

Meaning of Life

Guide to Reading

“生活的意义”是每一个来到这个世界上的人，尤其是将要走出大学校园进入社会工作的大学生们必须面对和回答的问题。面对严峻的就业形势和沉重的生活压力，如何明确人生的目的、树立正确的择业观和成功观是至关重要的。本单元选取的五篇文章在这些方面从不同的角度进行了深浅不同的分析，对同学们会有有益的启示。

第一篇文章“**It's Not What You Do, It's How You Got There**”题目本身就强调：做什么样的工作并不重要，重要的是如何做好它并取得成功，得到物质与精神两方面的满足。现实世界里究竟有多少人在从事与其大学所学专业有关的工作呢？事实上，这个比例很小。文章以加拿大多伦多陌生人之间流行的问候语“你是做什么的？”开头以引起读者的兴趣，然后提出自己的论点，对这一现象背后的原因进行深刻的剖析。这可以帮助同学们树立辩证的择业观。

第二篇文章“**Determine Your Mission**”引导读者树立正确的成功观。许多人将成功视为人生的追求，但怎样才算成功呢？作者通过分析得出结论：事业与金钱只是成功的两个方面，而人生的目的是多方面的。这就提醒我们不要陷入一味追求物质财富的陷阱。作者在这篇文章里着力对成功进行全面地定义，并形象地将成功比喻为钻石的不同剖面。

第三篇文章“**Modern Life Is Killing Us**”则提醒我们注意现代化，尤其是科技飞速发展的结果。现代化使我们异化，成为物质与科技手段的奴隶，从而限制了我们的身心自由。这是现代人或后现代人应尽力避免的。这篇文章使用了驳论法，即先陈述以美国为代表的西方“竞争”价值观的可取之处，然后引入它无能为力的地方，最后证明西方生产和生活方式的弊端。这种方法合情合理，令人信服。

第四、五两篇文章为补充阅读。第四篇文章“**Reasons to Be Cheerless**”论述现代化给人类带来的生活意义的迷茫。第五篇文章“**Frequently Asked Questions About the Meaning of Life**”则从哲学与逻辑的高度对生活与生命的方方面面的问题进行解答，针对性较强，但难度较大。

▶ Reading on the Subject

Requirements:

- You are required to go over Articles 1, 2 & 3 before coming to class. The questions listed after these three articles are meant to help you in reading and preparation for class.
- Articles 4 and 5 are for reference. You are encouraged to read them for information.



It's Not What You Do, It's How You Got There

Judith Timson

- 1** In Toronto, the careerist capital of Canada, when strangers meet, they don't say "How do you do?" They say "What do you do?"
- 2** It is a question that drives many people crazy because they don't wish to be defined by or awarded status or demerit points on the basis of their work.
- 3** I say it's all right to ask the question if you follow it up with a much more interesting second question: "How did you come to do what you do?"
- 4** It is then, not in the simple job description, that character is revealed and destiny described. The real estate saleswoman confesses she wanted to be a forensic pathologist but was not steered to the right university courses. The lawyer shrugs and says he had no clue what he wanted to do and law school seemed like a good idea at the time. The entrepreneur admits he had this crazy idea about starting a small radio station. The highly capable nurse still laments her family did not have the money to send her to university.
- 5** Choosing what we do for a living—or having it choose us—is, as American author Po Bronson observed in his bestseller *What Should I Do with My Life?* "one of life's great dramas." There's usually a Greek chorus (the parental unit), an unexpected twist in the road (can't get into medical school) and a crisis or two to be overcome.
- 6** For some there is unbelievable success—think of the founders of Google, so young and yet so rich, for others, a life of desperately unsatisfying activity, and for most everyone else, something in between—good years and bad, fulfillment and drudgery. If you ask people about their professional regrets, they usually involve something they didn't do, as opposed to something they did. "I didn't try out enough things when I was young," says one businessman.

