

WHAT MAKES UP THE GOOD LIFE?

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I. Introduction:

Some time or another many of us have seriously asked ourselves, “What is the meaning (importance/significance) to my life?” “Does my life have any ultimate purpose or goal?” “What truly is morally valuable?” Combined with the reality of the brevity and fragility of life, especially in view of seeing so many people we know and love be snatched from us by the claws of death, we wonder what steps can be taken in order to achieve a satisfying, purposed, and meaningful life. Death could knock at our door any moment. Our pulse quickens and anxiety builds as we search for the answer to the ultimate question of identity, purpose, and significance, namely, “What makes up the good life?”

II. What Makes Up the Good Life? Answers from Entertainment:

The dedication to this question is quite revealing when one turns to the extent of answers disclosed in films, music, novels, and TV shows. Why? Our longing to know what makes up the good life is part and parcel of what it means to be human. To be sure, great stories are developed by the pursuit of these questions and the answers given. We watch the choices characters make and the repercussions that follow personally and/or collectively. Tragedy, success, destruction, and altruism find colorful and creative expressions as expressed in films like *Citizen Kane*, *Amadeus*, *Gladiator*, *Lord of the Rings*, *Into the Wild*, and *Avengers*, and TV shows like *Heroes*. Just a cursory glance given to the philosophical notion of what makes up the good life in entertainment, we have a wide array of competitive and conflicting ideas:

What makes up the good life?

1. Achieve financial success so you can reach a state whereby you do nothing.
2. Freedom from all demands and expectations.
3. Be surrounded by the biggest and greatest material goods.
4. Be the object of physical desire.
5. Maximization of self-interests.
6. Party it up.
7. A life whereby pleasure is maximized and pain is minimized.
8. Be recognized as a hero.
9. Receive accolades from your community for making the world a better place (e.g., Nobel Peace Prize).
10. The ability to control and manipulate others.
11. Complete freedom from consumerism and social conformity (herd mentality).
12. The stripping of all self-desires whereby perfect peace is achieved.

13. Communion with “nature.”
14. Freedom from hard work.
15. Fame.
16. A life of valor.
17. A simple life.
18. Financial success and security.
19. Physical fitness.
20. Academic accomplishments that affect or mold the way others look or discuss a particular notion.
21. Shape domestic/foreign policy nationally and/or internationally.
22. Self-actualization.
23. Inventions that impact the way people live, move, and have their becoming.
24. Discoveries.
25. Contributed to the “tipping point” of a particular idea, item, or movement in contemporary culture.
26. Choice-worthy purposes
27. Consistent state of feeling good
28. Live a life of love and compassion.
29. Leave this world with personal peace.
30. Live courageously in an absurd world.
31. Live life to the fullest.
32. A state of happiness.
33. Being true to yourself.
34. Appreciating ever moment of living life.
35. Live fast and hard instead of “fading away.”
36. Biological reproduction and eugenic success.
37. Life of contemplation.
38. Military Conquest.
39. Moral purity.
40. Unashamed Devotion to a Higher Power.
41. The stoic acceptance of “Fate.”
42. Rebellion or conformity to the arbitrary will and whims of the gods.
43. Meaning in life is relative to personal preference, dependent upon one’s mental state, and the capability to access a certain set of external goods.
44. Meaning in life is generated to the extent that one is able to love something.
45. Survival of the fittest.
46. The ability to perfect ourselves with the use of biotechnology, genetic engineering, advancing technologies, and the assimilation of knowledge.
47. Embracing what the community cherishes or upholds as the good life... it is what is agreed upon collectively by the particular community.
48. Being true to yourself. The more true to yourself you are the more fulfilled you. The less true you are to yourself, the less fulfilled you will be.
49. Being absorbed in some activity or experience like employment, public service, raising children, and loving your spouse.
50. “Meaning arises when subjective attraction meets objective attractiveness.” ~ Susan Wolf.

III. What Makes Up the Good Life? Philosophical Answers:

Philosophically, this question of what makes life meaningful, significant, or important has been answered in various ways. Consider the following examples:

Many agree with Aristotle that the good life is dynamically related to human functioning whereby "*eudaimonia*" (human flourishing) may be achieved. Thus, the habitual mastery of intellectual and moral virtues, a certain set of external goods, mimicking one who possesses the good life, and always choosing a path moderation between excess and deficiency in any given situation are required. But one problem with this view is that even if you achieve "*eudaimonia*" you can lose it "*all*" with one misstep. Furthermore, this view of the good life leaves you hostage to luck for you must be born in the right family, receive the right education, live in the right community, and possess the right set of resources.

