

Find Purpose
FP, FP

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Table of Contents

Introduction	1
Intro: Why should I "develop my purpose"?	1
Part One	2
Part One: Life Purposes of Great Thinkers	2
Part Two	6
Part Two: Values and Purpose Development	6
Extra	10
Extra: Human Impairments and Solutions	10
Appendix	16
Appendix	16
Sources	19
Sources	19



Introduction

Intro: Why should I "develop my purpose"?

Everyone is aware that life is a string of struggles. Yet it is difficult to actively choose the battles that are most important to us, as life is a complex, daunting mess, with everything grasping for our attention and desire.

In better understanding ourselves and the world, we can take life as a whole, choosing a purpose we deem intrinsically valuable (how we'd like to change the world). We **choose to think for ourselves and take control of who we are instead of being driven by circumstantial values** (ie desires of authority, peers, culture, our circumstantial self, our ego, etc). When everyday we align our decisions to our values and purpose, we live with less self-deception and hypocrisy, **achieving a more permanent contentedness and fulfillment.**

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Note: This guide attempts to be objective, not favoring or disfavoring any beliefs. It only disfavors if we stop questioning the drives behind and consequences of our decisions, denying our freedom and responsibility for our actions.



Part One

Part One: Life Purposes of Great Thinkers

Summaries of major philosophies, selected to inspire thought regarding one's values and purpose. In analyzing how each would affect one's life and the world, this encourages greater understanding of oneself and of what one believes he/she should strive for.

Purposes of Happiness

Hedonism touts that nothing matters except one's own pleasure. The hedonist's actions are evaluated in terms of maximizing net pleasure (pleasure minus suffering), although unclear whether immediate or long-term gratification is better. Crop rotation is a higher level hedonist tactic: constantly change what one is doing in order to maximize the enjoyment derived from each activity, staving off boredom; however, Kierkegaard argued that it eventually leads to a state of despair because all activities, no matter how unique or new, will eventually become boring, leading the hedonist to yearn for a more meaningful life.

Utilitarianism, instead of focusing on the self, wishes "the greatest happiness/well-being (pleasure minus suffering) to the greatest number of people." It believes that the worth of an action is determined solely by its usefulness in maximizing utility (pleasure, preference, satisfaction, knowledge, etc.) and minimizing negative utility as summed among all sentient beings. Utilitarianism values highest the people who sacrifice their own happiness for the greater happiness of others.

Negative Utilitarianism is the idea that the reduction of suffering to all is most valuable, more so than increased pleasure. Buddhism's central idea is the same, specifying that we can reduce suffering by performing good deeds (because we are trying to be the best virtuous person we can be, not because of our emotions). Regarding the self, Buddhism touts acceptance of both bad and good, which allows one to be forever content with everything, appreciate what one has, and to move on.

Epicureanism maintains that the greatest good is to attain a tranquil long-term happiness by becoming free of pain. The greatest source of pain is fear, and the solution is to be wise (to not fear the elements), just (to not fear friends), and honorable (to not fear anything else). This elimination of fears and desires leaves people free to pursue modest pleasures to which they are naturally drawn (companionship, knowledge, love, sex, acceptance, virtuous temperate living), and to enjoy their consequent peace of mind. Non-natural sources of pleasure (power, fame, material objects, etc.) are sources of even more pain. Epicureans further argue for withdrawing from public life and residing frugally with like-minded close friends, albeit criticized by Plutarch as neglecting the desire of the human spirit to help mankind and take on leadership roles and responsibility.

Egoism states that a man's purpose should be his own happiness or rational self-interest, that an action is right if it maximizes good for the self. Similarly, **Objectivism**, as founded by Ayn Rand, also has self-interest as man's purpose, but "with productive achievement as his noblest activity, and reason as his only absolute." She said the individual should neither self-sacrifice for others, or sacrifice others to himself.

Purposes of Virtue Ethics: [Stoicism](#)

Note: "One could not simply study what virtue is, he had to be virtuous, via virtuous activities." — Aristotle

Cynicism touts that the purpose of life is living a life of virtue, aided by embodying man's animal-like



self-sufficient nature. The Cynic entirely rejected possessions and conventional desires (power, wealth, fame, entertainment/pleasure). To a Cynic, suffering and negative emotions are consequences of false judgments of value (mostly from society's conventions).

Stoicism holds the purpose of life as living according to virtue (wisdom, justice, courage, temperance), achieved through self-control and mental fortitude to achieve "clear judgement" (maintaining a will that is in accordance with nature vs Cynicism's living in accordance with nature). To a Stoic, health, pleasure, beauty, strength, wealth, good reputation, and noble birth are neither good nor bad since they can be used well or badly, so they are merely preferable indifferences. We should be indifferent/resigned with dignity towards external events/misfortune, as we have little power to change them, but can change our state of mind and our exercise of virtue. [apatheia techniques](#)

Purposes of Humanity's Development

Humanism encourages us to lead ethical lives of personal improvement and self-fulfillment that aspire to the greater good of humanity. Enlightened self-interest is at the core of humanism; the most significant thing in life is the human being, thus also the human race, because the happiness of the individual person is inextricably linked to the well-being of all humanity (due to the fact we are social animals who find meaning in personal relations and all benefit from cultural progress). **Confucianism**, a humanist philosophy, tries to define the most basic virtues/ethics to cultivate and maintain for self-development and the greater good: 1) altruism and humaneness to others (saintly), 2) upholding justice/righteousness to do good (scholarly), and 3) following an etiquette that leads to a content and healthy society (gentlemanly). It looks down on pettiness of mind and heart, narrow self-interest, greed, superficiality, and materialism. **Transhumanism** emphasizes that we should also actively improve the human body with technology, to overcome all biological limitations such as mortality, physical weakness, limited memory capacity, etc.

