

Existential indifference

By Tatjana Schnell, 2020

Not every absence of meaning is reflected in a crisis of meaning, causes irritation and motivates us to search. Indifference is much more frequent. About one-fourth of all Germans experience their lives as meaningless but have no problem with it. They neither search for meaning nor experience a lack of meaning or a crisis of meaning. I have therefore called them existentially indifferent (Schnell, 2010). While Viktor Frankl assumed that human beings have an inherent need for meaning, which if not fulfilled leads to an “existential vacuum” and subsequently to a “noogenic neurosis” (Frankl, 2014, p. 14), today we have to say that a lot of people do not care if their life has meaning. They are not particularly happy with this attitude, but they do not suffer from it either.

9.1 Whatever!

In 1964, psychologist Abraham Maslow lamented a widespread loss of values in Western societies. He then stated that this was followed by a joyless, dull, boring, passionless, indifferent attitude to life (Maslow, 1964). In psychology, this thesis has not yet been investigated further. The presumed attitude might simply be too inconspicuous, since it is not subject to psychological stress: If you don't care, you don't seek support.

From a humanist or existentialist perspective, however, we should be worried if it is indeed the case that large sections of society retreat into indifference. Several philosophers and psychologists (Martin Heidegger, Viktor Frankl, Rollo May, Irvin Yalom and Kirk Schneider) have provided important theoretical insights into the difference between an active, committed and authentic life and a shallow, superficial mode of existence. Heidegger (2008), to whom subsequent authors repeatedly refer, contrasted authentic (“owned”) with inauthentic (“unowned”) being. He understood the inauthentic as the original mode of being. It is ordinary

behaviour, what “one” does – and thus the environment in which we all find ourselves – which constitutes our conditions of existence. To turn our lives into authentic being, we have to come “to our own.”

The mode of being that we have empirically identified as existential indifference is characterised by a lack of owning the self. Most likely, people who are existentially indifferent have not (yet) exposed themselves to the angst described in Chapter 8, have not (yet) faced up to nothingness – at least this is suggested by our research findings, which are presented next.

9.2 How to assess existential indifference

Also for methodological reasons, empirical research on meaning has long overlooked existential indifference. Most researchers assumed that meaning in life was to be represented on a single continuum, with one pole reflecting meaningfulness and the other a crisis of meaning. This was based on Frankl’s assumption that an absence of meaning amounts to a crisis. Only when the availability of the SoMe (Schnell & Becker, 2007; Schnell, 2014) allowed for a separate measurement of meaningfulness and crisis of meaning were we able to detect a state of low meaningfulness and, at the same time, low crisis of meaning. To identify existential indifference, the two scales are combined. Existential indifference occurs when the mean values of both scales are below 3 (values from 0 to 2 indicate rejection, whereas values 3 to 5 indicate affirmation) This kind of calculation allows for four types of meaning to be identified (Table 9.1).

9.3 Relationships and explanatory approaches

On the basis of our data, we can say who is more likely to be existentially indifferent in demographic terms. Correlations with sources of meaning

Table 9.1 Identification of four types of meaning (mean scores)

<i>Meaningfulness</i>	<i>Crisis of Meaning</i>	<i>Type of Meaning</i>
≥ 3	< 3	Meaningfulness
< 3	≥ 3	Crisis of meaning
< 3	< 3	Existential indifference
≥ 3	≥ 3	Conflicting

and personality traits contribute to a better understanding of the phenomenon, and intercultural comparisons provide further clues.

9.3.1 Correlations with demographics

Parallel to the reported changes regarding crises of meaning (Chapter 8), the frequency of existential indifference has decreased in recent years. Only 23 percent of our current sample account for this type of meaning. Also, the age distribution has changed. Whereas in 2006 almost half of all young people were existentially indifferent (Schnell, 2008, 2016), today this is only true for 23 percent (Figure 9.1). An existential mobilisation of youth seems to have taken place, for which phenomena such as Fridays for Future might be taken as evidence. At nearly one-third, most existentially indifferent people are to be found among the 30–39-year-olds. With progressing age, the numbers decrease continuously; the lowest figure, that of 9 percent, is found among people over 70.