Some are attracted to Plato who believed that the good life is achieved when one's appetites, emotions, and reasoning flourish together in their respective states with reason controlling the others. From this aggregation virtues like justice, courage, temperance, and wisdom emerge. Likewise, this type of ethical living is tied to the community whereby the artisans/workers, warriors, and philosopher-kings flourish in their respective states with the philosopher-kings ruling. When this threefold caste system flourishes, serving the whole community, these same virtues emerge. But is this enough?

For Kant, the good life is one whereby one's life adheres to the supreme moral principle of morality, namely, the threefold Categorical Imperative (which is, roughly speaking, a secularized version of the golden rule): "*Act in conformity to that maxim and that maxim only, that you can will at the same time a universal law.*" In other words, this type of meaningful life is one whereby personal preferences are exchanged with adherence to logical duties that are universally impartial. Moreover, the Categorical Imperative emphasizes the inherent value of human life, fairness, and equality. Our desires or preferences are constrained by the logical will of all. But is this approach this really possible in a self-serving world where depravity is natural, decadence is attractive, and virtues are ignored? Does this view focus on rules to the neglect of being? What if our desires are in conflict with duties? Does the focus on rules also ignore or even displace the existential aspects of our personhood?

Others embrace the nihilistic mindset that there is no purpose to life; life has no meaning for we are accidental products of nature that emerged from chance, matter, and time. While nihilists believe there is no "designed" purpose in this atheistic universe, some contend that by adopting a "life project" personal meaning, situated purpose, and significance may find expression-even though there is no ultimate purpose in this absurd and meaningless universe. Can one really be in the position to claim a universal negative?

Still, others may claim we should not even ask the question, "What is the good life?" This notion of lasting contentment, joy, and satisfaction is intelligible. In fact, to even think there is prescribed purpose to our lives is to fall victim to categories of thinking we inherited from both Greek and Judeo-Christian worldviews. Instead, meaning is found in liberation from all constraints, categories, and other authority structures imposed on us. Be free to be what you want to be! But is this view really coherent given all that we know about life? Do we not long for security?

Some assert the good life is much more complicated than what we previously thought. Instead of some singular overarching prescriptive purpose to our lives, our purposes are complex and dynamically associated with the biological, familial, social, and environmental. Thus, our purposes are shaped, molded, and expressed in different ways and in different contexts. Thus, our purposes change as we change and as our culture changes. Does this view still commit the fallacy of reductionism by not considering the immaterial or spiritual realm of reality?

Others may claim that the good life is found in the beneficial mastery of our circumstances. We inquire into the specific situation itself (since we are in experience and not outside of it) and attempt to use various tools at our disposal to generate practical benefits that will help us achieve our dreams personally and collectively. Thus, the good life is found when we achieve certain benefits or rewards in a given situation. The "nectar" is found in how we engage our circumstances recognizing that experience itself oscillates between moments of stability and instability. Does this view also commit the fallacy of reductionism by not neglecting the immaterial or spiritual realm of reality?

Lastly, all throughout history many have concluded the opposite view. Our position in this universe is one of ultimate design and transcendent purpose. But the question becomes, who designed this plan? What is the nature of this type of Designer? Related, what role, if any, does free will play in the decisions and the destinies that we are called to fulfill?

All of these explanations point to the obvious conclusion that people are passionate about what makes up the good life. Moreover, answers given are related to other ultimate questions like:

What is true?

What is ultimately real?

What is good and evil?

What is right from wrong?

What happens following death?

But as you read the above views, you must realize that not all explanations are created equal. In fact, it would be incoherent and illogical to claim that all the above answers are all equally valid. Therefore, how can we adjudicate which answer is best? While some of the above answers may be connected, the question is what view

makes the most sense given “who we are” and “what we already know to be true” in the world in which we live.

IV. A Seven-Fold Evaluation of Truth-Claims Regarding What Makes Up the Good Life:

Personally, I use a seven-fold criterion to examine truth-claims- whether philosophically or theologically. I have discovered that this type of approach is most enlightening, enriching, and meaningful given the contexts in which I move, act, and grow. This combinational checklist is extrapolated from the insights of philosophers like William H. Halverson, Winfried Corduan, and Ravi Zacharias. First, the answer given must be **logically coherent**, that is, it must be free of internal logical inconsistencies. Thus, the truth-claim must harmonize with what I already know to be true.

Second, a truth-claim must be **empirically adequate**, that is, it must have evidential value. See, a fact is something that actually exists; it has objective reality; it is a provable concept. For example, the hunger for transcendence is empirically evident among the world’s adherence to religious worship (e.g., the amount of and adherence to religion).

Third, the truth-claim must be **existentially relevant**, that is, the truth-claim must be germane, pertinent, and relatable. In other words, this truth-claim must have an important, evident bearing on the matter at hand.

