

But Why: A Podcast for Curious Kids

How do we know life is not a dream?

March 6, 2026

Jane

This is But Why, A Podcast for Curious Kids from Vermont Public. I'm Jane Lindholm. On this show, we take questions from curious kids just like you, and we find answers. Every now and then... actually, more frequently than you might think, we get questions that are really, really big and very hard to answer. These are the questions from kids who are wrestling with what we call "existential questions," things like: Why do humans exist? Why is life sometimes unfair? Questions about punishment and kindness, how we define art, or, what if we're all living in a dream and we just don't know it? Another way to describe these kinds of questions is to say they're philosophical in nature. What's philosophy?

Scott Hershovitz

My favorite definition of philosophy actually comes from my son from when he was in second grade.

Jane

That's Scott Hershovitz. He teaches philosophy and law at the University of Michigan.

Scott Hershovitz

He said philosophy is the art of thinking, which I think is a really perfect description. So what we do when we do philosophy is we think about the world, and we think about ourselves, and we try to understand them better.

Jane

Because Scott's a philosophy professor, he spends a lot of his time thinking about these kinds of complicated questions that don't always have a straightforward answer. Like, why do we need to follow the law, or why do parents or other adults get to tell you what you should or shouldn't do?

Scott Hershovitz

What are the reasons to let some other people decide what you're going to do sometimes, and when are those times, and when is it okay for you to do what you want to do? So that's a philosophy question, because the way to learn about it is not to go into a laboratory, and it's not to go search for, you know, things in the woods, or it's not to do science. It's just to think really carefully about the problem and see what we can learn about it.

Jane

Well, let's talk about some of the... what we call existential questions that kids have sent us. And so the idea of an existential question is it's a question about our existence. It's a question about who we are and what the world is and why it works the way it does, and how do we know that? And one of those fundamental questions is one we've gotten from a lot of kids who wondered, basically, just what's the meaning of life? What's the purpose of life?

Ben

My name is Ben. I'm from Philadelphia. My question is, what's the meaning of life?

Nick

My name is Nick. I live in Louisville, Kentucky. I'm seven years old. Why are people's purpose made?

Leighton

Hi. My name is Leighton. I am eight years old. I live in Austin, Texas. My question is, why do humans exist?

Aviad

My name is Aviad. I am six years old. I live in Israel. I want to know what is life for?

Violet

My name is Violet. I'm five years old. I live in Eagle art, California. Why do people even exist?

Avery

Hi. This is Avery. I am seven year seven and a half. I live in Seattle. Why are we here this moment, and how did we exist?

Scott Hershovitz

Yeah, I think this is such an important question, and it's a question that everybody thinks about. And I think there's different ways in which we might go and going about trying to answer it. So some people who are religious, some people who believe in God, think that maybe the world was designed and we were put here for a reason, and that maybe that we can try and find out what God's purpose is for us. And then there's non-religious ways of thinking about this problem. Just think about the size of the universe. I think how big it is, right? It's billions and billions of light years across, and there's billions of billions of stars and probably billions and billions of planets, and we're just on a tiny planet, right? That's the third rock from a sun that from a star that's not even all that specialist star. I think, Wow, this the whole universe couldn't really be about us, right? So I'm not sure that there's a purpose to our lives. I'm not sure that there's meaning to our lives, but I think we can give our own lives a purpose, and we can make meaning in our lives. So that's a distinction. Philosophers sometimes draw a difference between finding meaning, what is the meaning of our lives, and finding meaning in our lives. And so I think one of the coolest things about getting the chance to be a person is deciding what, what meaning you'll have in your life. And that may be meaning that you find in important relationships, your relationships with your family and your friends. It might be meaning that you find in work that you do right. Maybe you'll be a doctor or a firefighter and you'll get to do really meaningful things, helping people or saving people, or maybe it'll be meaning that you create through art. There's so many different things you can do that will be meaningful to you and meaningful to other people. And so I think instead of trying to find out what we're for, we should think of the world as the canvas that's been put in front of us, and we can decide what we're going to paint on it.

Jane

Janelle, in Vancouver, puts a slight twist on the question.

Janelle

What is the point of life if you're going to die anyway?

Scott Hershovitz

Oh, wow, that is a really tough question. So here's a way to think about it. So the thought behind Janelle's question is, if something's going to end, then maybe it doesn't have a point. Maybe it's not worth engaging in. And so I'm thinking right now about other things that have ends, and wondering whether that's true, right? So a book has an end, right? But I love books. I love them, even though I know the story is going to come to an end, or music comes to an end, but I still think music can be

really lovely, and maybe a human life is like that, right, so it's the kind of thing that has an end, right? There can be lots of beauty and significance and important things that happen inside that life.

