Side by Side

Existential crisis

From Wikipedia, the free encyclopedia

An **existential crisis** is a moment at which an individual questions the very foundations of their life: whether their life has any meaning, purpose, or value.[[1]](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Existential_crisis#cite_note-1) This issue of the meaning and purpose of existence is the topic of the philosophical school of [existentialism](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Existentialism).

I look up from the Wikipedia article after only reading the first few sentences. My gaze leaves the computer screen and settles absently on the leafless tree that stands motionless outside my window. It’s no longer alive. I think it has termites. They have slowly eaten away at it until there is nothing left but this empty husk.

I glance back down. It’s curious that the random generator would come up with *this* page, among all of the billions of topics that Wikipedia holds. I stare at the tree again. It gives me a peculiar feeling. I can almost see it as it once was—the vibrant green, the *aliveness* that it used to embody. The strength of my recollection is nearly enough to overpower the thin skeletal frame that exists in my current reality. How is it that the past and the present can coexist like this? The juxtaposition of my memory with its actuality is jarring. It’s been so long since I actually *looked* at the tree. In death it did not afford me the same pleasures as in life—in my younger years, I only appreciated the fruits that it bore and the enjoyment I got from climbing it. But death and weakness took both of these amusements away.

It’s the night before my Calculus final. Why was I even on the internet in the first place? Oh yes, I remember. I was looking up a clarification on polar curves.

I search this, find the answer I was looking for, and copy it down into my notes.

I complete the problem, but find myself unable to move on to the next. The tree draws my eye. I am physically unable to look away.

It’s a bit like the body at a funeral. I cannot stop staring at it despite that it makes me feel ill, though even in death it has a peculiar majesty that I don’t think the human body has never been able to manage.

Human bodies. I’m a math major, not a science major. I can’t think about the physical—my realm of existence is the theoretical and its pure applications.

But this lump of brittle bark is making my brain freeze. Why? I’ve seen it a thousand times before. But have I ever looked properly? Because something is so integrally different about it at this moment that even mathematics cannot distract me.

I feel as though my mind has made some sort of strange, cross dimensional journey. The meaningless shell of a tree is changing. Its life is converging before my eyes, as if what should, by rights, stay spread out amongst the years is compressing into the space of a few minutes.

They say time travel is impossible. My math teacher proved it to me some years ago. “Time travel cannot happen,” he said, “because two y’s cannot exist at the same x-coordinate. As soon as they do, the graph is no longer a function.” But if two y’s cannot exist at the same x coordinate, why is it that the tree is all at once full to the brim with both life and death? Why do my memories exist in conflict with the truth? Or are my memories the truth? How can I tell? How can anyone tell? These images. I see a hundred little x’s where the brittle branches cross in my line of vision. A hundred violations of the laws of time?

No, they’re just branches.

I drag myself out of the boggy depths of my mind. It’s hard to exist always on the surface, and sometimes I can feel myself sinking. I suspect there will come a day when I will not be able to find the air.

I grasp my paper so tightly that my nails puncture little crescent-shaped holes in my careful calculations.