Fourth, the truth-claim must be **workable**. If something works, then it is true. Though there are problems with this as the sole criterion, itself, e.g., a lie may be workable, the bottom line is that if something is true, then it works. To be sure, one does not have to embrace a consequential form of ethics or become a pragmatist in order to consider, discover, or observe what consequences a truth-claim may generate. In fact, one of the benefits of recorded history is that we have over 2,000 years of ideas and their consequences upon humanity and biological and sociological environment and the trajectories they generate. We do not live in a vacuum. Thus, I believe it is helpful to consider what can be and what is generated by truth-claims.

Fifth, and related to the third criterion, relevance, and fourth criterion, workability, the truth-claim must be able to be lived out; it must be **viable**. If some idea or worldview cannot be lived out, then it is not worthwhile. Though this criterion of viability is a negative test, it is worth using. The question becomes, can one live out this truth-claim? If not, then it is suspect and perhaps valueless. See, the test of viability helps clarify our values, pursuits, and plans.

Sixth, does this truth-claim **possess explanatory power** in the area of comprehensiveness? Is this truth-claim weighty or substantive? Does this

worldview pull all of life together? Does this truth-claim shed light on other known inquiries, claims, insights or discoveries?

And seventh, does this truth-claim or worldview possess **an aesthetic and moral quality** that meaningfully improves or degrades that which good, honorable, and noble? Does it generate virtue or vice, contribute or degenerate one's wellbeing and the good of the community? Does it satisfy, conform to, and enrich our conscience? Or is it counter-intuitive, extracting the best parts of our personhood.

In sum, when I apply this seven-fold criterion, namely, the criteria of (1) internal coherence, (2) empirical adequacy, (3) existential relevance, (4) workability, (5) viability, (6) comprehensiveness, and (7) aesthetic and moral quality, to answers given, such as what makes the good life, I have come to the realization that I am better able to discover and discern that which is true and false among all the competing truth-claims that exist in our world today.

V. What Makes Up the Good Life? A Theological Response:

When I apply the combinational test to the answer given in the *Westminster Shorter Catechism*, "Man's chief end is to glorify God, and to enjoy Him forever," I have come to the incredible discovery that this answer not only meets my seven-fold criterion, but it also exceeds my expectations. Let's explore this further.

First, this answer internally coheres with what I already know to be true about the nature of God as powerfully expressed in the historical reality of the person, words, and works of Jesus Christ. Jesus demonstrated what it looks like to glorify God and enjoy Him. Moreover, Jesus' words internally agree about what I know about the frailty and depravity of humanity. His use of first principle of logic is unmistakable and His use of the correspondence view of truth is clear.

Additionally, this answer also internally coheres what I know about God from general revelation as reflected in physical beginning of the universe (Cosmological argument), the empirical design, order, and complexity that is evident in our universe and in our biological systems (Teleological argument; apparent design; irreducible complexity; anthropic principle), the unity and diversity in biological life-forms, the reality of abstract, non-physical realities like mathematics and the first principles of logic, the inherent search for redemption from sin and immortality (Religious Need Argument), the beauty that surrounds us (the argument from beauty), the reason for moral and nature evil and suffering in the world (the problem of evil actually firms the existence of God), moral values, duties, virtues, and accountability (Moral Law argument and its ontological foundations), the occurrence of miracles (e.g., configuration miracles which do not necessarily violate the laws of nature), and the nature of our human conscience (Divine, natural Law). Thus, taken all these things together, we have good reasons to believe God has an overriding purpose for our lives.

Second, this answer given to what makes up the good life, namely, glorifying God and enjoying Him forever, is empirically evident when one examines the historical truths regarding the person and work of Jesus Christ. If Jesus is not what He claimed to be, then one needs to question how one may know anything else historically. Moreover, when one examines the extent of ancient manuscript evidence and compare them together, archeological evidences, and the actual precise fulfillment of Bible prophecy (e.g., Isaiah 52:13-53:12; Micah 5:2), one has good reasons to believe that the truth claim, glorifying God and enjoying Him forever has empirical weightiness.

But we also have the testimony of those who committed themselves to living out this answer in the moment-by-moment choices of life. The more closely people like George Washington, Abraham Lincoln, Hudson Taylor, Amy Carmichael, Oswald Chambers, A. W. Tozer, Lewis S. Chafer, and John F. Walvoord followed this truth, their lives flourished, experienced fulfillment, and generated a legacy that is still impacting lives in the most positive ways. Those Christians who did not live out this maxim actually hurt others-and at times in the most horrific ways.