Scott Hershovitz

And I'll go one step further. There are lots of philosophers who have thought that it's the end of our lives that gives meaning to what happens in them, right? So just imagine what it would be like to be a mortal, to live absolutely forever, right? And if you were immortal, you really wouldn't have to make any choices, right? You wouldn't have to make a choice about say, are you going to be a doctor or a firefighter, right? Or are you going to be an artist or an auto mechanic? Because if you were immortal, you could be a doctor and then a firefighter and then an artist and then an auto mechanic. And you wouldn't have to decide what instruments you were going to learn to play, there'd be time to learn to play all of them. And many philosophers have thought it's the scarcity, it's the having to make a decision, it's the not being able to do everything that makes our choices important. So maybe it's the end of our lives that gives the things we do within them appoint

Jane

Well, here's another question that I think a lot of us have wondered, too, and often when hard things come into our lives.

Viven

My name is Viven. I am six years old. I am from Gardenside, Pennsylvania. My question is, why is life sad?

Scott Hershovitz

Yeah, why is life sad? Well, I think there's, there's different kinds of reasons that we get sad. So sometimes we're sad because say we've lost someone that we love, or maybe we've lost something that we love, or maybe there was an activity that we were excited about, and now that's behind us, and we're feeling a little bit sad. And I think one thing to remember when we're sad for those kinds of reasons is that it's, in some ways, the other side of love. So, you know, to love someone is to feel really attached to them. And it's it's what comes along with feeling really attached to them as being sad when we lose them, and that can be true for things in our lives, special objects that we care about, or special times in our lives. Maybe you love going to camp, or maybe you love going to the swimming pool, and that makes it a little bit sad to leave, but that sadness is a marker of something really special, of the love that you have for it. And they kind of go together.

Scott Hershovitz

When I was thinking about this question, I think there's another kind of reason we get sad, which is when people don't treat us very nicely. And you know, we really hope that people are going to be kind, and they're going to, philosophers like to use the word goodwill. They're going to show us goodwill and treat us respectfully. And we get sad when they don't, because it doesn't seem like they're taking us seriously or caring about us, and that kind of sadness I think we could live without. I think we could all do a better job of treating each other nicely and showing respect and being kind, and then we'd have less to be sad about. But the first kind of sadness, the sadness that just comes along with love, I think it's actually a good thing that we have it in our life, because we really wouldn't have love without it.

Stella

My name is Stella. I am eight years old. live in Singapore. Why are people always too distracted by being in life to ever think about the theory of it?

Scott Hershovitz

Well, I love this question, because I think that it's most grownups who are too distracted by being in life, but kids are not. And I think one is they have a lot of responsibilities. It's the grownup maybe that has to cook dinner or do the laundry or go work at a job to have money to pay for all the things that we need in life, and that stuff can take up a lot of time, and it can be very stressful. And I think when we feel busy and stressful, it's hard to take time to think about these deeper questions, these harder questions to answer, especially if we're not sure that we're going to find answers. But part of the reason that I like to teach philosophy, and part of the reason that I like to talk about philosophy with kids and with other adults, is I think that even grownups do have the same kind of curiosity about the world that kids do, and that it's good to slow down sometimes and think about that, think about the harder questions, in part because it can remind you what's beautiful about the world or what's puzzling in it, or to notice the things that are special about it, and partly because it may lead you to wonder whether you should be spending so much time on things like your job or the dishes or laundry. Maybe those actually aren't the best ways to spend all of our time, even though they can be important things, and philosophy invites you to think about that.

Jane

So let's dive deeper into some of these questions that arise when we're thinking about existence and the world. Here's one from Gemma, who's seven and lives in Vermont.

Gemma

Where was I before I was born?

Jane

We have a whole episode that's all about how babies are made, scientifically speaking. We'll link to that episode in our show notes. We know a lot about how the physical pieces of us come together from the DNA of our biological parents, but how our minds or our essences form remains a big mystery.

Scott Hershovitz

Yeah, it's a real puzzle, and it's, it's connected to some of the hardest problems that I think philosophers but also a lot of scientists are trying to figure out. So we're made out of physical things, but that human being has a mind, right? And we don't really understand what the relationship is between the stuff that we're made out of and the minds that we have, right? So some people think that our minds just are our brains, right? And other people think that our minds must be different things than our brains, but then it's not clear what they are or how they relate to each other, and I don't know the answers to this. I hope some kids listening will help us figure it out someday.

