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## The Desperate Search for Meaning in Life

HEATHER BROWNING AND WALTER VEIT

Reason for existing, *raison d'être*. The reason why we're allowed to be here.

—Episode 25, “Do You Love Me?”

**W**hy do we exist? What's our purpose in life? These are some of the oldest questions in philosophy and also form the heart of Hideaki Anno's *Neon Genesis Evangelion*.

While on the surface *Neon Genesis Evangelion* may seem to be just another story of epic giant robot battles, fans know that there's much more to it. The focus is actually the personal struggles of the young EVA pilots and those around them, looking to find meaning in their lives. Here we see echoes of Albert Camus, who famously wrote on what he labeled the *only really serious philosophical problem*: suicide.

Camus argued that “Deciding whether or not life is worth living is to answer the fundamental question in philosophy. All other questions follow from that” (*The Myth of Sisyphus*). Like any typical teenagers, the three main characters question their own reasons for existence and attempt to find their own identities. It's this deeper exploration of the search for meaning that has led to the show's lasting cult status. Come for the robots, stay for the existentialism.

### Duty, Meaning, Loneliness

All of the three main characters initially try to answer these questions through their identity as EVA pilots, drawing their purpose, their meaning, and their identity from piloting the

EVAs. Shinji takes on the task of piloting an EVA with a sense of duty. He does so mechanically, and it's clearly difficult for him. Though he starts by claiming that he pilots for the sake of others, he comes to realize that his motivations are more self-ish. When piloting the EVA, he gains praise and attention from others, particularly his father, and this makes him feel valuable. Without his task he feels worthless, unable to accept that the people around him might like him for any other reason than his role as an EVA pilot.

Though, in the beginning, it's clear that he doesn't enjoy piloting the EVA, over time Shinji increasingly accepts this role. After his father overrides him and uses his EVA to destroy Unit 03, putting Toji at risk, Shinji decides not to pilot the EVA again. But when he sees his friends defeated, he realizes he must step up and returns to NERV, begging to be allowed to pilot, gathering his courage and for the first time owning this as his identity: "I'm the pilot of Evangelion Unit 01. I'm Shinji Ikari!"

Rei takes a similarly dutiful attitude towards piloting her EVA. Quiet and unassuming, she follows orders as she is given them. Yet we also see that it's through piloting the EVA that she feels connected with others, telling Shinji that it's "her link" to everyone and that she "doesn't have anything else." She places little value on her own worth or safety, as shown when she steps up to shield Shinji from the attack of the fifth Angel, risking her own life in the process. At Asuka's goading, she even admits that she would give up her life if ordered to by Commander Ikari. It's through piloting her EVA that Rei feels connected to the world, as though she has some worth. It's all she has.

Asuka also finds meaning in piloting an EVA, but for different reasons. For her, it's about succeeding and being the best. This desire to prove herself often leads to her rushing into battles unprepared and ending up defeated. Her insecurity is further evident in her ongoing rivalry with Shinji. Asuka's sense of purpose is derived from the recognition of others. Her child-like need for attention shows itself in the way that she constantly performs, calling others, especially Shinji and Kaji, to watch her as she acts. Her response to Shinji's question about why she pilots an EVA is "Why else? To show the whole world how talented I am!" When Shinji enquires "To let them know you exist?" she replies "Yeah. Something like that."

She also tries to find her connection to others through piloting the EVAs. After losing against several Angels and finding it increasingly difficult to block the memories of her traumatic

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past, Asuka is no longer able to sync with her EVA and must be withdrawn from battle. She falls into a deep depression, feeling the loss of her identity. Without the validation she receives from piloting the EVA, she no longer feels like her life is worthwhile.

Suicide is a recurring theme throughout the show, considered by several characters as a means to escape the apparent worthlessness of their lives. For Asuka this is perhaps most striking, since her mother hanged herself, an image that still haunts her. For Camus, suicide wasn't an acceptable response to the meaninglessness of existence. Many existentialists, such as Jean-Paul Sartre, thought that we can face this by creating our own meaning. Camus argued instead that we need to revolt in the face of a life without purpose and enjoy it anyway. *Neon Genesis Evangelion* follows the journeys of the characters as they similarly discover their own ways of finding meaning in their lives.

