerere

Search 102 Conclusion



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The Merriam-Webster dictionary defines the term “search” (Latin: Quaerere) as meaning, “To look into or over carefully or thoroughly in an effort to find or discover something”. The primary objective of the “Search for Values in the Light of Western History and Religion” is evident in the title: a pursuit of values with which to live life, and an exploration for these values within historically esteemed texts. The class is meant to examine the writings of authors from vastly different regional, economic, historical, and philosophical backgrounds who identify the values that they believe are the most essential to uphold in one’s life. Upon experiencing and participating in this pursuit for its duration, it is evident that this bold, philosophical search is defined by one overarching moral conflict that transcends time, location, status, and religion. The search for the proper way to live one’s mortal life is an ongoing clash between reason and faith. Poets like Virgil, Homer, and the authors of religious texts like the Bible and the Qur’an argue through their writings that life should be lived with a set of principles that are defined by faith in one or many deities and one true, pious path. Revered philosophers like Plato and Lucretius argue that the world should instead be viewed with a logical outlook and suggest a set of values and manner of living a moral life based on reason. This conflict has defined the search for values throughout the course and will always be present when determining the standards by which human life should be lived.

When young children are first learning the difference between right and wrong, they are at their most impressionable, and the concepts that are instilled in them will shape their beliefs for the remainder of their lives. As Saint Augustine describes in *Confessions*, “by hearing words arranged in various phrases and constantly repeated, I gradually pieced together what they stood for. . . I took a further step into the stormy life of human society, although I was still subject to [authority]” (Augustine 29). At this point in life, the beliefs with which children will live their life are passed on to them from their parents or guardians, and their environment. For many, that includes a specific set of religious beliefs, whether that means learning the philosophy of a certain sect of Christianity, Islam, Judaism, or another religion. Although children cannot understand much of the history of the religion or meaning behind the traditions they practice, they inevitably grow up having an inherent belief in what they experienced in their formative years. It is very uncommon to find the situation that appears in Ramon Llull’s *Book of the Gentile*, where an individual who is “very learned in philosophy. . . [with] no knowledge of God. . . [or] the Resurrection” (Llull 86) converts and becomes one whose “soul endeavored to recall, understand, and love divine virtue” (Llull 165). An individual typically grows up being taught one practice and remains with the worldview that is instilled by that particular school of thinking for their entire lives. Homer, for example, grew up believing in traditional Greek mythology and polytheism, and, therefore, his writings reflect his faith-based worldview. Virgil was raised to believe in the polytheistic hierarchy of Roman deities, and his writings reflect his faith as well. Just like many of the authors showcased in the Search curriculum, including Augustine in the first Book of *Confessions*, Virgil briefly questions the nature of the gods he believes in. He asks whether “[there can] be/Anger so great in the hearts of gods on high” (Aeneid 1:1), but his faith is unwavering. Virgil decrees that the immortal deities control many of the actions and thoughts of mortals, a direct reflection of his own belief and vision of the way the world works: a belief that would have been instilled in him from an early age.

Possibly the greatest example of a worldview based entirely on faith is that of the Christian religion, and especially that found in the writing of the Bible’s New Testament. In stark contrast to the Old Testament, commonly referred to as a book of signs, the First Letter of Peter in the New Testament summarizes this faith-based worship, stating that “Though you have not seen him, you love him; and even though you do not see him now, you believe in him and are filled with an inexpressible and glorious joy, for you are receiving the end result of your faith, the salvation of your souls” (1 Peter 1:8-9). Similarly, the Gospels of the New Testament describe different accounts of the life of Jesus Christ and interpret his teachings, invoking a spiritual obligation upon the reader to believe in and worship the Holy Trinity. The Christian faith commands its followers to “run on the path of God’s commandments, . . . faithfully observing his teaching . . . [and] share in the sufferings of Christ that we may deserve also to share in his kingdom” (Benedict 6). As is evident, the appeal of faith also involves the incentives promised. The Gospel of Matthew offers that “If you believe, you will receive whatever you ask for in prayer” (Matthew 21:22), and Acts decrees that “[if you] believe in the Lord Jesus. . . you will be saved – you and your household” (Acts 16:31). Influenced by these incentives, Christians are able to develop a deep faith, rooted in the text of the Bible and the historically engrained tradition of their beliefs, despite demanding no signs or indications from God as the Jewish faith does.