Teddy

My name is Teddy I'm eight years old, and I live in London, England, and this is my question: how do we know life is not a dream?

Scott Hershovitz

So I have met so many people that wonder about this, young and old in philosophy, there was a guy named Descartes, who was also a mathematician, who was sitting by the fire one day, and he was wondering whether he might be dreaming everything. And even thousands of years before that, there's an ancient Daoist text called the Zhuangzi, where a man named Zhuang Zhu said, one day he dreamed he was a butterfly floating and flitting around, and then he woke up, and he was solid, unmistakable, Zhuang Zhu, but he wondered whether he was Zhuang Zhu who dreamed he was a butterfly, or whether he was a butterfly who dreamed he was Zhuang Zhu.

Scott Hershovitz

And so human beings have just been wondering about this question forever. And one thought you might have is, we can't know for sure, right? So philosophers call this skepticism, right? The idea that maybe we don't know what we think we know, and maybe that applies to absolutely everything, including, like, are we awake or are we dreaming? And I think it's okay to be unsure. And to recognize that there's kind of limits to what we might know, and to realize that we might be confused, right? But we might think, well, I'm happy with the way things are, or at the end of the day, it doesn't matter. It's good to remind myself that I can question absolutely anything, but that doesn't mean I should question everything all the time.

Mugumo

My name is Mugumo. I'm 11 years old, and I live in Nairobi. Why is it that sometimes many people in a group are punished for something that only one person did like in class?

Scott Hershovitz

I love this question. This is another philosophy question about law, because the law often hands out punishments. And I think there's two ways of answering this question. One might be to say, what's the grownup who punishes the class when one or two kids has done something bad? What are they thinking? Well, sometimes they're thinking that I can use the other kids in the class to put pressure on the kids that were behaving badly to start acting well, right? So they think that the kids who are behaving badly may care more about what their friends think than about what the teacher thinks, and so if the friends get upset with them because they got punished, then maybe they'll behave better. So philosophers talk about collective punishment, and this is a kind of collective punishment, and I think that's one reason that people sometimes use collective punishments. A different kind of question we can ask about it is: is it fair to do collective punishment? And I don't think it is. I think that when a teacher says I'm going to make everyone in the class unhappy because a couple people did something bad and that I'm going to try and use that peer pressure to get better behavior from the kids who are behaving bad, she's kind of using the other kids, the ones that were acting well, as a tool, right to accomplish something and not treating them as individuals, not treating them with respect. So I think collective punishment is the kind of thing that can work, but I don't think it's a very nice thing to do. I think we should be treated based on the way we've acted and not based on the way other people behave.

Oskar

Hi, my name is Oskar. I'm eight years old. I'm from Iceland. How do we learn from our mistakes?

Scott Hershovitz

So I have this conversation with my students a lot, not necessarily with like big important mistakes, like being mean to someone or hurting someone, but even just when they make mistakes on a test. Sometimes they just want to look at the answer, the right answer, and then they think they're done. And I think, no, that's just the start of learning from your mistakes, because what you need to do is then think back to when you took that test and ask yourself, how could I have done things differently so I would get to the right answer? And so I often think that that's true even when we make a mistake, like saying something mean to a friend, right? So what we need to do is kind of a little bit of mental time travel. We need to think back to what we were feeling in that moment and ask ourselves why we said what we said, or did what we did, and if there was a better way to handle those feelings and maybe try and make a plan for next time something like that happens. I think that's a way to learn from your mistakes, is to kind of plan out what you'll do differently if the same kind of situation arises.

Jane

After the break, we'll ponder more questions with Scott Hershovitz, like is graffiti art and how can narwhals be real? Stay with us.

Jane

This is But Why. I'm Jane Lindholm. And today, we're talking with philosophy professor Scott Hershovitz, who's here to help us tackle some of the biggest, hardest questions about our lives and our world. Here's one from West in Baltimore.

West

I see art on the bridges when I'm going to school, and why, and it's called graffiti. Why do people do it?

Jane

And West's question to me, is interesting on the face of it, but also is interesting in the idea of, what do we call art, and what do we call vandalism, or painting something on other people's property when they shouldn't, what's art and what's not art?