Also in contrast to the earlier data, gender differences are now becoming apparent: More men report existential indifference than women do (26 percent vs 20 percent). Moreover, a correlation with the level of education has been established: People with higher education report less existential indifference (18 percent) than people with minimum compulsory schooling (31 percent). With regard to marital status, 30 percent

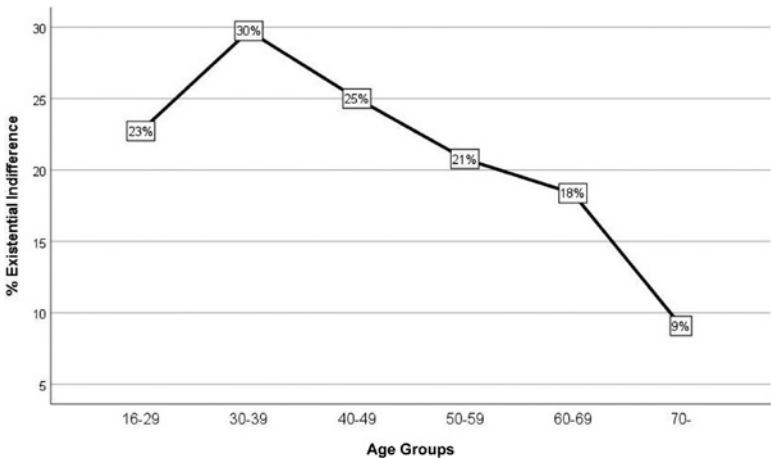


Figure 9.1 Existential indifference (in %) in six age groups (N = 1,291)

of unmarried cohabitants and over a quarter of singles (26 percent) are classified as indifferent, compared to just under a fifth of married people (19 percent).

9.3.2 (No) sources of meaning in existential indifference

Let us remember once again the hierarchic model of meaning (Section 4.1): It suggests that personally relevant sources of meaning, when put into action, support the perception of life as meaningful. If meaningfulness is low, as with existentially indifferent individuals, there should also be little commitment to sources of meaning. This assumption has been clearly confirmed. Existential indifference is related to very low general commitment. Religiosity, spirituality and generativity are particularly low, even to an extent that indicates rejection. When comparing the values of indifferent individuals with those who report meaningfulness, the largest differences can be found in generativity, religiosity, spirituality, care, harmony, communion and attentiveness.

Using Maslow's words, we can summarise as follows: Existentially indifferent "people have nothing to admire, to sacrifice themselves for, to surrender to, to die for" (Maslow, 1964, S. 42). They have no passions, no commitment. The idea of a supernatural reality is of no use to them; even in this world, they are not interested in leaving traces or making a contribution. At the same time, they avoid exploring themselves (self-knowledge). This again obstructs the way to a more authentic being. Without knowing about our strengths, weaknesses, desires and values, "owning" ourselves is impossible.

Rebecca Schlegel and colleagues (Schlegel, Hicks, King, & Arndt, 2011) have elaborated on the importance of knowledge about the "true self," in several studies. They showed that the availability of knowledge about the true self is closely related to the perception of life as meaningful. The researchers developed several approaches for measuring knowledge about the true self: One measure refers to the level of detail (as judged by experts) that people achieve when they are asked to write a short text about their true self. In another survey, people were requested to create a list of attributes that described their true self. They then had to assess how easy or difficult it was for them to do so. Schlegel interpreted both measures – that is, the externally evaluated level of detail and the participants' statements about the ease or difficult in making the description of the true self – as personal accessibility of the true self; both went hand in hand with increased meaningfulness.

Nevertheless, as Schlegel notes, thinking about the true self is not always pleasant, because it can be accompanied by existential discomfort. This ambivalence of self-knowledge also shows up in our data. On the one hand, we see clear indications for the meaning-making potential of self-knowledge. On the other hand, self-knowledge is positively related to neuroticism (Section 5.1 and Schnell & Becker, 2007). From an existential perspective, these findings make sense. According to Heidegger, as described earlier, the confrontation with angst is a necessary prerequisite for authenticity. This experience of existential angst might well be reflected in increased neuroticism scores, indicating the occurrence of anxiety, worry, fear, frustration, loneliness and so on.

As existentially indifferent people reject a reflection on their actual or “true” self, this may prevent authenticity but at the same time avoid the state of angst. The low manifestation of development (as a source of meaning) also underlines the assumption that in existential indifference, people tend to avoid unpleasant states that arise when the actual state is questioned by the possibility of change. Furthermore, low mean scores in attentiveness indicate that awareness of the present, the actual state, is also suppressed or ignored. The low level of generativity, on the other hand, can be explained by the lack of a stable self-concept: As long as we do not know who we are, we will have difficulties to leave traces, to create something *sting*.