- 7** Sometimes I think people invest their careers with the same mythology they do their love lives—the great passion, the career that got away, now looms larger than life, which is why, in their fifties, many people go looking for that career spark they left behind. And which is why the word “passion” is today popping up in more and more career consultants’ marketing come-ons. We understand, because of our own convoluted life circumstances, that there is no one moment when we fall in love with our work and stay that way, but we don’t demystify the process enough for students.
- 8** It starts early in schools. “When they have a career day at my daughter’s school, they usually haul in the parents and that’s a narrow spectrum—a handful of doctors and lawyers,” says one Montreal woman who wanted to be an architect but ended up with a Bachelor of Commerce degree. On the other hand it’s difficult to convey how vast the possibilities are without overwhelming students.
- 9** Because of changing work patterns, we now get it that when you choose a career, it most likely won’t end up being exactly that job or even that career for life. But how helpful is it to tell someone starting out, actually agonizing over the choices, not to worry because that job won’t be around anyway 20 years from now?
- 10** The graduates in good shape are the ones who emerge even hungrier to learn. That’s what a great education should really foster: a big appetite for learning, and just a little of bravery.
- 11** A few years ago, a high school student in the neighborhood was doing a project on careers, and she called with a good question: “What did you want to be at 16, and what are you today?” I warned her that my answer would be boring—in short, I became what I wanted to be. “Out of 16 people, you and only one other person answered this way,” she said.
- 12** It’s not surprising that we don’t all become what we think we want to be. If we did, it would be a pretty dull world.
- 13** In the meantime, on the bumpy road to getting there, there’s always humor. A teenager I know—tired of adults asking her all the time what she wanted to be—decided at a recent family party to just mutter the words “brain surgeon” to any adult in the room.
- 14** I thought it was a great idea until, at the same party, I came upon a guest who actually is a brain surgeon and he laughed when I told him her plan. “I went skiing recently, and on the chairlift someone asked me what I did. When I said neurosurgeon, he wouldn’t believe me.”
- 15** What kind of a world is it if you can’t get instant status points for being a brain surgeon? I guess it’s a world in which you might as well do exactly what you want.



Questions to think about

1. How does the author start her article?
2. Do you wish to be defined or judged by your profession or status? Why or why not?
3. Why do many people end up doing what they did not intend to do when they were young?
4. What is most people's professional regret?
5. What kinds of parents does the university haul in at students' career day?
6. What is the most important thing, according to the author, for a student when he or she is in university?
7. What function is the final example in illustrating the author's point of view?

2

Determine Your Mission

Tom Gegax

- 1 Success. Arguably the most sought after and least understood prize. Many hunger for it, and some never realize when they've got it. Most of us want to be successful human beings, mates, parents, workers, managers, homemakers, salespeople. To achieve it, many work excessive long hours and packing more activity into already bloated schedules.
- 2 Yet it's startling to consider that while this effort may yield some of the usual trappings, many still don't feel successful. Underneath the satisfaction of good performance reviews, a bigger house, and committee memberships, many still feel that success is somewhere out there yet to be snared.
- 3 No wonder. Our eyes are bleary from reading business-success tomes and taking notes at "achievement" seminars. Still, we're left asking the same questions: What makes us tick? What makes us stick? What drives us? While the average people works more hours than ever, little of the effort actually helps us understand anything about ourselves. Crowded out by the often manic push for success, simple, reflective inquiry rarely hits anyone's radar screen.
- 4 Many of us are encouraged to train our attention outward, toward such linear concepts as the latest managerial trend, and toward consuming and producing on time, on trend, and in step. We're often so concerned with learning how to manage others—employees, children, mates, even friends—that we're left with little energy to manage ourselves. Obsessed with mastering the world around us, we often fail to notice the unexplored world within. As French author

Edward Schure writes, “Modern man seeks pleasure without happiness, happiness without knowledge, and knowledge without wisdom.” Meanwhile, the search goes on for the secret to success, as if there were a single pill that would make all the difference.

5 In my experience, there is no magic bullet. Success, however, is forever within reach, personal and professional growth evolving hand in hand through a winning life game plan. This “whole person” approach focuses on every aspect of our being to support a well-lived personal and professional life. Every aspect is a player and every player is necessary. No one needs to be left on the bench. Recognizing that a win-lose dichotomy only fragments your mission, this winning life game plan redefines “winning” into a venture of cooperation and integration. Win-lose evolves into win-win. Everyone and everything benefit.

6 This integrated approach is a path to success, but what kind of “success” are we talking about? This life game plan isn’t just about making more money, ascending the corporate ladder, or cramming in one more goal in the name of efficiency. That narrow view of what constitutes success stands between us and deeper satisfaction. With our eyes locked only on the prize, we forget that a winning life is a product of how we play the game.

7 Success, like a jewel, has many facets, and it can be easy to focus on two of the most eye-catching: money and career. Important? Sure, polishing those are part of the plan. Turn the jewel in your hand, though, and take a look at all the other glints of well-rounded success: loving relationships, community consciousness, physical and psychological health, intellectual balance, spiritual connection—to name just a few. An effective life plan polishes them all. While no single facet defines success, the sum reflects a life well-lived.



Questions to think about

1. What do most people pursue all their lives, according to the author?
2. How do most people measure success in Western societies?
3. What is an integrated approach to success, according to the author?
4. What is your opinion on success?
5. What kind of life would you like to live out there?