Although this faith is most commonly instilled during the childhood of young Christians, as it is for youth of other religions, faith can also be attained by other methods. While the Gentile depicted in Llull’s writing is a constructed character, Saint Augustine himself was inclined to write *Confessions* following his own childhood growing up without faith, his search for fulfillment, and his subsequent conversion to Christianity. In searching for meaning in life and values, the purpose of the course, Augustine’s text not only makes his answer very clear, but also describes why other viable options were unsatisfactory. He describes how he “had lost all faith and was in despair of finding the truth” (Augustine 111), having spent his life committing “sins of the flesh” (Augustine 43) and searching for fulfillment. For Augustine, the religion of the Manichees, which was based on certain scientific explanations that he thought were “the most tedious fictions about the sky and the stars, the sun and the moon” (Augustine 98), could not sufficiently bring meaning to his life. Likewise, the Neoplatonist teachings Augustine becomes interested in upon reading Aristotle’s *Categories* are similarly unfulfilling, with Augustine concluding, “What profit did this study bring me? None” (Augustine 88). The logical reasoning and rhetoric that Neoplatonism was based on, and that so many choose to live their lives by, was disagreeable to Augustine because he could not “understand God. . . in these same terms” (Augustine 88). However, in Augustine’s famous “come to Jesus” moment in the garden, he finally realizes that the absolute faith in God was the missing piece to his life, and he remarks, “How sweet all at once it was for me to be rid of those fruitless joys. . . You [God] drove them from me, you who are the true, the sovereign joy” (Augustine 181). Saint Augustine is the prime example of an individual for whom the principles of reason could not satisfy his desire for fulfillment in life, and who, instead, found explanation and “eternal Wisdom which abides over all things” (Augustine 198) in faith.

The converse of St. Augustine’s search for fulfillment and meaning in life is also prevalent among philosophers and mankind as whole. Many irreligious people claim that others follow religion simply because of “the endless fantasies [that] priests devise, that can subvert all reasoned thought” (Lucretius 1:104-105), and that this blind faith out of “fear of eternal torment after death” (Lucretius 1:111) is profoundly dangerous. Lucretius, a Roman philosophic poet who subscribed to the Epicurean worldview, argues in *On The Nature Of Things* that “religion has prompted [more] vile and vicious acts [than blasphemy]” (Lucretius 1:82-83). He recounts the disconcerting story of Agamemnon, the commander-in-chief of the Greek fleet that besieged Troy in Homer’s *Iliad*, sacrificing his own daughter, Iphianassa, to pray to the gods for a favorable wind. Lucretius believes that religion cannot, and should not, provide the structure and meaning to life that reason can. “Mortal men. . . can’t discern [the] causes of [so many things on earth and in the sky] . . . and hence believe that they are acts of god” (Lucretius 1:151-154), Lucretius states, to provide a logical justification for those who put their faith in religion. Reason is the alternative to a faith-based worldview, and many philosophers believe that “this night of the mind must be dispelled. . . by the face of nature and her laws” (Lucretius 1:146-148). Plato, the student of Socrates and one of the most revered ancient philosophers, believed that “[true knowledge from reason] is the cause of all that is correct and beautiful in anything. . . [and] it controls and provides truth and understanding, so that anyone who is to act sensibly in private or public must see it” (Republic 517c). The reason and logic by which Plato swears constitutes the vast majority of his arguments and persuasive writing in the *Republic*. This masterpiece of Plato’s is a text dedicated primarily dedicated to the exploration of justice; his own analysis of the meaning of life, and structure by which it should be lived.

However, while Lucretius condemns the “hierophantic threats” (Lucretius 1:103) that religion uses to make people subscribe to its ideas, Plato sees the benefit in such tactful intimidation. While Lucretius argues that “This fright [of eternal damnation for those who are impious] . . . must be dispelled” (Lucretius 1:146), Plato implicitly concludes that the utility of such a fear is an effective tool of persuasion. The *Republic*’s closing statement, beginning in section 614b of Book X, is Plato’s account of the Myth of Er. This story tells “of a strong man, Er” (Republic 614b), who dies in battle and comes to a “certain demonic place” (Republic 614c) between heaven and earth, where judgment is passed on souls. Those determined to have lived a just life are sent to heaven, and those who lived unjustly are subject to an unnamed sort of miserable equivalent of hell for a thousand years. The character of Socrates maintains that this tale “could save us, if we were persuaded by it” (Republic 621c). This intimidation comes in distinct synonymy to the appeal of many religious texts, especially those of Christianity. In comparison, the Gospel of John concludes with the assertion “that through believing [in Christ] you may have life [after death] in his name” (John 21:30). This incidence of an allusion to faith by one of the foremost proponents of reason, Plato, exemplifies the complicated relationship between faith and reason in philosophy, and emphasizes the complex nature of the search for meaning in life.

