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Prompt: Is escapism a betrayal of the self, or a necessary path toward self-actualization?

Lucid Dreaming

A man drinks in the shower on a hot summer evening, the cold water streaming down his skin. His mind fades of all worries and soon becomes numb. To himself, only his accelerated heartbeat and the soft touch of the steady stream of water reflect his existence in that moment. A boy puts on headphones, blasting the first song that he can find, desperate to drown out the shouts of his parents fighting in the room next door. "Surely, if I drown out the horrid sounds, they will cease to exist anymore." A woman, unable to heal from her past trauma, develops a split personality as a coping mechanism. To consciously trade the experience of reality with ignorance is a dangerous deal with the devil. Lucidity begets pain, and ignorance is bliss. In the case of the woman, the subconscious splitting of her psyche is not a choice, but a necessity. In essence, escapism is an attempt to leave reality and retreat into the safety of ignorance. It is an organic and deeply human response towards both pain and disillusionment. Souls too sensitive and fragile to navigate the weight of moral living find themselves trapped in this paradoxical liminal space of lucidity and ignorance that is escapism. Escapism offers neither comfort nor healing, but rather, it is a flawed yet necessary step in self-actualization.

Specifically, although escapism relieves the soul temporarily, lacking the sufficient means to heal, it serves as a powerful step towards realizing one's full potential. "Heal the soul by indulging the senses", Oscar Wilde posits through Henry in *The Picture of Dorian Gray*. Yet, it is deeply flawed. The soul exists as a metaphysical dimension that cannot be physically identified biologically or psychologically. In contrast, the senses remain the physical mediums that ground human knowledge as suggested by the Empiricists. Interpreting this claim metaphorically may prove more useful. Just as Dorian indulges in opioids, the senses become catalysts that numb the lucidity of the soul. Moreover, exchanging mock ignorance for lucid awareness is a doomed endeavor, destined to fail to satisfy the individual. To exchange is a conscious choice that defeats the purpose of ignorance by creating an ouroboros loop of lucidity. The only exit is unconscious escapism, a cruel fate that exists outside of individual choice.

If conscious escapism inevitably fails to provide permanent relief, how can it be a critical step of self-actualization? The process of escaping, whether indulging the senses or retreating to one's own mind invariably creates a lucid awareness of one's own cognitive architecture. Introspection strengthens self-awareness. Primary experiences with the base human senses construct the color palette that creative synthesis employs. This process establishes the core functions that allow an individual to harness their full potential. Buddhist meditative practices are often viewed as escapist practices aimed at losing touch with reality in pursuit of enlightenment. However, that is not only a shallow perception, but also deeply flawed. It is only with the terrifying lucid

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understanding of civilian suffering, nature's cruelty, and wealth inequality, that Sidhartha Gautama developed and spread religious practices to become the Buddha. In becoming the Buddha, he reaches the epitome of his potential and achieves self-actualization.

While self-actualization is not inherently tied to religious practices, its connection with the concept of enlightenment cannot be denied. Lucidity is the first step towards reaching one's potential, as it not only provides the awareness of oneself, but also the awareness of one's relationship all external things.

In the contemporary world, with rigid work structures, overbearing social dynamics, and a tendency to value noise, embracing escapism to fully reject reality becomes a dangerous temptation. Social group structures serve as a hydraulic press, molding individuals into archetypes that assist the group like an intricate ecosystem. An individual refusing to acknowledge the group leader or the jokester becomes ostracized and exiled. It is only by balancing that retreat into oneself, and having enough lucidity to reject its ever-present temptations, that escapism becomes a meaningful tool that guides individuals towards achieving their full potential. It presents one facet of the puzzle, but not the complete picture. With the lucidity escapism brings, it is crucial use it to its full potential. Awareness of the self allows for not just introspective probing, but the active construction of cognitive architecture. Reliving memories, constructing experiences, and daydreaming intricate scenarios. This combination allows the individual to surpass the one life they are given, to dilate time and live countless lives by building countless worlds like the actor in *The Myth of Sisyphus* by Camus. Camus mourns the death of the actor more than any other, as they are deprived of the countless lives they will live in the future, not just their present life. Similarly, to achieve the greatest level of wisdom and maturity in one's capacity, one must embrace not just their single life, but to use it to live countless lives. In doing so, one becomes an awake lucid dreamer: an individual that lives life as only one of countless lucid dreams.