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The Meaning of Life

The Meaning of Life: Perspectives from the World's Great Intellectual Traditions

Course Guidebook

Professor Jay L. Garfield
Smith College

Professor Jay L. Garfield is Doris Silbert Professor in the Humanities and Professor of Philosophy at Smith College. He also teaches philosophy at the University of Massachusetts, Melbourne University, and India's Central University of Tibetan Studies. Professor Garfield is the author, coauthor, or coeditor of 16 books. Among these are *The Oxford Handbook of World Philosophy* and *Buddhist Philosophy: Essential Readings*.

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Lame Deer—Life Enfolded in Symbols

Lecture 32

Modernity doesn't only construct a prison for us, but it's a prison without any windows. It's a prison that we can't even see out of and imagine alternatives to.

In some respects, **John Lame Deer**, a medicine man of the Lakota Sioux, shares insights with some of the other critics of modernity whose work we've examined. Along with Nietzsche, he is a critic of "mass-produced people." With Tolstoy, he shares the belief that society's focus on consumerism and normalcy alienates us from interpersonal relations. Lame Deer also agrees with Gandhi that modernity forces us to lead lives in which we're complicit in harmful social structures. He connects modernity and mass culture to alienation from ourselves and the world of nature that we inhabit. He also points out that the values of modern life tend to assume a kind of universality that makes it impossible for us to see alternatives. We adopt a regime of ideology and morality that takes over our way of seeing the world; as a consequence, we lead lives that are unreflective, self-alienated, and meaningless.

The context in which the Lakota seek the meaning of life encompasses both the social and the natural world. It embodies a sense that, first and foremost, human beings are animals living in a natural ecosystem. We should treat other animals as our peers, members of our culture who have obligations to us and to whom we have obligations, and should care for the environment. This natural context also means that we must internalize a sense of temporality, because the natural world itself is marked by temporal cycles.

An important issue for the Lakota is the nature of symbols and the pervasiveness of the symbolic. The world is defined by its symbolic character, and that symbolism is central to the meaning of life. To the Lakota, life as a whole is permeated with symbols, things that mean something in a linguistic sense. Part of the meaning of life is the meaning of those symbols, and part of what makes our lives meaningful is that our lives themselves can be seen as symbolic.

Lame Deer offers an eloquent example of the meaning found in nature in his description of a cooking pot. He writes, "The bubbling water [in the pot] comes from the sky: it represents the rain cloud." The water itself is symbolic of the cloud; it's not just caused by the cloud, but it represents the cloud. Lame Deer continues, "The fire comes from the sun which warms us all—men, animals, trees. The meat stands for the four-legged creatures, our animal brothers, who gave of themselves that we might live. ... These things are sacred." Each of these commonplace things is a symbol that calls to mind something sacred, something greater than us. For the Native American speaker, simply looking at the pot is to look at a host of symbols that remind us we live in a vast, sacred order. The symbols around us are actually language, the language of the universe teaching the meaning of life.

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Understanding the world in this symbolic dimension effects a transfiguration of the commonplace into the sacred. Opening our eyes and seeing these symbols enables a much deeper connection to a sacred natural world that gives our lives meaning. Lame Deer points out that the human world of symbols—names and rituals, for example—is part of the natural world. Human language is just one instance among thousands of the symbolic; the symbolic is a much grander affair than something that we instantiate.

Lame Deer describes the Native American sun dance as a ritual that served as a symbolic sacrifice of the dancer's body, sensations, and endurance. These are the only things humans have to sacrifice; everything else already belongs to the universe. The ritual of the sun dance reinforces a vision of unity of the universe through devotion, as well as the symbolism of the dancer himself. The dancer becomes a symbol of his own devotion.

The symbol of the Native American is the circle, which not only resembles and describes the character of nature but is also a representational symbol. In the repetition of circles in the universe—the planets, the stars, the rainbow—Lame Deer sees "symbols and reality at the same time, expressing the

harmony of life and nature." Symbols and reality don't stand apart from each other; the universe is already saturated with the symbolic, and the symbolic is natural to the universe, not imposed by our conceptual activity. In contrast, the symbol of non-Native Americans is the square, seen in houses, office buildings, and walls. Our world, too, is full of symbols, but they are the wrong symbols—symbols of separation. The truly meaningful life is the organic life, the life that is in unity with nature and represented by the circle. What's wrong with modernity is not that it fails to be meaningful but that it means the wrong things. ■

Name to Know

Lame Deer, John (1900–1976): John Lame Deer was a Lakota Sioux medicine man born on the Rosebud Reservation and educated in Bureau of Indian Affairs schools.

Suggested Reading

Black Elk and Lyon, *Black Elk: The Sacred Ways of a Lakota*.

Lame Deer and Erdoes, *Lame Deer, Seeker of Visions*.