9.3.3 Informative correlates of existential indifference

Various studies deal with potential predictors and consequences of existential indifference. Summarising the available results, the following picture emerges: With regard to the three basic psychological needs – autonomy, competence and psychological relatedness (Deci & Ryan, 2002) – existentially indifferent people have below-average values in competence (Schnell, 2013). Competence refers to the experience of behaviour as effectively enacted. Accordingly, also self-efficac (Damásio & Koller, 2015; Hörmann, 2016) and internal locus of control are limited (Schnell, 2013). Self-efficac stands for the personal judgement of one’s ability to cope with difficultie and barriers in daily life (Schwarzer, 1992). An internal locus of control is present when a person is convinced that they can control events and thus experiences them as consequences of their own actions (Krampen, 1991). Existentially indifferent individuals therefore experience themselves neither as capable of coping with the problems of their everyday lives nor as capable of influencing the events in their lives. Their hope of success is also below average. Especially with regard to attractiveness and career, they expect fewer chances of

success than others (Hörmann, 2016). Existentially indifferent people do not feel personally responsible for the course of their lives; instead, their trust in science and technology is above average (Schnell, 2015).

We can conclude from this that existentially indifferent people do not feel comfortable with the demands placed on them. They react by withdrawing into indifference, which is an act of resignation but one that does not reach the status of a crisis. Their self-perception is characterised by moderate self-esteem and moderate resilience (Damásio & Koller, 2015; Vötter & Schnell, in press). With regard to dealing with potential partners, data suggest that existentially indifferent people are characterised by attachment avoidance. They tend to distance themselves and avoid closeness and intimacy (Hörmann, 2016). Finally, they are neither pessimists nor optimists: Both values are in the middle range, as are the values for hope (Damásio & Koller, 2015).

How do the existentially indifferent fare? So-so. Life satisfaction and subjective well-being are neither highly developed nor in a critically low range. There is no psychological strain. Neither depression nor anxiety reach values that would indicate mental problems. In young adulthood, they do not smoke and drink more than those who find their lives meaningful, nor do they consume drugs more frequently (Schnell, 2013).

9.3.4 Cultural differences

When we compared data from different countries and cultures, we found differences that were revealing. Existential indifference was much more common in countries with high levels of prosperity than in countries with lower levels of prosperity. For an overview of the frequency of existential indifference in different countries, see Table 9.2. To ensure comparability, the table presents data from participants aged 16 to 25, all of whom were surveyed between 2010 and 2014. Existential indifference was most common in Germany, followed by Austria, Denmark and France. These countries also had high levels of prosperity in the Legatum Prosperity Index, 2014, which is calculated from eight subscales: economy, entrepreneurship, governance, education, health, security, personal freedom and social capital. By contrast, existential indifference was much rarer in Ecuador, Brazil and Bulgaria – countries that also show significantly lower levels of prosperity. Thus, there seems to be an inverse relationship between existential indifference and prosperity.

An interpretation of these results can only be speculative. High social prosperity might encourage some citizens to minimise their involvement and participation, as this will entail little or no material loss for them.

Table 9.2 Existential Indifference (%) – Legatum Prosperity Index (ages 16–25; data collection 2010–2014)

<i>Countries</i>	<i>Existential Indifference (%)</i>	<i>Prosperity Index* (-5 to +5)</i>
Germany	51	> 2.5
Austria	39	> 2.5
Denmark	35	> 2.5
France	32	> 2
Ecuador	11	< 0
Bulgaria	9	< 0.5
Brazil	4	< 0.5

Note: * Legatum Prosperity Index for 2014

A desire for active and creative participation, on the other hand, has many barriers to overcome: Industrially highly developed societies are characterised by pressure to perform, competitive thinking, rivalry and economisation. The pursuit of higher goals is accompanied by a risk of failure that should not be underestimated (Anhut & Heitmeyer, 2007). The low expectation of self-efficacy and competence that we have observed in existentially indifferent people can explain their passive-negative attitude under such conditions. In addition, professional success and even social success require clear self-positioning. To increase career and partnership opportunities, personal strengths must be identified, promoted and optimised. On the part of existentially indifferent people, avoidance of self-knowledge and challenge constitutes a hindrance in this way.