Although these characters are seemingly finding their meaning in their work, it's evident that what really matters to them is trying to find attention from, and connection to, others. The work they do is only instrumental in pursuing this goal. For them, true meaning is found in these human connections; however, they struggle to ever get what they need from others. This is an example of the Hedgehog's Dilemma.

### **The Hedgehog's Dilemma**

The Hedgehog's Dilemma arises from the writings of Arthur Schopenhauer (though he talks about porcupines, animals not closely related to hedgehogs), and forms the title of the fourth episode of the series. Schopenhauer tells of porcupines, coming together for warmth but driven apart again by the pain of each other's spines, drawing a parallel with the human condition of creating distance between ourselves because of our desire to avoid harm. Though we crave connection, we aren't ever able to fully satisfy this desire. He writes:

A number of porcupines huddled together for warmth on a cold day in winter; but, as they began to prick one another with their quills, they were obliged to disperse. However the cold drove them together again, when just the same thing happened. At last, after many turns of huddling and dispersing, they discovered that they would be best off by remaining at a little distance from one another. In the same way the need of society drives the human porcupines together, only to be mutually repelled by the many prickly and dis-

agreeable qualities of their nature. The moderate distance which they at last discover to be the only tolerable condition of intercourse, is the code of politeness and fine manners; and those who transgress it are roughly told—in the English phrase—to keep their distance. By this arrangement the mutual need of warmth is only very moderately satisfied; but then people do not get pricked. A man who has some heat in himself prefers to remain outside, where he will neither prick other people nor get pricked himself. (*Parerga and Paralipomena*, Volume 2, pp. 651–52)

This pattern is repeated throughout the series. The characters all feel lost, and alienated, because of a lack of strong connections to parent figures or peers. They have experienced pain and losses that make them wary of growing close to others, and they employ defensive mechanisms to try to protect themselves from further pain.

Shinji has never really belonged anywhere, his life a series of “unfamiliar ceilings.” He was abandoned by his father after the death of his mother, and his father remains cold and distant, only reaching out when he needs Shinji for something. To avoid further rejection and abandonment, Shinji has become obedient, trying to follow orders and please others by piloting the EVA or playing the cello at the advice of his teachers. He’s also defensive, unwilling to allow anyone to get really close.

Shinji deals with his fear of hurt and rejection by running away, leading to his repeated mantra throughout the series: “I mustn’t run away.” He runs away not just literally, by leaving when things get hard, but also figuratively, by avoiding things that are difficult. The very act of hating himself, of feeling like he doesn’t matter, is itself a form of running away, of avoiding having to engage with life, or with others.

Rei has similar issues with Gendo, who acts as a father figure to her. Although he shows some attachment to and protectiveness toward her, this is a result of her link to his late wife, Yui, as well as his need for her as part of his Instrumentality Project. Rei is well aware of the reason for his attention and though she craves it, she understands the reality behind it. Rei also suffers from a feeling of disconnection and a struggle with self-identity, as she is a clone and thus doesn’t feel entirely human. In response to this, Rei is an isolated and almost robotic character who separates herself from others. She doesn’t seem to know how to interact with them but passively does as she is told and accepts what happens to her without complaint, strikingly illustrated by a scene of her lying naked, impassive, below Shinji, after he accidentally falls on her. She then gets dressed and leaves without saying a word.

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Asuka also suffers from childhood abandonment, with her father absent, focused on his work, and her mother first having a breakdown that leads to her taking a small doll as her child in Asuka's place, and finally committing suicide. When Asuka overhears her new stepmother telling her father that she could stop being a mother if she chose, this terrifies the young girl. She develops a steely determination to be strong, living without relying on others. She protects herself through her loud and aggressive behavior and as her struggles intensify through the series, she begins to express hatred towards everyone, including herself.