Evolutionary Ethics states that survival and growth is the chief purpose of man.

Purposes of Existentialism

Existentialism holds that the existence of life precedes its essence/meaning. In other words, the universe is either meaningless or its meaning transcends our understanding. Because the meaning of one's life is not predetermined, every person is free to create their own meaning. Furthermore, although the human being can use reason to understand the objective world, he cannot use reason alone to give meaning to his own life. If he tries, it gives rise to the emotions of anxiety and dread, felt in facing one's radical freedom and inevitable death.

In a world where many people seek to flee their anguish, existentialists agreed that we should be aware of our "Absurd" dilemma (being compelled to find meaning in a meaningless universe) and its subsequent freedom. They disagreed upon how to solve it:

1) Believe in a transcendent realm or deity, as such has innate meaning ([Kierkegaard](#))

<-or->

2) Create and work towards our own purpose and subsequent goals, thus creating meaning (most other existentialists, Nietzsche)

Nietzsche could also explain existentialism's idea "the universe is meaningless" in that all ideas and evaluations occur from perspectives (Perspectivism), so one can never know absolute truth. Nietzsche



believed that man needs to continue to act in the face of this uncertainty, forging his own way with new lifestyle/goals/values (based off love for this world and life) instead of being burdened by the old or imposed ones, or having no values (nihilism). This is also the only way to attain true happiness/pleasure, as opposed to chasing it (which also leads to mediocrity).

Purposes of Deontology (duties/rights)

Classical Liberalism (Locke, Rousseau, Smith) considers individual liberty to be the most important goal, because humankind has evolved from its natural state to finding meaning for existence through labor and property, and using social contracts to create an environment that supports these efforts. It casts humans as beings with inalienable Natural Rights (including the right to retain the wealth generated by one's own work), and seeks out means to balance rights across society.

State Consequentialism holds that an action is right if it leads to state stability, through order (no violence), wealth for basic needs, and population growth (no famine).

Marxism and **Communism** say the meaning of life is to serve one another, in peace and with integrity as equal and just beings. The pursuit of wealth, power, and fame cannot ultimately give our lives meaning, even standing in the way of achieving happiness. Thus private property should be abolished. No one has anything anyway, except the 10% that have everything; those conditions should be equalized. They believe that only when we share in the ownership of property, when all are equal with all, and all share in the labor, can there truly be freedom.

Purposes of Spirituality

Theism touts God created the universe and that God had a purpose in doing so. Humans find their meaning and purpose for life in God's purpose in creating and/or one's perceived relationship to God. Theists further hold that if there were no God to give life ultimate meaning, value and purpose, then life would be absurd.

Asceticism describes a lifestyle characterized by abstinence from worldly desires/pleasures often with the aim of pursuing religious and spiritual goals (salvation, deliverance, etc.), but always with the aim of greater freedom in various areas of one's life (such as freedom from compulsions and temptations and suffering) and greater tranquility of mind. Nietzsche agreed that an ascetic can overcome pain and despair and attain mastery over oneself in this way, however, it does not encourage achievement/self-improvement and can lead to an aversion to life (like the hibernation and denial of the material world that priests place themselves in).

Kierkegaard (religious thinker, "founder of existentialism") believed that the only way to embrace life fully is to have a non-rational acceptance for an unprovable thing (ie "God exists"), to have faith among doubt (without doubt one would merely be gullible). Only with faith can one have great passion, become his true self, and be atoned for always being in sin (God's morals of right and wrong transcend our understanding). He also stated faith could be of something else, like an impossible love; we deduce we will never have that person, and can either 1) give up, 2) keep at it but be resigned that it won't happen, or 3) keep at it and believe "the absurd that it will happen because all things are possible with god" (the only happy option). You must DO something, not merely think about your faith. In addition to faith, Kierkegaard's other idea was that religion is a purely personal endeavor (never social, political, etc); to know God deeper, we must know our selves deeper, through self-reflection and introspection, cultivating our own awareness of our selves and our own principles for salvation. He warned of pretending to be spiritual while acting from worldly motives or others' views of God's will, and also warned of losing the self within the infinitizing of the God-relation,



pervverting the relation.

Platonism states that there are no such thing as objects, except as heavenly forms. The meaning of life is in attaining the highest form of knowledge, which is the Idea (Form) of the Good, from which all good and just things derive utility and value. Human beings are duty-bound to pursue the good.

