

'What are our lives for?': a philosopher answers kids' existential questions

What happens when Plato mixes with playtime? Philosopher Scott Hershovitz answers the questions that confound children and adults alike

Children are constantly wrestling with questions about metaphysics and morality. But most adults in their lives don't notice or, even worse, discourage them when they do. I'm a philosopher and a father. I've got two boys, Rex and Hank. They have been asking philosophical questions since they were little, and they try to answer them too. They've recreated ancient arguments and advanced entirely new ones. People are sceptical when I say that. "Sure, your kids are philosophical," they respond, "but you're a philosopher. Most kids aren't like that."

They are wrong, though. Every child is a natural philosopher. They're puzzled by the world and they try to puzzle it out. And they're good at it, too. Kids are clever and courageous thinkers. In fact, adults can learn a lot from listening to them – and thinking *with* them.

If God created everything, who created God? Leyha, 7

Leyha, that is a good question. I think the biggest mystery about the world is the reason it exists at all. Some people think the answer is: God created it. But that doesn't get us very far, since it raises a new question: why does God exist?

Most religious people don't think God was created by anyone. They think that God simply exists. In fact, some think that God *has* to exist.

A long time ago, Saint Anselm tried to prove that God has to exist. He said that God is the greatest guy we could possibly imagine. Since actually existing would make a great guy even greater, God has to exist, otherwise, we could imagine an even greater guy. (This is called the ontological argument, because philosophers like to give things fancy names.)

I don't think that works, and neither did a monk named Guanilo. He imagined the greatest island possible – as beautiful as could be. If Saint Anselm's argument was right, he said, that island must actually exist somewhere. Otherwise it wouldn't be the greatest. But that's just silly! The fact that we can think of something doesn't make it real.

Does God exist? I don't know, but I'm sceptical. And your question points to one of the reasons why. Imagining that there's a God doesn't help us explain anything. It just raises new questions, which are at least as mysterious as the old ones.

I sometimes feel like I'm the only real person and everyone else is a robot. How can I know if that's true? Ursula, 8

Have you checked your family and friends for circuit boards and fuse boxes? I'd give them a good look if they're acting like robots.

I'm kidding. If they were really good robots, you wouldn't be able to tell, at least not without cutting them open. And let's not do that, since they would get hurt if your hypothesis was wrong.

And it probably is! I can't say for sure. Because it's hard to say *anything* for sure. A philosopher named Descartes once tried to imagine that everything he believed was wrong. He didn't suppose the people around him were robots, since they hadn't been invented. Instead, he imagined that an evil demon was filling his head with falsehoods – that none of the people or things he thought he knew actually existed.

But even if a demon was trying to trick him, Descartes thought there was one thing he could know for sure: he existed. After all, he was thinking about the possibility that a demon was trying to trick him. And to think, you have to exist – or as Descartes put it: "I think, therefore I am."

You're in the same position. You know you're real. But what about everyone else? When I worry about this, I remind myself that there's no reason to think I'm special. I'm just some guy who was born outside Atlanta in 1976. Why should I be the only person in the entire world who's real? Why would someone make all those robots just to trick me?

Ask yourself the same question, Ursula. Is there any reason to think that you, and you alone, are real? Probably not. Unless you're the main character in a movie and I'm just another robot trying to trick you ...

Why are there numbers? Sahil, 5

Philosophers argue about this, Sahil. Some think we made numbers up – that people created them to help us solve problems. (The fancy word for this is fictionalism, since the idea is that we're telling stories about numbers.) If we did invent numbers, that was a really good idea. Numbers are amazing; we can do so many cool things with them. We use them to play games and bake cakes and make sure our spaceships get to the right destination.

Other philosophers think we discovered numbers, just like we discovered gravity and electricity. (This is called Platonism, after [the philosopher Plato](#).) They think that numbers would exist even if we didn't. I think that's probably right. There are mathematical patterns all over nature. Lots of flowers have either three, five, eight, or 13 petals. Those numbers appear in the [Fibonacci sequence](#) – a special set of numbers named after an Italian mathematician. Fibonacci wasn't the first to notice

that set of numbers, though; mathematicians in India described it long before he did. But flowers seem to have got there first. So I think that numbers are a part of the world that we discovered, even though we can't see them, smell them, taste them or touch them.

Where was I before I was born and before I was in your belly? *Melia, 4*

Melia, bad news: you were never in my belly. But you have good company in wondering where you were before you were born ...

Where was I before I was here? *Josh, 3*

Nowhere! The universe has been around for billions of years, but you weren't part of it until very recently. I wasn't either, though I've been here a bit longer than you.

Have you ever made something new – like a picture? It wasn't anywhere until you made it. And you're just the same. You weren't anywhere until your parents made you.

Where do you go when you die? *Homer, 7*

It's hard to say for sure, since nobody who is dead can tell us. Some people believe in an afterlife – they think we might go to heaven if we're lucky. But I think we simply cease to exist – that we aren't anywhere.

That makes some people sad. The universe will be around for billions or trillions of years after we have gone. We only get to hang out here for a little while. But I think it's amazing that we get to be here at all – to explore the world and have fun. So enjoy it, Homer, and don't worry too much about death.

What is it like to be dead? *Arthur, 8*

Same deal, Arthur. We don't know for sure. But I think the answer is: it's not like anything at all. Before you were born, there was nothing like the experience of being you, since you didn't exist. And the same will be true when you're dead. It won't be like anything, since you won't exist any more. And that's OK – in fact, it's good news. Being dead won't bother you. You won't even know that you're dead.