These traumas, rejections, and abandonments in the characters' pasts lead them to be afraid future harms, building up defenses to protect themselves. All classic examples of the Hedgehog's Dilemma. In fact, the idea is introduced directly in the series. In Episode 3 ("A Transfer"), Ritsuko tells Misato about it, in an attempt to help her understand Shinji, explaining that he may be scared of taking risks with others because he could be hurt again:

**RITSUKO:** Shinji might be the kind of person who can't make friends easily. Have you ever heard of the Hedgehog's Dilemma?

**MISATO:** Hedgehog? Those spiky animals?

**RITSUKO:** Hedgehogs have a hard time sharing warmth with other hedgehogs. The closer they get, the more they hurt each other with their quills. People are also like that. I think some part of Shinji is afraid to take that risk because he's afraid of being hurt.

**MISATO:** He'll figure it out eventually. Part of growing up is trying again and again using trial and error to work out the right distance to avoid hurting each other.

This dialogue is poignantly delivered over scenes of Shinji walking and sitting quietly alone amongst his chattering classmates. Because of Shinji's past hurts, he now feels unable to get close to others, scared of being hurt again, and simultaneously hurting others in return.

Episode 4 tackles this parable head-on, and we get a glimpse at its possible resolution. After fighting with Misato, Shinji runs away. Misato realizes that both Shinji and she are scared of lashing out at one another, leading to further hurt and withdrawal: "The Hedgehog's Dilemma, huh? The closer they get, the more they hurt each other. I get it now. He talks like that because he doesn't know how else to express his feelings." The visuals of this scene, Shinji's speaking face fading into Misato's, further emphasizes the similarity between them.

This leads her to race to the train station to try to stop him from leaving, only to find that, remembering her words, he has decided to stay. They have both made an effort to overcome their tendency to hurt or withdraw, in order to benefit from the warmth that comes from connection.

### **The Human Instrumentality Project**

That's how everyone's Instrumentality began. Parts they were missing, hearts they had lost, that emptiness in their hearts was filled. The Instrumentality of the heart, the soul, begins. Everyone's Instrumentality begins, returning everything to nothingness.

—Episode 25, “Do You Love Me?”

I'm tired of being . . . alone.

SHINJI, Episode 16, “Splitting of the Breast”

The early episodes on the Hedgehog's Dilemma are a teaser of what's to come. Hideaki Anno uses the small-scale story between the characters in the beginning to later reveal and connect the plans of the secret organization SEELE and their Human Instrumentality Project.

The isolation we have seen in the characters, the prior hurt and abandonment that leaves them damaged, and scared to connect, while they crave the love and acceptance of others, is exactly what SEELE plans to overcome using Instrumentality. Throughout the series, the Angels are able to generate AT fields that cannot be penetrated by any conventional weaponry. This is why the EVAs are a necessary weapon, themselves able to manifest these shields and penetrate those of the Angels. Close to the ending of the series, however, it's revealed that the AT fields actually arise from possession of a soul. They hold together the ego, or sense of self, protecting against others. These are physical manifestations of the psychological barriers between individuals.

Here, the plot converges: SEELE (the German word for “soul”) aims to destroy these barriers that separate humans from one another, solving the Hedgehog's Dilemma by merging all souls and overcoming the problems of alienation and loneliness by making everyone whole. Instrumentality is the dissolution of the self into the collective, the loss of boundary. In this, there are echoes of Heidegger, who saw the self as having an authentic form of being (which he called *Dasein*) that involved identification of the self as separate from but interacting with the world of others; whereas the inauthentic being would

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choose to lose themselves in the world of others, the They. Instrumentality is thus a form of losing the self and giving into the They. The motivation for this project is to bring everyone together, a single soul, filling all the empty spaces in the hearts and minds of people. A world in which there is no authenticity.

Shinji is shown a world of complete freedom, a world in which there are no others. However, he's disturbed by the emptiness of this world and realizes that it's the presence of others in the world that provides the boundaries by which he can define himself: "If nothing exists outside of yourself, you can't determine your own shape . . . You visualize your own shape by seeing the wall between 'self' and 'other'. You can't see yourself unless others are with you."