Third, this answer by the Westminster Shorter Catechism also possesses existential relevance. The more Christians adhere to this answer, glorifying God and enjoying Him forever, the more satisfying life is -no matter how difficult life becomes. This life of abiding joy also spills out and qualitatively ministers to the afflicted, hurting, and troubled. Others cannot help but be inspired when such contentment, joy, and peace are seen in the difficulties of living life. People can feel this hope when the practical needs of others are met. People see this lifestyle of loving God as reflected in a life of intellectual and moral excellence. But people also can witness to the power from such a relationship when contrasted to a life of deprivation, decay, and darkness. Moreover, the joy that follows from such a dynamic intimacy is but a foretaste of what one will experience when this physical life is over and believers are in the presence of God Himself.

Fourth, glorifying God and enjoying Him is also workable. The more one follows this truth, the greater God becomes in how one perceives, moves, and develops. As a result of living this maxim out, one's life becomes sweet - no matter how bleak or painful the circumstances seem. Purpose, significance, and value become paramount as one becomes God's committed disciple, blooming and flourishing where He plants His people according to His good providence. In contrast, when one does not follow this truth, self-inflicted loneliness, pain, regret, exhaustion, and tragedy become commonplace. If one stays on this path where self-interest reigns supreme, bitterness will take root and rob the best parts of one's personhood. But when one seeks to glorify God and enjoy Him in the daily decisions one makes, one is able to experience the delight of His presence in the "now." God's presence becomes inimitable, His enablement evident, and His love unmistakable. With this type of love relationship, one is able to touch the lives of others in the most life-changing ways (e.g., loving the un-lovely, helping the hurting, meeting practical needs with the blessings God has bestowed, and stemming the tide of social injustice).

Fifth, glorifying God and enjoying Him forever is also viable. This mindset not only agrees with what we already know to be true, but it also reaches down and meets the deepest of our needs, satisfies our deepest longings, and fills the void with a peace that surpasses all understanding. When Christians consistently follow this truth, their lives are changed qualitatively, bringing forgiveness where wrongs were committed and healing where wounds existed. But this mindset also fills the mind and heart with wonder and delight as the believer perceives all that His Hands have made; all of life has value. So, one's surroundings is not taken lightly or taken advantage of. But the viability of this explanation is also seen in how it answers questions about our origins, identity, meaning, destiny, and hope. Because God made us, we know our origins. We know what we are and who we are. We understand why we are here and how we should live. We understand what's gone with the world and what we can be done to the fix the problems of this world. Thus, this answer, glorifying God and enjoying Him forever, not only touches the core of what it means to be human, but it also gives direction, meaning, and purpose to who and what we are, what we are called to do, and where we are going.

Related to above, glorifying God and enjoying Him forever, also possesses explanatory power, for it pulls together the value and importance of living life to the fullest for the glory of God, the importance and need to obey the precepts of the Bible, and living for what matters most while we have air to breathe. Coupled with our understanding of the brevity and frailty of life, glorifying God helps us to understand the purpose, nature, and role of material goods, the existence of hope in the midst of trials and tragedies, and the nature of personal relationships. Moreover, this maxim sheds light on goodness, virtues, duties, and even acts of altruism, explains why evil is evil, why people of all gender, race, and age have inherent value, and why life itself is to be cherished. But this truth also helps explains the direction of history as it moves forward to its purposed end - all within God's providence.

And seventh, glorifying God and enjoying Him forever, possesses aesthetic and moral value for this type of purpose, significance, and meaning reflects the beauty of our perfect God in the decisions we make, the pleasures we pursue, and the values we embrace. The more we reflect God's beauty in how we live, the more beautiful and morally meaningful life becomes. Following this maxim upholds what is honorable, noble, true, and trustworthy, enriches society, and ennobles virtues like justice, courage, self-control, and wisdom.

VI. Personal Testimony:

In conclusion, I submit to you from personal experience that the more I have yielded myself to God, following this maxim, the more fulfilled my life has become. Even though hardships come my way, I am not alone. Sometimes He delivers me from these obstacles and other times He holds my hand I was walk through them. But given the frailty of life, and recognizing that for all eternity I will be in His presence, those of us who strive to make it our ambition to be pleasing to Him have not only

discovered lasting contentment, meaning, and purpose, but we have also experienced an overflow that touches lives in the most extraordinary way.

So, if you are looking for lasting contentment, joy, peace, and satisfaction, I invite you to seriously consider the person and work of Jesus Christ. Because of Jesus Christ' sacrifice on your behalf, your past, present, and future sins have been forgiven. Thus, when you place your faith in Him for salvation, eternal fellowship, undeserved favor, total forgiveness, and an unmistakable and incomparable joy and peace becomes yours. And all of this is possible when you place your faith in Jesus Christ alone for salvation, believing that He is God, who died on the cross for your sins and rose bodily from the dead.