Scott Hershovitz

Yeah, I wish we, I wish we could ask a follow up question, because why do people do it? Could mean lots of things, right? So it could involve a kind of criticism, like you've painted on other people's property, and it's not nice to do that without permission, and whether it's not nice, I think might depend a little bit on the context. So in some places, graffiti isn't welcome, but in other cities around the world, there's a real tradition of street art and painting, and maybe the folks who own buildings in those places are more open minded and welcoming of that kind of expression.

Scott Hershovitz

But there's a deeper question here, which is, why do we make art? Why do we want to paint on the side of that bridge or on that wall. And this is something that human beings have been doing as far back as we know. They're human beings, some of the earliest evidence we have for the existence of human beings, is art that they painted on the wall of caves. And I think there's a few answers. One is we make art to communicate with each other. We want to express things about ourselves and the way we see the world. And when I see graffiti, sometimes I think there it's really beautiful or has really interesting ideas that are captured in the pictures that people are making. Sometimes I just think it's fun, right? To make something beautiful. One thing I think kids know that adults forget, is that something's being fun is a complete reason to do it, and we don't. It doesn't need to have some purpose beyond itself. And painting, whether it's graffiti or on a canvas is one of those activities like dancing. It can just be fun, and we don't need to ask why do it and have an answer in mind beyond we like doing it.

Jane

Well, in that case, I'm going to give you maybe the toughest question of the day.

Bella

My name is Bella. I am eight years old. I live in Burlington, Vermont. Why do people like the meme six seven so much?

Kid voice

Why does six seven exist? Why does the six seven kid exist?

Jane

Why does six seven exist, and why does the six seven kid exist?

Scott Hershovitz

Oh, wow, I might be too old to answer this question. Maybe this is a question that belongs to kids, but if I was going to try and answer the question, I think it's just such a wonderful example of how playful human beings can be, to take almost anything and to make a joke out of it, or to make a game out of it. And I can't say at my age, I'm 49 years old, that I fully understand the six seven game. I've just noticed if I find a way to say "six seven" in my classroom, that my students are amused. But I think of it as just a way to play with numbers and with language and to have fun with each other.

Jane

I also think it's an example of how forever before and probably forever into the future, kids will try to find a way to confuse adults into being frustrated about what they don't know, because so many times adults seem to act like we know more than kids. And here's this thing that kids are like, you know, all in the know about and all these adults are like, what does it mean? And so it for me, reminds me too, yes, that playfulness, but also that kids have some power in the world to figure things out for themselves, that adults don't have to understand.

Scott Hershovitz

That's definitely true. And my younger son Hank likes to make clear how little I understand about the way kids talk these days, so we'll roll his eyes if I try and use the words I hear on TikTok.

Almira

My name is Almira. I'm five. I live in Leavenworth, Washington. How can narwhals be real?

Jane

if you've never seen a narwhal, it's a kind of a whale that lives in very, very cold ocean waters, and it has a long tusk sticking straight out of its head. They're amazing looking animals, and someday I really want to see a narwhal in person. But how can those animals be real?

Scott Hershovitz

It's such a good question, because it looks like somebody just sort of mashed up a whale and a unicorn, and that it had to have been imagined into existence. But actually, it's real, and so it's a reminder that the actual world is as cool as any world we can imagine. I have children who liked narwhals, and so I did a little bit of research on that tusk, and it turns out it's really useful to them, right? So the tusk, because it extends far out from their heads, it's really sensitive to vibrations, and so it helps them pick up sounds, and it helps them pick up other things that are moving in the water, and it can sense the temperature of the water around them. So that tusk is giving the narwhal a lot of information for helping it navigate and so that's the answer of how it evolved. Because, of course, the animals that exist are produced by evolution, and the traits they have tend to be the traits that make them successful, right, at being a narwhal, or make them successful at being a dog, or make them successful at being a person. So narwhals exist because that tusk is super helpful.

Jane

Well, Scarlett kind of we can build on that question with Scarlett's question:

Scarlett

Why can't everything be the same, for example, like, why isn't a banana on an orange the same thing, a crocodile or a bird, or red and yellow?