Although he has his own self, it's only meaningful through contrast with others. This idea is raised in the work of some of the post-Kantian German idealists, such as Johann Gottlieb Fichte and Georg Wilhelm Friedrich Hegel. They explored the idea that the awareness of the self could only be fully realized through the presence of others. It is only in contrasting yourself with those around you that you can recognize your own identity. It is the interaction between self and other that is crucial for human awareness and experience. Although the otherness removes some freedom, without it, the self cannot exist.

Instrumentality erases these barriers and thus the self along with it, a consequence which leads to losing what it is that makes a person human in the first place. This is an outcome that Shinji is unwilling to accept. He fears that by joining with others, he will lose himself and realizes that although he has internalized the rejection of others and started to hate himself, thus building the protective walls that keep others out, he could learn to like (or love) himself, and that he wants to continue to exist. As he draws these realizations, the manufactured world around him shatters. He breaks through once more to the world containing others and he finds himself surrounded by congratulatory friends and family. Although aware that separation from others will re-create the barriers and allow the fear and loneliness to return, he accepts this as a necessary cost of the potential joy that can be achieved in relationships with others and chooses to return to the world, thus making the same choice possible for others. In the end, it's Shinji's will to live, and will to be a self, his desire to retain his identity through his separation from others, that allows him to break free from Instrumentality and create a new world.

The failure of Instrumentality is driven by this unwillingness to accept the loss of self. The conclusion we're led to is that

connection with others can only be made meaningful through the separation of individuals, despite the pain of isolation that this entails. The story suggests that the meaning the characters seek can only be found through human connection, their relationships with one another, but maintaining some distance.

During Instrumentality, Rei defends the idea that she has an identity found through her interactions with others. She gains a sense of self, independently of her clones, through these connections: "I am the real me. I became myself over the time that I've existed and through the connections that I've formed with others. The person I am is shaped by my interactions with others. Interactions with others and the passage of time will change the shape of my heart . . . Those are what created the person that I have been, the object called Rei Ayanami. They will create the person I will be."

The value of connections with others is emphasised throughout the show. Although the characters struggle with their fears and hurts, we also see that they're able to strengthen and grow through the connections they make with one another. This is particularly true of Shinji, and it's the relationships he forms, and the ways in which they change him, that ultimately decide the fate of humanity through Instrumentality.

Misato acts as a parent figure, helping him feel accepted and at home and in the end it's she who pushes Shinji to meet his destiny, challenging him to grow up, and start making decisions for himself. He also develops bonds with his fellow pilots, Asuka and Rei. These relationships are conflicted and ambiguous. Like typical teenagers, they are navigating the complicated strands of friendship, family, and romance. However, it's obvious that they truly care for one another. In the end, this is what causes Rei to put her faith in Shinji, rather than Gendo, determining the entire outcome for Instrumentality.

In *The End of Evangelion* when Shinji breaks free from Instrumentality, it's Asuka whom he finds at his side back on Earth. The relationship which Shinji builds with Kaworu, the Fifth Child, and seventeenth Angel, is a key defining one for him. Their relationship is ambiguous, sitting between friendship and romance, and they quickly become close. Kaworu encourages Shinji to think about himself and his place in the world and tells Shinji that he loves him, the first time that Shinji has ever heard those words. In the end, when Shinji is fearful of Rei/Lilith as she tries to take him and Unit 01 into her hands, it's when Kaworu's form emerges that he joyously accepts the union.



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Through these relationships, Shinji builds more confidence, becoming stronger and more assertive. Instead of simply trying to follow orders and please others all the time, he begins to stand up for what he wants and make decisions for himself. Eventually, it is his connections with others that help Shinji find himself and save humanity. The meaning that he has sought for himself is discovered in defining his identity through his relationships with those around him. He accepts that it is better to continue to exist, with all the pain that it may entail, than to lose himself in the formless safety promised by Instrumentality.

We may remain hedgehogs, unable to ever completely shed our spikes, but we should never stop trying to seek that warmth, the human connection that defines us.

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