Should this sociopolitical derivation of existential indifference apply, we should find evidence also for the alternative: for those who face social challenges with a clear self-image and without fear of failure. And we do find them, represented by the so-called Generation Y. Youth studies and generational analyses suggest that the following characteristics apply to Generation Y: They have a relatively high level of education and are technology oriented without being monopolised by technology. They are well aware of their values and orient their lives accordingly. The focus here is less on status and career than on meaningful action and a balanced life plan (Bund, 2014).

Our society thus elicits (at least) two kinds of approaches to the world: one that uses the existing demanding structures confidently and willingly (such as Generation Y) and another that is associated with feelings of overburdening, withdrawal and relinquishing claims to societal participation (such as existential indifference)

Various youth studies provide indications of this gap: In the 16th Shell Youth Study (Albert, Hurrelmann, Quenzel, & Schneekloth, 2011), 59 percent of young people stated that they were confident about their personal future. However, 35 percent said that they saw their future “sometimes up, sometimes down,” and 6 percent expected a dark future. An Allensbach survey commissioned by the Vodafone Foundation and published in 2014 pointed out that almost half of young people found it difficult to choose a career after finishing school (Vodafone Foundation, 2014). The Sinus Institute has identified the following long-term trends of change in our society (Sinus, 2018, p. 17, transl. TS):

- Modernisation and individualisation: opening of the social space through higher educational qualifications, increasing mobility, communication and networking and thus a wider scope for development and choice.
- Excessive demands and regression: growing overextension and insecurity through technological, sociocultural and economic change, through the diversity of possibilities (multi-option paralysis) and the de-standardisation of life courses, with the consequence of disorientation and loss of meaning and a search for relief, support and certainty (regrounding).
- Dissolution of boundaries and segregation: drifting apart of life-worlds and values driven by globalisation and digitalisation, social-hierarchical differentiation and growing social declassification processes, erosion of the centre and the emergence of a cosmopolitan elite (one-world-consciousness).

The remarkable clarity of Generation Y – winner of the trend towards modernisation and individualisation – often hides those who find it difficult to orient and assert themselves and who experience a pressure to perform that is perceived as too strong (excessive demands and regression). These include the existentially indifferent. The British author Clive Martin (Martin, 2014) self-critically and revealingly gives a personal insight into this state:

It’s no longer just teenagers and students who seem to be running away from real life. It’s people in their twenties and thirties, too – people who should really know better but don’t seem to know how to do much else. . . . This is my generation, the generation with no real incentive to grow up. No kids to feel guilty about, just jobs that let them scrape the money they need to feed, house, and wash

themselves. . . . In my parents' day, it was easier to grow up. It was borderline impossible not to; society dragged you up whether you wanted it or not. . . . We are the new aging Italian bachelors in our own mundane versions of *The Great Beauty* – the new-British professional wreckheads, the generation that doesn't know what to do with itself now that it's been forced to choose reality over the grand, overarching myths that steered our parents the way of relative peace and respectability. When you have no myth to guide you, what do you lock in on when the hangovers and comedowns demand some normalcy to return to? . . . We claim to hate the system that's made us like this, yet we're all so desperate to be a part of it.

The Japanese phenomenon of hikikomori can be regarded as an extreme example of withdrawal and indifference. Here, too, we find indications that existential indifference arises when a high level of prosperity, which guarantees the satisfaction of basic needs, meets high competition and pressure to perform. Hikikomori are young people, most of them male, who refuse to leave their home or even their room and withdraw from family and society for months or years. The psychologist Tamaki Saito was the first to draw attention to the rising numbers of withdrawing young people; he coined the term "hikikomori." He believes that the withdrawal is caused by two things: the strong pressure to achieve excellence in school, education and working life and close family ties that ensure that parents sustain their children even for decades, should they not move out – sometimes into the fourth decade of life (Jones, 2006).