Purpose of Anti-Human Nature: Schopenhauer

Schopenhauer deems all humans, both the master and slave, are one and the same, that we all have the same human essence/“will”; an aimless, irrational drive bringing about everyday desires, lead to suffering. This is caused by our strong tendency to apply reason/rationalization (from our individuating consciousness) to everything. To fully reduce one’s suffering and become more free is to realize and resist our individuality (minimize desires through Ascetic voluntary poverty and chastity, resist the animalistic drive to merely endure and flourish, etc) and to direct the physical, practically-oriented consciousness towards more extraordinary, universal (consequently more peaceful) states of mind. One realizes that the origins of morality are not found in reason as Kant believes, but rather in the feeling of compassion (because one feels others’ suffering is as important as one’s own). Among the values Schopenhauer respects are treating others as you would like to be treated, refraining from violence/egoism/vengeance, and reducing suffering in the world.

Nihilism (No Purpose)

The world, and especially human existence, is without meaning, truth, knowledge, or valuable morals (which only serve as society’s false ideals). Nietzsche recognized that nihilism induces a despicable “paralysis of will.” However, Nietzsche believed nihilism is a necessary evil, a transitional period between believing illusions (ie God/Afterlife) and manifesting greatness.



Part Two

Part Two: Values and Purpose Development

To improve the development of values and purpose, described are ways to document and test them.

“There are no objective values. Because of this, ethics must be invented, rather than discovered.” — J. L. Mackie

Value System Development and Testing

When our beliefs or character changes due to new experiences/facts/issues, we must consciously reappraise the values that we base our decisions on. We can even create a list of values (a Value System). Even if we do not scribe our values, it is absolutely necessary to consciously prioritize values amongst themselves. Example value: “Minimize suffering for Country in the long-term”. We must understand the boundaries between values. Ex: The two core American ideals of liberty and equality are incompatible with each other, thus one must be set as a higher priority. Remember: Improvement is always possible, and with an open mind, there is always something new to learn from experiences/relationships/knowledge.

What matters the most

Performance – Productivity, Development, Innovation, Knowledge/Understanding

Ideals – Purity, Freedom, Equality, Competition/Cooperation

Health – Survival, Physical/Mental, Suffering/Happiness, Satisfaction/Fulfillment

Supernatural – Belief (ie Relationship to God(s), an event that occurred, Salvation, etc.)

Relative Social Constructs – Power/Wealth/Influence, Status/Fame/Respect, Appearance

Social Traits – Modesty, Honesty, Kindness, Respect, Exploiting(taking)/Reciprocating(equal)/Giving

Who matters the most

Self

Mankind

Certain social groups (family, friends, group with common belief, etc.)

Environment, Plants, Animals, All life, Earth, Universe

Questions to Test Values:

Are you less moral than you want other people to be?

What general Value System do you think other people should have? How similar is it to your own? Kant similarly posed the Categorical Imperative question: Imagine that all people thought/acted in your way, would it be possible for the world to function or be a good place?

What types of jobs should most people strive for? What type of job do YOU strive for? What types of jobs should people refuse to take (in desperate vs non-desperate situations)? Would you refuse it?

How should people spend their free-time? (Work, Pleasure, Whatever they want, Improving themselves, Charity) How about you?



With what scope do you generally make your decisions with? With only yourself in mind, or also your significant other, family, friends, social groups, neighborhood, city, country, humanity, Earth, the far future of any of these or just the present? Which scopes are preferable? If you knew that the human race would perish a few years after you died, would you be distraught? How about if humans do not outlast the death of the Earth?

Eternal Recurrence Question

“What if some day a demon were to appear and dictate to you: ‘This life as you now live it and have lived it, you will have to live innumerable times more’ ... Would you throw yourself down and gnash your teeth and curse this demon? Or have you once experienced a tremendous moment when you would have answered him: ‘You are a god and never have I heard anything more divine.’”

Nietzsche wants you to consider whether eternal repetition of your life’s choices is a curse or a boon, and in so asking, he forces you to assign a value to your actions: if you are proud of them. No matter if you would repeat your life or not, your future choices, in the light of this dilemma, will be more considered and more honest than those made without it; ultimately, more moral. Reduced to an ethical maxim, Eternal Recurrence may read: “Do not commit yourself to any action you would never repeat in the same circumstances.”

Nietzsche’s Übermensch

His concept of a great man entails 1) being creative and skeptical so nothing limits his creation of meaning, able to change and be different from the majority/others not just with words but also actions. 2) He is noble: consumed by his work/responsibilities/projects and actively seeks heavier ones, all in pursuit of a unifying project. 3) He only has a taste for that which helps him towards this project (he despises anything non-relevant/petty, ie he lacks “congeniality,” requires no sympathy, and deals with others only instrumentally – as means or obstacle). Health is important, however, the familiarity of suffering can bring energetic stimulus to one’s life, necessary for human excellence. 4) He is not pessimistic, but life-affirming, as he would joyously repeat his entire life for all eternity. 5) He has an attitude of self-reverence (akin to a God), transforming his life into a work of art through self-knowledge, and has an attitude of certainty about oneself and one’s values. The great man’s anti-thesis is the last man: tired of life, taking no risks, seeking/achieving only comfort and security, an apathetic creature who has no great passion, who is unable to dream, who merely earns his living and keeps warm.

Developing Purpose

Self-Purpose

A purpose creates for oneself direction and meaning in the face of life’s uncertainty, that otherwise leads to feelings of loneliness, helplessness, and constant anxiety. Purpose is different from morals. Purpose should take into account your [potential] skills (what you are good at) and your [potential] passions (what you would love to lose yourself in doing), and your self-less morals (to filter your passion-able skills to be most useful towards your beliefs). Of course, ideally, your purpose should also sustain your survival needs (food, water, shelter). It is up to you to decide the prioritization of your purpose’s building blocks: material desires, needs, passion, skills, self-less morals.