Faith and reason both have specific merits in defining human life, just as they both have specific shortcomings that create perceived voids in human understanding. Reason cannot always definitively explain some prevalent philosophic themes, like why “many misfortunes fall to the lot of good men” (Seneca 29); in other words, why bad things happen to good people. Seneca the Younger, a prominent Stoic philosopher, uses faith to fill this void. This much is explicitly stated, as he claims that “it is the gods’ cause I shall be pleading” (Seneca 28). That cause being pleaded is the nature of divine providence, as is evidenced by the text’s title, *On Providence*. Seneca dispatches the idea of a world governed by reason on the basis that “so mighty a structure does not persist without some caretaker” (Seneca 28). He continues by using faith to prove the existence and merits of providence, arguing that “God’s attitude to good men is a father’s” (Seneca 30) and that he “let[s] them be harassed by toil and sorrow and loss . . . that so [sic] they may acquire true strength” (Seneca 30). This explanation is arguably more fulfilling than the logical argument of Lucretius. Lucretius agrees that, just as tribulation is beneficial to man, “wealth’s no profit to the flesh. . . [and] can’t benefit the soul” (Lucretius II:37-39). However, in rebuttal to the idea of providence, Lucretius’ only statement is that every human is “a helpless captive bound by. . . the tiny swerving of the atoms at no fixed place and no fixed point of time” (Lucretius II:291-293). The explanation that the governance of divine will is nonexistent and worldly events are simply random chance is not nearly as satisfying as the providence that Seneca describes, and hence faith fills a void that cannot completely be addressed by reason.

Of course, the converse also occurs: reason fills a void that faith cannot always address. For instance, faith cannot always definitively explain scientific or astrological phenomena that occur around humans. The original Buddhist explanation of rain as “the tears of. . . crying divinities [falling] to earth” (Strong 15) is understandably unfulfilling nowadays, considering the change in meteorological knowledge between the 4th century B.C. and the present day. Even Seneca’s claim that God is responsible for natural phenomena being “strictly allotted” (Seneca 29), like “how the shore is laid bare when the sea withdraws into itself” (Seneca 28), comes into question given a more modern understanding of science and nature. Despite having been written prior to most modern scientific advances, Lucretius’ logical philosophy provides bold, yet surprisingly accurate and reasonable accounts of natural events. He provides a thoughtful analysis of science, predicting that “Nature. . . has two forms that make it up: the atoms, and the void where atoms are placed and travel their varied paths” (Lucretius 1:419-421). Lucretius explores scientific phenomena with reason, determining that “we must think with accuracy and care about the world above – of sun and moon and how they move, how everything on earth takes place” (Lucretius 1:127-129). His continued exploration of the matter that makes up the world, and the nature of atoms and scientific methodology, provides an appealing and logical explanation for the complexities behind astrology and meteorology that faith cannot necessarily provide in the same depth. In this way, reason also provides explanation and intellectual satisfaction in a way that faith cannot always provide.

The aptly named “Search for Values in the Light of Western History and Religion” is, in its most fundamental form, a studious journey through time and space that uses literature to critically analyze the nature of a good life and the tenets by which such a life should be ruled. The conflict between finding such meaning and values in reason versus in faith is the tumultuous foundation upon which the structure of Search is constructed. As is a common theme amongst the ideas presented in Search, there is no single correct answer, and the ambiguity and complexity of the aforementioned conflict defines it. Most philosophers and writers throughout history have naturally or intentionally chosen one basis, either reason or faith, because of the ideas instilled in them during their formative years or as a result of some sort of transformative conversion. However, the complexity of the conflict is evident in the instance of writers like Plato calling upon the persuasions of faith to solidify arguments of reason, and vice versa. While the faith of Christianity, as defined in the Bible and exemplified by the monasticism of St. Benedict and the *Confessions* of St. Augustine, provides a clear definition of piety and meaning of life, even faith has its ambiguity. Buddhism and Islam each teach different tenets of faith, and even the differences between the Old and New Testament and the disparities between the Gospels communicate slightly different definitions of faith – not to mention non-canonical accounts like the Infancy Gospel of Thomas. Similarly, the Platonic teachings of the *Republic* and the Epicurean teachings that Lucretius adheres to have many key discrepancies, and no consistent definition of reason is forthcoming. Therefore, while Search concludes as a class, the search for purpose and value in life continues as an ongoing debate of which the implications and merits are infinite, a conflict that has no definite conclusion. The course illustrates clearly why such a conflict is anything but clear: that every individual has their own inherent beliefs and inclinations, and their own meaning of life and values to discover for themselves, whether that be through reason, faith, or some combination of the two. Thus, the Search.

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