Study Questions

1. How does the notion of meaning found in Lame Deer's writing—symbolic meaning—differ from the understanding of "meaning" that we've explored to this point in the course?
2. In what ways is Lame Deer's critique of modernity familiar to us from other thinkers and in what ways is it different?

Lame Deer—Our Place in a Symbolic World

Lecture 33

We end up living in a world that's square, not a world that's circular; a world that's a prison, not a world that's organic. That's not a world that any of us would choose to live in, despite the fact that every day, in every action, we make choices that entail the necessity of just such a world.

“My grandparents grew up in an Indian world without money,” writes Lame Deer. Most of us take for granted that money must play a role in the world, but for this philosopher, that's part of the totalizing character of modernity: We can't even envision a world that different from ours. Most of us also spend a great deal of time thinking about money, possessions, and so on. Those things become the objects around which we organize our lives. But we would never reflectively endorse the idea that the focus of our lives should be money. Lame Deer tells us that after the Battle of the Little Bighorn, the victorious Native Americans gave the soldiers' money to their children to play with. Thus, the money became useful in precisely the way it should be useful—not as the central organizing principle of our lives but as something that has a useful subsidiary role.

The Battle of the Little Bighorn was over gold in the Black Hills, and Lame Deer points to another “battle” based on money: the poisoning of prairie dogs to preserve grass for cows. According to Lame Deer, the rancher “looks at a prairie dog [and] sees only a green frog-skin [a dollar] getting away from him.” But when a Native American looks at a prairie dog, he sees another member of the community to which we all belong. The prairie dog, if it's symbolic of anything, is symbolic of the natural order that enfolds us. The Native American sees the dollar as a symbol of what it can do. The rancher, in a deep reversal of priority, sees the natural world as symbolic of the artificial symbol. In the European view, everything—grass, prairie dogs, Black Hills—comes to be seen in monetary terms. That view imposes a new symbolic order on our world, one in which everything stands for money.

Lame Deer points out that the bald eagle appears on our money as a national symbol, but our money is killing the eagle, and the destruction of this symbol means that we've lost the ability to connect with symbols as symbols. If we lose the ability to appreciate the symbolic character of the eagle, then we'll be happy to simply let it become endangered and disappear. The disappearance is bad enough, but the alienation from the natural order we inhabit is the disease of which that's a symptom.

The end of this path of rejecting the symbolic and the natural, of fetishizing commodities, and of denying that we are biological animals is a completely ersatz life, a life that's a stand-in for a real life.

For Lame Deer, the symbolic and natural orders go hand-in-hand. Symbols are part of reality; reality is completely symbolic.

Commodity fetishism and the systematic disregard of symbols also go hand-in-hand. When we see things only in terms of their economic value and we see the economic value as all that matters, we abstract ourselves from the natural world, precisely because we abstract ourselves from its symbolic character. In doing so, we commodify the world and, in the end, we commodify ourselves.

Modern European culture draws a clear line between the biological world of plants and animals and the nonbiological world of minerals. But for Lame Deer, this line is dangerous because the biological world depends on the nonbiological one. To call rocks and minerals "dead" gives a kind of implicit permission to commodify that world and despoil it. Further, domestication has changed animals from creatures with beauty and integrity to artificial things that can live only on feed lots or in cages—things that are symbolic of exactly what might be uncomfortable for us. Ultimately, we no longer even think of ourselves as biological animals who live in an ecosystem but in terms of our functions in an economic order. We thus imprison ourselves and are complicit in our own imprisonment.

The end of this path of rejecting the symbolic and the natural, of fetishizing commodities, and of denying that we are biological animals is a completely

ersatz life, a life that's a stand-in for a real life. For Lame Deer, the nature of modernity is to turn us into spectators, not even of our own lives but of other people's lives. We become prisoners looking at televisions that give us views into other people's cells.

Finally, Lame Deer argues that modernity alienates us from death. As we've seen in so many other views we've examined, confronting the reality of death and coming to terms with it is essential to leading a meaningful life. But Lame Deer argues that modernity sweeps that under the rug. We live in a culture of violence, war, and pollution, but we sanitize it away through television and other means. To come to terms with death, we must think about it, plan it, and accept it. That leads to an authentic life, a life that understands us as natural objects that are indeed mortal. ■

Suggested Reading

Black Elk and Lyon, *Black Elk: The Sacred Ways of a Lakota*.

Lame Deer and Erdoes, *Lame Deer, Seeker of Visions*.

Study Questions

1. Why does modernity, in Lame Deer's view, necessarily alienate people from the natural world and its symbolic order? How does commodity fetishism lead to the destruction of nature and of meaning?
2. What is added to our understanding of the meaning of life through Lame Deer's emphasis on the natural world as the ground of meaning?