Mankind's Purpose

How can one take the building of his own purpose seriously if he/she does not question humanity's purpose? Where do you wish the human race to lead to? How does your purpose fit in the grand scheme of humanity?

Making Decisions

Your created value system (moral code) is a general guide — developing it aids you in understanding your morals/beliefs and making decisions aligned to them, but it is not a cheat-sheet for making decisions. Every situation is different and decisions should also be based on circumstantial facts and knowledge of the world, not just ideas/ideals. Without knowledge, our actions are more likely to betray our values (our actions are more like “guesses”). Peer-reviewed scientific or statistical evidence tends to be better than experiential/anecdotal knowledge (although if not available, a compromise is lots of anecdotes). Better knowledge can better divulge the full array of consequences of our actions. All facets of our values and lifestyles should be treated as big decisions, searching out better evidence and using analysis for our decisions.

People who can think and talk at a high moral level (moral judgment) may not behave accordingly (moral action). Every time we witness an injustice and do not act, we train our character to be passive in its presence and thereby eventually lose all ability to defend ourselves and those we love. If we are passive, even if we are of noble heart and see the need to take up arms, the instinctive fear of authority will motivate us to find rationalizations to avoid conflict. Aristotle argued that ethical knowledge is not certain knowledge (like metaphysics and epistemology), but is general knowledge. Because it is not a theoretical discipline, if a person were to become “good”, he could not simply study what virtue is, he had to also practice being virtuous. “Moral excellence comes about as a result of habit. We become just by doing just acts, temperate by doing temperate acts, brave by doing brave acts.” — Aristotle

Judging the Correctness/Morality of Actions

Consequentialism (Teleological) – the rightness of an action is determined by its consequences (either actual or expected) (ie hedonism – whatever produces greatest pleasure to oneself, utilitarianism – greatest pleasure to everyone)

Deontological Ethics (Deontology) – the rightness of an action is based on the action's adherence to a rule or rules

Virtue Ethics – the rightness of an action depends on what the action says about the person (benevolent, charitable, selfish, etc.)

Pragmatic Ethics is different in that, 1) it focuses on the society as the entity achieving morality/ethics instead of the individual, 2) inquiry should be used to improve norms, principles, and moral criteria, 3) a moral judgment is only appropriate in a given age of a society (ex: although Thomas Jefferson fought to end slavery, he did not free his own slaves, claiming that to do so before society reformed would result in harm for both the freed slaves and the union).

—**Development of Ethics:** Lawrence Kohlberg indicates that humans typically learn to practice consequentialism at the earliest age, followed by virtue ethics and deontology. Since ethical pragmatists build upon these forms of moral reasoning, pragmatic ethics would likely be learned later in life, and would



therefore be less prevalent in the general population. [It is up for you to decide what type of ethics is most correct.]

Purpose – Do not be concerned about when one is to do good, who defines good, etc. Act in the way you do because to do otherwise would be at odds with yourself. Being on a path true to your character carries with it a state of flow, where the thoughts about your next step come upon waking, unbidden, but welcome.



Extra

Extra: Human Impairments and Solutions

Our minds and bodies are solutions to the environment, built for adequacy, not perfection, and we must work to control our lives. **Described below are 1) human flaws that impair our everyday judgment and decision-making, and 2) solutions.** In internalizing both, we better understand ourselves and can better develop ourselves objectively (for better values and adherence to them). Note: Every individual has personalized biases and self-limitations. This section is only to help development of one's purpose. Once one has set him/herself upon a purpose, it is easier to overcome the impairments and resist distraction from one's purpose.

Human Nature: General

Ego

“Egotism and competition are far greater forces than public spirit and sense of duty.” – Einstein
Our ego is insatiable and overpowering. It perpetually encourages us to find ways to feel important, to rationalize that our self, beliefs, possessions, lineage, or abilities are better than other peoples' and that we deserve more. We even try to convince others, such as by demeaning them or bragging or rebelling (disobeying or trying to be different without reason). Ego also causes us to believe we are smarter than experts even, and to ignore or argue angrily with people who think different from us or criticize us. Nietzsche describes the ego's drive as the human need to envision an event occurring, and attributing one's actions to its occurrence: a need for the feeling of power/dominance. Boosts to ego are always temporary, as are escapes from ego like entertainment or our passions. Egos, in addition, can be hurt easily by mistakes or external factors because of our expectations that continually rise towards perfectionism. We find it easy to let things get us down and we despise it. To protect our egos, we try to avoid self-disappointment: we lower our standard of success (sometimes giving up) or we set ourselves up for failure (self-handicap, half-ass, spend all our time preparing but never actually do it), and we try to shift the blame onto someone/something else or just tell ourselves “it wasn't meant to be.”