Parents of hikikomori claim to have paid particular attention to the promotion of performance in their children, while other aspects have receded into the background. If achievement is the only source of meaning and identity, it is easy to understand the fear experienced by young people when they face the possibility of failure. Withdrawal can be understood as an attempt to avoid potential failure. "Better to stay in the room than to venture out into the world and fail" (Jones, 2006). Hikikomori spend most of their time watching television, playing video games or other distracting activities that do not pose mental challenges. They are convinced that they are not needed by society, that they have no place in it. A social worker describes how she asked a withdrawn person who spent most of his time building model cars for a sample to give to children in a day-care centre. "He seemed so pleased. . . . It was as if he'd never been asked to do something for someone else before. He was sitting in his room all day where nothing was expected of him, and he did nothing to show his value" (Jones, 2006). Those affecte

experience themselves as outsiders, as not belonging, as alienated and insignificant

A large number of studies on hikikomori are now available (e.g. Harding, 2018; Li & Wong, 2015; Teo et al., 2015). They were mainly conducted in the Japanese context, but they repeatedly draw parallels to similar phenomena in countries such as Hong Kong (“Hidden Youth”), the United States (“adulthoodless”), Spain (“Ni-ni”) or the United Kingdom (“NEET” – Not in Education, Employment or Training). The OECD (Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development) regularly publishes statistics on the frequency of NEETs in its member states, limited to 15–29-year-olds. In the United Kingdom, for example, the share of NEETs in this age group was 15 percent in 2006, 16 percent in 2012 and 13 percent in 2018 (OECD, 2019). Figures for Scandinavian countries are significantly lower, varying from 8 percent to 9 percent in Norway, from 9 percent to 10 percent in Sweden and from 7 percent to 12 percent in Denmark.

It is necessary for us to gain understanding for people who withdraw into indifference – with those who drop out of educational and professional paths being only the tip of the iceberg. In doing so, it is important to distinguish what might look the same on the surface. An increasing number of people are consciously leaving the dominant system and distancing themselves from it to varying degrees (e.g. downshifting, living off the grid, minimalism, anti-consumerism). Despite their withdrawal, their decisions are based on not indifference but clear convictions. As grassroots movements, such initiatives contribute to making alternative lifestyles more visible in our society (Chapter 14).

In the case of disengagement and withdrawal, as can be seen in existential indifference, social scientists and practitioners call for more vigilance, because such people easily disappear into invisibility (“invisible youth”). In contrast to those who express their displeasure through violence and antisocial behaviour, those who withdraw receive little attention; their needs remain hidden (Wong, Yuen, Su, & Yung, 2019).

9.4 Ways out of indifference?

What possibilities may we have to counteract the segregation observed by the Sinus Institute and other surveys? As long as it does not concern extreme phenomena like total withdrawal (à la hikikomori), existentially indifferent individuals do not perceive psychological strain. From the outside, therefore, there are hardly any starting points or justifications for intervention. Nevertheless, it seems necessary to think about possibilities

of preventing and overcoming indifference and regression. Democracies depend on the participation of their citizens. If large sections of the people show no interest in participating, in shaping society, then the model of democracy is in danger. If social structures lead to the empowerment of one part of the population but to the alienation of the other, then criticism is appropriate.

The results of empirical studies on existential indifference demonstrate that indifference is accompanied by subjective helplessness and loss of control. It is not our autonomy that is limited; we are all aware that we have to make our own decisions about our lives. The question is whether we can. The low level of competence reported by existentially indifferent individuals shows that they feel overwhelmed by the demands they encounter. They experience themselves as ineffective, not as designers of their own lives. There is no hope for positive change and therefore no motivation to become active in this direction. Existentially indifferent people reject exploring themselves just as much as they reject committing to things that go beyond themselves.

Rahel Jaeggi (2014, p. 3) describes, in her socio-philosophical analysis, the phenomenon of alienation similarly to existential indifference

Alienation means indifference and internal division, but also powerlessness and relationlessness with respect to oneself and to a world experienced as indifferent and alien. Alienation is the inability to establish a relation to other human beings, to things, to social institutions and thereby also – so the fundamental intuition of the theory of alienation – to oneself. An alienated world presents itself to individuals as insignificant and meaningless, as rigidified or impoverished, as a world that is not one's own, which is to say, a world in which one is not "at home" and over which one can have no influence. The alienated subject becomes a stranger to itself; it no longer experiences itself as an "actively effective subject" but a "passive object" at the mercy of unknown forces.

According to Jaeggi, the solution lies in affectively identifying oneself with the world as a precondition and object of one's actions. The conditions for this, she claims, are openness to experience and vitality (Jaeggi, 2007). However, existentially indifferent people lack precisely this openness to experience. As one of our fundamental personality traits, openness is not easily attainable without a respective predisposition. And vitality arises from a will to live that is difficult to achieve without a sense of meaningfulness.