Scott Hershovitz

Yeah, so this is such a fun question too, because there was a philosopher who lived a long time ago in ancient Greece named Parmenides, and Parmenides thought that all differences were illusion, that there was only one thing in the world. And anytime you were drawing a distinction, whether it was between a banana or an orange, or between you and a banana, right? You were laboring under illusion, because there was just one thing. And he and some of his followers took this idea very seriously, and they were not always careful for their physical safety, because they believed in themselves being a kind of illusion. And there was another philosopher in ancient Greece named Heraclitus who held the exact opposite view. He thought that everything is constantly changing, so that banana right now is different than the way that banana will be in a few minutes, which is different than the way it was last week. And so he thought, you can never pick up the same banana twice, right? As he put it, he said, you can never step in the same river twice, because the river is always changing. And I think, and I think most of us think the truth is somewhere in the middle, right? That the banana can be the same banana, even though it's changing, even though it's rotting, maybe, and I can be the same person, even though my hair gets longer or my fingernails get shorter, or, if you're kid, you might be getting taller. So I think that things can change but nevertheless be the same thing, right? But part of what that tells us is that what we mean by same isn't exactly the same in all ways. What makes me the same person that I was last week, right, is probably... I have the same memories and the same personality, even though I don't have the same hair, right? My hair is a little bit longer. So, so that's one way to think about this question is, you know, we have different reasons for thinking about sameness and difference. Another way to think about the question is just to go back to the narwhal. Banana trees and orange trees come from different environments, and their different characteristics probably made them successful for the environments that they're in. And I'm so glad that oranges are not bananas, because I love oranges and I don't like bananas.

Logan

Hi. My name is Logan. I'm six years old, and I live in Austin, Texas. Why are humans made out of stardust but they're not fragile?

Scott Hershovitz

Yeah, this is super cool. And so let's just back up for a second. What do we mean when we say we're made of stardust? We're made out of atoms, right? And most of the atoms that exist inside our body say the carbon atoms and the nitrogen atoms, they were made inside stars. Stars are big nuclear reactors, and they're squeezing lighter atoms into heavier atoms, and some of those heavier atoms are what you need to make people. So the atoms in our body, they were at the centers of stars once, and that is super, super cool, right? Now, we know that dust, it's hard to make things out of dust. It would be really fragile, but what we mean when we say that we're made of stardust is just that we're made out of the same kinds of things that dust is made of or made out of atoms. And atoms can be put together in different ways, and some of the ways we put them together are super strong, and some of the ways we put them together are super fragile and breakable. So when we put them together in glass, they're easy to break, and when we put them together in steel, they're really hard to break, and you probably need a chemist to come on and tell you about exactly how they fit together and which arrangements will be strong and which arrangements will be weak. But we have stronger and weaker bits of us, right? So your muscles might be really strong, but maybe some of your bones are weaker, or maybe your biceps, you're really strong, but your nose is a little bit weaker, and that's going to be because of the different arrangements of atoms in those parts of your body.

Dexter

My name is Dexter, and I'm four years old, and I live in Illinois. Why do hearts break?

Scott Hershovitz

Oh, wow. Well, this is kind of bringing us full circle. Back to the question, why is, why is the world sad sometimes? And I think I want to answer this question in the same way, right to say, Well, again, there's always multiple questions that are, that are... you know, lurking in any good question. And so why do hearts break? You know, sometimes physical hearts break because, you know, the valves don't work, or someone has a heart attack. And so the heart is a kind of machine that breaks down. But when we talk about our hearts as people, sometimes we're not talking about the thing that's beating inside us. Because sometimes we're talking about the really important part of ourselves that loves others and wants to be loved. And love is this beautiful, wonderful thing. When we love somebody, we want to be with them, and we want to enjoy them, and we want good things to happen to them, and when bad things happen, or when we're separated from them, the other side of that love is sadness about the loss.

Jane

Scott says it's not just philosophy professors who are philosophers. We all wonder about these big existential questions, especially kids. So do you know what that means? It means you are a philosopher, too. That's it for this episode. Thanks to Professor Scott Hershovitz for contemplating the big questions with us today. Scott's also written a book called *Nasty, Brutish and Short Adventures in Philosophy with My Kids*. It's a book for adults, and I really loved reading it, but it's all about how you kids think about these big questions and can push adults to continue thinking about them as we get older. We'll include a link to the book in our show notes.

Jane

As always, if you have a question about anything, have an adult record you asking it on a smartphone using an app like voice memos, then have your adults email the file to questions@butwhykids.org. Our show is produced by Sarah Baik, Melody Bodette and me, Jane Lindholm at Vermont Public and distributed by PRX. Our video producer is Joey Palumbo, and our theme music is by Luke Reynolds. If you like our show, please have your adults help you give us a thumbs up or a review on whatever podcast platform you use to listen to us. It helps other kids and families find us. We'll be back in two weeks with an all-new episode. Until then, stay curious!