Relative Thinking, Desire and Envy – Ego can also be explained to exist due to humans both being social creatures and relative thinkers so we, as such, are compelled to make judgments and crave recognition. We judge ourselves and what we have by comparing to others, which may lead to “becoming vain and bitter, for always there will be greater and lesser persons than yourself” – Desiderata. We get upset/jealous over everything that others have but we don't (luxury/technology/leisure time/status/relationships/etc), which may lead to perpetual dissatisfaction, and in-appreciation for what we have (we easily get used to having what we have). Jealousy encourages us to use increasingly immoral means to the ends of “one-upping” the people we compare ourselves to. Enjoyment obtained from the suffering of others (Nietzsche's *schadenfreude*) also appeases our envy (those with low self-esteem are more likely to have it). On the other hand, relative thinking at the survival level is beneficial – it encourages perpetual improvement through competition.

Self-Interest

We naturally act in our self-interest, driven to obtain more power/resources, either out of fear (uncertainty of



future) or ego, even to the detriment of others (with insufficient rationale such as “the future is uncertain,” “it is legal,” “I deserve it,” “just obeying authority,” “just doing my job,” “everyone is doing it,” “if not me then someone else”). We do these things, when many times, if we were not benefiting, we’d be morally against it. “It is the human wish to be told lies that keep us as primitive morally and socially as we are... I am persuaded that a lie grounded in human desire is too powerful for mere reason to kill.” — David Horowitz (ie Nietzsche believes the idea of the afterlife/god exists due to the fear that life is meaningless and desire that it isn’t). And many believe there will be a point of power/resources when we will have less self-interest, saying how when we become wealthy, we will be generous, however, insecurity/relative thinking or the hunger of ego is not satiated. Millionaires believe they will not be safe without a few million more. In addition, our drive for status and fear of rejection from society seems so strong – perhaps as strong as our response to hunger. When we have additional funds, we tend to spend it first in ways that will be noticeable to the outside world (cars, house, clothes), seldom in ways where only we would know (health care, retirement, etc.).

The Duality of the Brain – The Ancestral Brain vs The Deliberate Brain – We are equipped with two response systems – one that is quick, automatic and almost entirely unconscious (**the ancestral brain**), and the other that is slow and conscious (**the deliberate brain**). The ancestral brain is driven by our primal needs: food, shelter, status, procreation, while the deliberate brain allows us to consciously use logic to make decisions that may be selfless. These two systems do not exist independently – the decisions we make are often done by an interaction of the two (“deliberate prefrontal thought is piled on top of automatic emotional feelings”). Interestingly, where the two systems conflict, the ancestral brain tends to win and also tends to make immediate (mostly bad) decisions, especially the more we are stressed (tired or under pressure or emotional). This deficiency of our self-control, an inability to suspend judgment, causes much of our irrationality and poor decision making. As solutions, we can anticipate impulsion, can also imagine that our decisions will be spot checked (or, think like an airline pilot, where all checks you make have to be thorough) and can consider how we will feel about the decision in future. We must not just set goals but use an if/because statement afterward – I must read more books then I will have more knowledge. Always trying to perform a cost benefit analysis would help also.

Innate Empathy Only to Other Humans – Because we are self-interested and social creatures, our strongest innate empathy is towards other humans. We are sad for when someone we know dies, or even an acquaintance, yet do we visibly shed a tear for pollution or extinct species? Our empathy for these things is not innate because 1) our natural self-interests are not immediately affected by them, and 2) we cannot relate as easily as to another human. Empathy must be created for things else we find ourselves allowing atrocities to occur via lack of interest. Even still, many times we lack empathy towards other humans who are different from us (race, culture, beliefs), because trust evolved at a tribe level, not a species level. David Hume goes further and suggests we have three biases: similarity bias (“we favour people who resemble us”; ex: how we struggle to slaughter a lamb because it is mammal but easily catch fish or boil lobster), familiarity bias (“the more we see, the more it matters” and flipside “out of sight is out of mind”) and kinship bias (in a situation of a burning house, people choose to rescue their own child over three unrelated children).

Pursuit of Happiness, and Unproductivity

Evolution did not “evolve us to be happy, it evolved us to pursue happiness.” Our judgment of what exactly makes us happy seems to be faulty. We find ourselves involved in activities that don’t positively impact our



long-term happiness and self-fulfillment, such as spending long hours working to gain more objects of “instant gratification,” when on our deathbeds we wish we instead spent more time on our loving relationships, family and friends, helping the world, etc., which we took for granted. No matter how much we self cultivate, we will want irrational things that we instinctively want (whims), despite positive or negative results it may bring. In addition, because we are addicted to instant gratification and our habits, and we fear trying to find happiness in the real world and failing, we can perpetually find time-wasting activities/desires/addictions that are only temporary solutions to our long-term happiness. Examples: 1) pursuing societal-imposed desires ie money/tech/status/opposite gender, 2) self-pampering with luxury/entertainment, 3) collecting knowledge/objects/media consumption, 4) dwelling/regret/fear/fantasizing over thoughts/events/past/present/future, 5) pursuing recognition/attention/love. Studies on true happiness have shown a few common denominators: social bonds, trust in people, trust in society, religion (great social network) and prosocial behavior (charities, helping others). Our evolutionary past centered on being cooperative and social in order to protect ourselves, which placed little value on personal gain (money).