Let's think about more feasible approaches. We can assume, for example, that unnecessary competition and pressure to perform would decrease if successful *curricula vitae* were not made dependent on a high level of education. This would require a new appreciation of a wide variety of vocational activities, especially in the area of skilled trades. Moreover, we should increase opportunities to participate in the shaping of society. Such opportunities for getting involved beyond one's own affairs are actually diminishing. This fact is partly masked by the large amount of attention that we direct to the design of our own little world. The huge choice of mobile phone cases, TV stations, car tyres, study courses, face creams, sneakers, cereal brands, holiday resorts, websites and so on occupies our working memory. As a consequence, we perceive more-crucial or even existential decisions as overtaxing and gladly leave them to chance, algorithms, or others who apparently know better.

Self-efficacy and experiences of control arise, among other things, from responsible action. Our society is characterised by a high degree of individual freedom, which relieves us of role prescriptions and rigid moral norms. At the same time, however, the individual has also been "freed" from responsibilities that do concern not the self but concern others (Schnell, 2013). But experiences of self-efficacy and control are particularly evident when responsibility for others is assumed: Getting involved, standing up for others results in an immediate feeling of personal significance. Judith Rodin and Ellen Langer were able to prove this effect as early as 1977 with a simple intervention. They placed plants in the rooms of a retirement home. Half of the residents were able to choose "their" plant from among those available; they were also given the task of taking care of it. The other half of the residents were given a random plant; they were then told that the staff would take care of the plant. The first half of the residents, who had both control over the selection of the plant and responsibility for its welfare, were found to be more active, more positive and less depressed.

Similar interventions to make personal responsibility tangible have also been successfully employed with hikikomori in Hong Kong. In one study, young people were invited to visit neglected dogs in an animal shelter. They were asked to build trusting relationships with the dogs and to engage in joint activities. According to their own reports, the reclusive youngsters were able to offer the dogs love, care, camaraderie and a safe environment. The experience allowed them to believe in their ability to care for living beings. Moreover, the interaction was also beneficial for the dogs. They trusted the youngsters, became more affectionate and accepted human care – which in turn gave the youngsters a sense of significance (Wong et al., 2019).

To strengthen experiences of personal significance, it is necessary to replace our understanding of responsibility as a burden with one that sees responsibility as an opportunity for development. At the same time, we need opportunities to take on responsibility, regardless of our social background or educational level. When are the children of migrants involved in social decision-making processes? When do pensioners experience that they are needed? Where do trainees experience playing an important role in our society? What right to a say do unemployed people have?



9.5 Know thyself!

SELF-EXPLORATION: RESPONSIBILITY

Write down your connotations of the term “responsibility”:

Are your connotations more positive or negative? Why?

SELF-EXPLORATION: “PUBLIC SELF” AND “TRUE SELF”

First, write down six characteristics or terms that describe your “public self”:

Using a numerical scale from 0 to 10, rate how easy it was for you to create this list (0 = very easy; 10 = extremely difficult).

0-1-2-3-4-5-6-7-8-9-10

Now write down six characteristics or terms that describe your “true self”:

Again, use a numerical scale from 0 to 10 to estimate how easy it was for you to create this list (0 = very easy; 10 = extremely difficult

0-1-2-3-4-5-6-7-8-9-10

According to Rebecca Schlegel’s results (Schlegel et al., 2011), there is a connection between meaningfulness and easy accessibility of the characteristics of the “true self.” To increase meaningfulness, it might therefore be advisable to invest time in self-knowledge.

FOR CONTEMPLATION

For a substantial part of society, our data on existential indifference tie in with Maslow’s lament that “people have nothing to admire, to sacrifice themselves for, to surrender to, to die for” (Maslow, 1964, S. 42). A collection of Theravada Buddhist writings contains the following words attributed to the Buddha (extracted from the Purabheda-Sutta of Sutra-Nipata; FWBO, undated; transl. TS):

A peaceful man has left all his desires behind before his body even disintegrates. He does not wonder how it all began or how it will end, nor does he hang on to what happens in between. Such a person has no expectations and desires for the future. He feels no anger, no fear and no stress. Nothing disturbs his conscience and his peace of mind. He is a wise man who speaks calmly. He has no desire for the future, no regret for the present. Free from the confused world of the senses, no opinions or views guide him.

Should we imagine indifference as a desirable state? Does it not create less suffering than people who sacrifice themselves for, surrender to or die for their cause?

9.6 Literature

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