What are our lives for? *Casper, 5*

They are for us, Casper! Lots of people want to know what the meaning of life is. They're searching for something that will help it make sense that we're here, and maybe tell us how to live. But I think they're making a mistake. The universe doesn't care about us. It's billions and billions of light years wide, filled with billions and billions of stars, and probably billions and billions of planets. There is not much special about where we are, or maybe even who we are, if there's life on other planets. And I don't think anybody put us here for any purpose at all.

But we are here, and we should care about each other, even if the universe doesn't care about us. There may be no meaning *to* our lives. But we can find meaning *in* our lives by filling them with family and friends and fun – and projects that make the world a better place. You get to decide what your life is for, Caspar, so try to make it something cool.

When there is a mummy and a daddy, but their baby dies, are they still a mummy and a daddy? Zahra, 5

Zahra, this is a really tough question. I've thought a lot about it because I had twin babies that died just before they were born. It was the saddest day ever. And for a long time after, I was confused because I didn't know whether I was a daddy or not. When people asked if I had kids, I wasn't sure what to say. I didn't want to make them sad, so I usually said no. But that felt sad for me, because it felt like I was forgetting the twins.

Here's what I think now. I was the twins' daddy, and I always will be. That's my *relationship* with them. But because they died, I didn't get to be their daddy in a different sense. I didn't get to play the *role* of daddy. I didn't get to tuck them in at night or tell them silly jokes. And I'm still sad about that, even though the twins now have brothers, Rex and Hank, who I get to tuck in every night.

Zahra, if you know someone whose baby died, maybe give them a hug? Hugs help a lot.

Why is it bad to have everything I want? Abraham, 4

I don't know if it is, Abraham – it depends on what you want. If all you wanted was peace on Earth, then it would be amazing for you to get everything that you wanted. But I suspect you want lots and lots of treats and toys. That's OK – I do too.

But there are problems with getting all the treats and toys that we want. Sometimes, the things we want are bad for us. If I ate all the chocolate I wanted, I'd get a tummy ache. It's better to just have a little bit.

Another problem is that other people sometimes want the same things we want. If there's not enough for everyone, it's nice to share.

Last, there's a song by the Rolling Stones called [You Can't Always Get What You Want](#). That's true. And you have to learn how to be disappointed without making yourself – and everyone else – miserable.

Why do people end up doing things that they don't want to do? Sarang, 4

There are so many reasons, Sarang. Sometimes, we do things because we feel like we *should*, even if we don't want to. I feel that way about flossing my teeth. I don't want to do it, but I think I should, since I know it's good for me.

Sometimes, we do things so we won't hurt other people's feelings. I don't like cherries. But once a friend baked me a cherry pie, and I ate it with her, since she'd worked really hard at it. I didn't want her to feel bad.

Other times, we do things we don't want to do because someone forces us to do them. Has anyone ever forced you to do anything? That's not fun, especially when the person is being mean. But sometimes the person making you do something is helping you by getting you to do something you should do, like go to bed or go to the doctor and get an injection. Parents have to do that a lot, since kids don't always know what's good for them.

There's another reason, which is a little more complicated. I want to eat sweets. But I also don't want to eat too many sweets, since I know that's not good for me.

Sometimes, I eat too many anyway because they're so tasty. Philosophers call that weakness of will. Everyone's will is weak sometimes. We want to do the right thing, but we also want to do the fun or tasty thing, and sometimes that want wins out, even though we wish it wouldn't. The good news is that you can work on making good decisions; you'll get better at it if you practise.

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Do the needs of the many outweigh those of the few, or do the needs of the few outweigh those of the many? *Arthur, 7*

Arthur, did you get help with your homework? Or did some grownup put you up to asking this question? I'm a little suspicious, but I'll answer anyway. It depends what the needs are – and whether they are really needs, rather than just wants. Sometimes the needs of the many outweigh those of the few, and sometimes it's the other way round.

But it's important to say: needs and wants aren't all that matter when we're deciding what to do. Rights are important too. Consider the following story (which philosophers call Transplant). You work at a hospital, and there are five patients there who will die if they don't get organ transplants. Each patient needs a different organ, but there aren't any donors. Just then, a man walks into the hospital with a broken arm. He's not in any danger of dying, but it occurs to you: if you kill him, you could give his organs to the patients that are dying. That way, five people will live and only one person will die.

Would you kill the man? I wouldn't. I think we have to respect his right to life, even if it means others will die. The rights of just one person can trump the needs of many people.

Is your imagination made of atoms? *Josie, 7*

Josie, this is one of the hardest questions that philosophers think about – so hard that I had to go to my son Hank for help. (He's nine and a pretty good guy to ask about stuff like this.) Hank says that the thing that makes your imagination (your brain) is made of atoms, but your imagination isn't.

Is he right? It depends what you mean by your imagination. If you mean the mechanism in your brain that lets you imagine things, then, yes, that's made of atoms, just like Hank said. But if you mean the things that you imagine, such as dragons or fairies, then it's actually up to you whether they are made of atoms. You can imagine anything you want – even dragons made of fairy dust.

A trickier question is whether the idea of those dragons in your mind is made of atoms. Some philosophers think our minds are just our brains. (This is called materialism, since the idea is that the mind is made of material.) If that's true, then everything in your mind is made of atoms – including your ideas. But other philosophers doubt that everything in our minds can be explained by the arrangement of atoms in our brains. (This is called dualism, since the idea is that the mind and brain are two different kinds of things.) I'm not sure what to think. It's really complicated, and philosophers and scientists are working together to figure it out. Maybe you'll help someday.