Buddhism (and Preference Utilitarianism) touts that it is not desire that directly causes suffering/unhappiness, but when our wandering minds make our happiness contingent upon fulfilling our desires and these desires go unmet. Buddhism challenges us to give up desire so that we’ll try and fail to give it up. We end up realizing removing desire entirely is impossible (we would be desiring to give up desire) and that desire itself is essential, it is our driving force, and without it we would be devoid of both suffering and happiness. We realize that when we don’t avoid the bad or focus on good, but embrace both (both are ephemeral and part of the human condition), we break the cycle so that we may learn to be perpetually content. Asceticism also states that attempting to give up all desire gets you more in touch with the unconscious desires you can do without, allowing you to cut them out and ultimately figure out and focus on what it is you actually want and why, instead of drifting un-thinkingly through life towards what you’re supposed or expected to want.

[Apatheia](#), similarly, was a chief aim of the Stoics, meaning “freedom from emotional responses to external events.” Not living indifferently, but without feelings/impulses/passions that interfere with the exercise of virtue. Their techniques to achieve this freedom include: 1) Use awareness and self-examination to help avoid the dangers of identification of our psyche with anything. 2) Distinguish genuine wants (food, shelter) from false wants (needless cravings) because the self, itself, has all that it needs. 3) Avoid the unhealthy desires (painful, compulsive, nervous, or angry) and seek those that are virtuous or aid self-understanding. 4) Think of ourselves in the third-person (a more objective self-observing view), to help separate the way we feel from the way we truly are. [from stoicism](#)

Our Environment Develops Us: Conformity without questioning

“People are sheep in credulity and wolves in conformity.”

Character is a lie, automatically and unconsciously built up to adjust to parents, peers, the world, and one’s own existential dilemmas. We take up values, desires, and lifestyles from our environments without questioning or conscious calculation, due to the strength of habits/beliefs/conditioning formed early in life (primacy error) and our powerful drive for conformity. Even our emotion and thought patterns, important to our well-being, are automatic developments. When we assume that these all are intrinsic parts of ourselves, we live in a conditioned prison of culture, lulled into triviality by the comfortable routines of society and the limited alternatives and dull security it offers. This man fears freedom of thought (thinking for himself),



because it would endanger the structure of denial that surrounds his routines. He is effectively denying authentic impulses (everything that makes us human) and his potential of self-creation, as he allows the will of another person to change his actions. Sartre has a very low opinion of conventional morality, ie being a “moral person” as defined by society, condemning it as a tool of the bourgeoisie to control the masses (ex: a “Keep Off The Grass” sign, a bourgeois need but hindrance to the need of the masses for play and relaxation). Similarly, society’s idea to “be yourself” might seem good because it seems to say “don’t feel pressured by conformity,” it actually says to do what is natural to us, which is already heavily influenced by our environment. It discourages us from using higher intelligence to analyze and choose our ways of ethical living. Many people seem to only improve their morals and lifestyle if forced (by laws, “cultural normality”, etc.) or if their character itself naturally adjusts to the world, and this is insufficient.

Socrates asked the similar question: Why do so many people go along with the crowd (herd mentality) or authority, and fail to stand up for what they truly believe? He answered: partly because we are too easily swayed by other people’s opinions (we are gullible or desire to be liked/valued) and partly because we don’t know when to have confidence in our own. Popularity Bias: “If someone/something/an idea is popular, it must be good/deserve it.” Don’t consider any thought/position to be “common sense,” because the idea of “common sense” is based on human experience and individual perception, altogether subjective. As social beings, conformity is a good thing for cooperating to better protect and (early on) develop ourselves, and we see key informal systems such as gossip and shunning that punish anti-social and non-conformist behavior.

Our Insatiable Desire for Fulfillment, and the Self-Deception/Freedom Dichotomy [Existentialism]

Camus touted that the absence of religious belief is usually accompanied by a longing for “salvation and meaning.” This anguish derives from existentialist paradoxes, such as the very basic: We seek purpose in a life without inherent meaning, a life condemning us to be free and responsible for our actions. Or that we have free consciousness, purity and spontaneity of thought, limitless desires, but the physical world constrains us with rules and limited choices of action. Or that we are impelled to be free to overturn one’s roles and take up new paths but our conscious desires peaceful self-fulfillment through physical actions and social roles, as if living within a portrait that one actively paints of oneself.

In our anguish, people tend to look outwards for fulfillment, defining themselves and acting based on their perceived social role or adopted values/rules/demands of authority/etc, ie “all the people in my workplace have a nice car/house/are aggressive, thus I will be fulfilled with the same.” It can even be simpler, ie the thought “I cannot risk my life, because I must support my family”, claiming one conscious possibility takes undeniable precedence over all others, which is essentially trying to convince oneself that he is bound to act by external circumstances (like an object). This is called “bad faith,” as people come to despise their free conscious, trying to escape the awareness of their total freedom and responsibility for their choices and its anguish. However, they are unable to escape, and their satisfaction/fulfillment is fleeting. [existentialism summarized](#)

Finding Meaning in a Meaningless Universe – When we recognize our freedom and responsibility for our actions, we are better able to live to our true self/feelings, without self-deception. This recognition involves the questioning of all choices, taking responsibility for the consequences of one’s own choices and therefore; a constant reappraisal of one’s own and others’ ever-changing humanity. Furthermore, instead of identifying ourselves the same way others judge us, through occupation, social status, choice of leisure activity, or other superficial ranking, we could, for example, create identity/purpose through output to society (work itself as



the reward).

Freethought: Skepticism and Zeal for Truth

“Ignorance is NOT the root of all evil, the root of all evil is the illusion that we have found the truth.”

Freethinking, or independent thought, is one of the most important solutions to solve flawed morality and lifestyle, given a rational thinker. Knowledge requires caution, intellectual moderation, discipline, and self-overcoming. The individual thinks for him/herself, objectively understanding both his own and differing ideas, and only accepting ideas as truth on the basis of knowledge and reason, instead of authority, tradition, dogma, bias, or fear. Wisdom is a reward from critical thinking, not an entitlement with age. 1) Skepticism and 2) Truth seeking, are two major components of freethinking.

1) Skepticism – Descartes stated that the mind tends to effortlessly and automatically take in ideas and information without intellectual filters. In today’s swamp of commonplace nonsense, misinformation, superstition and paranormal claims, one needs more than intelligence, one must actually utilize critical thinking (open-minded/skeptical, rational, and informed with evidence) to filter the noise. Whenever you hear anything said confidently, the first thing that should come to mind is “wait a minute, is that true?” Whereas skepticism is a drive to find the facts behind ideas (a method of thinking), cynicism constitutes an aversion to probable facts (a jaded negative perspective). Skepticism has to be learned, often by painful experience. Skeptics are neutral on an issue until they have sufficient evidence, and maintain the option to change their mind given new overriding data. They question everything: social conventions, their desires, tendencies, beliefs, and lifestyles. And skeptics ask more substantial questions, instead of always who/what/where/when, they ask: How likely? How does it compare? How does it affect everything? They also understand to not be in a hurry to make (many of our) decisions, that we have a tendency to be lazy and shortcut decisions.

2) Truth Seeking – Alongside our questioning, our drive for truth will propel us to find better worldviews and solutions to problems. We must base our decisions on evidence using our critical thought, as ideas without evidence or immune to evidence are inherently unreliable. The Socratic and Scientific methods, which are “a way of thinking,” refines itself by eliminating errors as it progresses [Positivism], basically always looking for exceptions and updating the original statement with the exceptions until it is impossible to disprove. “No matter how satisfying and reassuring the delusion is, it is far better to grasp the universe as it really is.” – Carl Sagan.

Human Nature: Specific Types of Bias

There are several bugs in our cognitive system – confirmation bias, anchoring, framing, lack of self control, motivated reasoning, false memories, absent mindedness, an ambiguous and inefficient linguistic system, vulnerability to mental disorders, etc. Also, complexity of decision and irrationality are positively correlated.

Generalizations and Gullibility

Gullibility: When young, humans tend to adhere to authority due to our dependence. Later, in adolescence, our desire for independence struggles with our inexperience of it, thus many of us rebel in strange ways.

Generalizations: Humans evolved the most during the Paleolithic period, the period spanning 99% of prehistoric man’s timeline. The Paleolithic man lived in small sample sizes (tribes) with simpler lives, thus, we place significance on little coincidences. We tend to create patterns/generalizations in our heads



prematurely, using single statistics to draw big conclusions. For example, one friend has trouble with his Volvo and all Volvos are off the buy list. We tend to also think in black and white (absolutes), when few things are.

The evolutionary reasons for these are simple: gullibility, black-and-white thinking, and generalizations are good traits for children to listen to parents and to learn quickly. However, they cause great hurdles for our higher-level thinking: thinking objectively, complex thinking, and when we wish to see the world as it is (with a lot of gray areas and exceptions). Additionally, believing something is true (ie an animal is dangerous), does not hurt us, but believing it is false, hurts us. So society tends to have more superstitions than belief-denials that would get us killed. On a similar note, a problem with statistical assessments is that we often look at what is possible, not what is probable. This is good for evolution of technology, however, again, causes small hurdles in everyday rationality. We must remember that correlation does not mean causation and that sample sizes are better with larger numbers.

Confirmation Bias

When evidence arrives that might prove we are wrong, we use motivated thinking to criticize it and may even try to avoid it. We only seek out evidence that confirms our conclusions, convincing ourselves we are right (flawed rationalizations can always be made). Perhaps this was developed to help motivate us to make decisions, or perhaps to fuel ego (ie to stay feeling correct, to gain confidence in ourselves to attract the opposite sex). Ironically, the only way to substantiate a belief is the opposite, to try to disprove it with evidence, which we always should be doing with our beliefs/opinions. Sunken cost error is similar in that, when resources (efforts such as time or money) have been sacrificed in making or assessing a decision, people will continue with their decision in spite of there being no further gains, and might even believe it to be more sensible.

Thinking Superficially (Short-Sightedness)

Most problems in the world are created by short-sightedness. We tend to only think of the short-term, obvious, more self-focused impact. Short-sightedness has a positive side, though, such as instances when being rational is not smart: stopping oneself from laughing at a silly joke and spoiling the fun, forsaking happiness.

Appendix Appendix

Morality Quotes

“A man must live by his principle. In fact, isn’t that why anybody remembers anybody? Not by what he owns or what he is, but how they feel about him. Our desires are less important than the principle in which we live by.”

“The most important human endeavor is the striving for morality in our actions. Our inner balance and even our very existence depend on it. Only morality in our actions can give beauty and dignity to life.” — Charles Dickens

“Morality is of the highest importance.” — Albert Einstein

“Morality is not really the doctrine of how to make ourselves happy but of how we are to be worthy of happiness.” — Immanuel Kant

“The important thing is: To be able at any moment to sacrifice what we are for what we could become.” — Charles Dubois

“Is it less dishonest to do what is wrong because it is not expressly prohibited by written law? Let us hope our moral principles are not yet in that stage of degeneracy.” — Thomas Jefferson

“Science drew the conclusion, not that the spiritual world had been misconceived, but that there was no such thing: nothing was real except tangible body composed of atoms. The result was a doctrine that philosophers call materialism, and religious people call atheism. The Socratic philosophy is a reaction against this materialistic drift of physical science. In order to rediscover the spiritual world, philosophy had to give up, for the moment, the search after material substance in external Nature, and turn its eyes inwards to the nature of the human soul. This was the revolution accomplished by Socrates, with his Delphic injunction ‘Know thyself’. Socrates himself, says Xenophon, only discussed human concerns—what makes men good as individuals or as citizens. Knowledge in this field was the condition of a free and noble character; ignorance left a man no better than a slave.” — F. M. Cornford
Before and After Socrates

“Science has therefore been charged with undermining morality, but the charge is unjust. A man’s ethical behavior should be based effectually on sympathy, education, and social ties and needs; no religious basis is necessary. Man would indeed be in a poor way if he had to be restrained by fear of punishment and hopes of reward after death.” — Einstein

“All men’s souls are immortal, but the souls of the righteous are immortal and divine.” “The difficulty, my friends, is not in avoiding death, but in avoiding unrighteousness; for that runs faster than death.” — Socrates

“The problem, often not discovered until late in life, is that when you look for things in life like love, meaning, motivation, it implies they are sitting behind a tree or under a rock. The most successful people in life recognize, that in life they create their own love, they manufacture their own meaning, they generate their own motivation.” — Neil DeGrasse Tyson

See More: [Purpose](#), [Morality](#)

Purpose Quotes

“My goal is simple. It is a complete understanding of the universe, why it is as it is and why it exists at all. What I have done is to show that it is possible for the way the universe began to be determined by the laws of science, not by God. We are just an advanced breed of monkeys on a minor planet of a very average star. But we can understand the Universe. That makes us something very special.” — Stephen Hawking

“For me, I am driven by two main philosophies, know more today about the world than I knew yesterday. And lessen the suffering of others. You’d be surprised how far that gets you.” — Neil DeGrasse Tyson

[Kohlberg’s Moral Stages](#)

Research in our moral development suggests that it is not a product of merely maturing or socializing, but of thinking about moral problems. Thinking about moral problems can be excited by discussions and debates with others, as we find our views challenged and are therefore motivated to come up with new, more comprehensive positions. These equate to higher level moral stages. In his studies, those who were most interested/active in the discussions made the greatest amount of change, possibly those demonstrating independent thinking. These stages, Kohlberg explains, are universal because they are underlying modes of reasoning, not specific beliefs.

The Stages

At stage 1 (Pre-Conventional), children think doing the right thing is obeying authority and avoiding punishment. At stage 2, children are no longer impressed by any single authority; they see that people have different interests and viewpoints. Since everything is relative, one is free to pursue one’s own interests, although it is often useful to make deals and exchange favors with others. They seem to be overcoming egocentrism.

At stages 3 and 4 (Conventional), young people think as members of conventional society with its values,

norms, and expectations. At stage 3, they emphasize being a good person: having helpful motives toward people close to oneself and being concerned with others' feelings. At stage 4 (ages 20-30), the concern shifts toward obeying laws to maintain society as a whole.

Stages 5 and 6 (Post-Conventional) are both rare. The people become less concerned with maintaining society for its own sake, and more concerned with the principles and values that make for a good society. At stage 5, they emphasize basic rights and the democratic processes that give everyone a say, and at stage 6, they define the principles by which agreement will be most just.

Moral Thought and Moral Behavior

Kohlberg's scale has to do with moral thinking, not moral action. People who can talk at a high moral level may not behave accordingly, thus, we would not expect perfect correlations between moral judgment and moral action. Still, Kohlberg thinks that there should be some relationship: that moral behavior is more consistent, predictable, and responsible at the higher stages, because the stages themselves increasingly employ more stable and general standards. For example, whereas stage 3 bases decisions on others' feelings, which can vary, stage 4 refers to set rules and laws. Thus, we can expect that moral behavior, too, will become more consistent as people move up the sequence.

Evaluation

Kohlberg has suggested that people, with enough independent thinking, may reach a post-conventional level of moral thinking where they no longer accept their own society as given but think reflectively and autonomously about what a good society should be: its rights, values, and principles. Perhaps some will even advance to the kinds of thinking that characterize some of the great moral leaders and philosophers who have at times advocated civil disobedience in the name of universal ethical principles.

Sources Sources

Credit to: Humanity – for nothing would have been possible without the perseverance of our ancestors. We are a beautiful species with all of our flaws, as is this planet we live on and the life that it allowed us.

Inspired by: Nietzsche, Diogenes, and my lovely girlfriend

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Appendix) [Supporters of Human Nature driving Policy](#)