3

Modern Life Is Killing Us

Richard Martins

- 1** The intellectual mind is a mind in denial. Let us not go into the American's self-deception with its power of positive thinking. Agreed, it works only too well for winning wars, competitive sports, making money. But one must ask: Why is it that the most affluent societies have the longest queues for psychiatrists?
- 2** Culturally speaking, the answer is ultimately clear for a system such as Western society and the nations centered upon capitalistic enterprise, which are based upon competition and success, the driving force of ambition, the rationale of surviving and winning. This is psychologically the most destructive element in human relationships. We are turning ourselves into machines with this kind of egocentric suicide. The suppression of emotions or the sentimental overt display of them misses the point: These are symptoms and may have cultural, moralistic or religious aspects within the overall conditioning of personality and attitudes.
- 3** This technological era has not given us more personal freedom except in the acquisition of material pleasure. Freedom is not a system, a set of laws, a display of individual desires and achievements. Freedom lies only in the courage to face our own self-made illusions and take responsibility for them. Time is being moved faster by the technology; one cannot escape from it; one must be required to do more and more even when there is nothing to do. When you accelerate time, you also accelerate the decay of material life.
- 4** Yes! Stress, paranoia. What good is the liberation of a technological society when one is so stressed that, like the Americans, to be alone or idle is impossible without either going mad or becoming violent? All of this contributes to an immense complexity in coping with the individuation process.
- 5** Life has lost its trust and its harmony, and only disease can follow. Children are very aware of little beings, but they have not the experience to understand. They accept life openly, and they are telling us that the one we have constructed for ourselves is killing us.



Questions to think about

1. In what aspects does the American way of “positive thinking” work well?

2. What has the technological era given us?
3. How does the author define personal freedom? Do you agree with him?
4. What does the author say about the relationship between technology and time?



Reasons to Be Cheerless

Madeleine Bunting

Modern life’s meaninglessness causes such despair that we need more than a stiff upper lip.

Rising mental illness seems an inescapable consequence of the kind of rapid, disruptive change driven by market capitalism. It’s not that people have gone soft so much as that they are profoundly disoriented by the ceaseless discontinuity of change. Experience becomes utterly random and meaningless. You were doing really well in your job but you still got fired; you thought your relationship was strong but your partner has fallen out of love with you. What lies behind the escalating weight of emotional distress is that awful struggle to make meaning, that instinct that our lives should have a narrative and a purpose.

Whereas previous generations had a very strong grasp of the meaning of their lives, of their own identity and where they belonged, we are living out Marx’s prediction that “all that is solid melts into air, all that is holy is profaned.” Meaning inspires resilience: If you have some explanation for what happens, it gives strength. That’s what past generations drew comfort from. It is the sheer meaninglessness of the chaotic instability of our experiences that exposes us to despair. We have no answer to “why me?” We have no account for the suffering which is the inevitable lot of human beings other than to employ desperate strategies to avoid it.

Freud said that human beings oscillate between their need for security and their need for freedom. At some point in the 20th century, we pretty much junked security in favor of freedom. The price we pay for that is a kind of nervy, risk-taking roller coaster ride of adrenaline and depression. We’ve replaced lives that were nasty, brutish and short with lives that are insecure, disorientated and long.

Inevitably, there are casualties, and they need help, not skepticism. That’s where the therapy and emotionalization of contemporary culture are part of the solution, not the problem; both are part of how we develop an account of our lives that connects with that of others in the wake of declining religious and political narratives. It can play a crucial role in the lives of many

who manage, as Charles Baudelaire put it in 1845, a kind of heroism of everyday life, in which they make themselves at home in the modern maelstrom.

It's an achievement all the more remarkable for the fact that it can call on few of the markers such as extended family, community and faith upon which the past relied so heavily. And it is accompanied, I suspect, by just as much endurance and cheerful determination as shown by any previous generation.

5

Frequently Asked Questions About the Meaning of Life

Eliezer S. Yudkowsky

Why should I get up in the morning?

There are three major reasons:

1. Happiness. Even if your life is unhappy now, stick around for a few years. Nobody really knows what's on the other side of the coin; but it'll probably be a *lot* of fun. You can be happy in the here-and-now as well.
2. Knowledge. No matter how confused you are *now*, things should all be straightened out in a couple of decades. It may be fashionable to insist that intelligence does not equal wisdom, and maybe, if you look at the differences *between* humans, that's arguable—but you don't see Neanderthals discussing existentialism, do you? A superintelligence would have a better chance of figuring things out and explaining them to you.
3. Altruism. We, ourselves, don't know what's right. Or, even if *you* do, you can't achieve it—at all, or as completely as you'd like. An enhanced intelligence, however, has a better chance of figuring out what's right, and a better chance of achieving it. By getting up in the morning, and either supporting general civilization, or working directly toward technological intelligence enhancement, you are *indirectly* doing what's right, acting in a supporting role. You're making the choices that lead to a better Universe, and that's all that can ever be asked of anyone. If you don't get up in the morning, the Universe will be the worse for it.

Which of those reasons is correct?

Living solely for happiness—avarice—is wrong. Not in the moral sense—many great things have ironically been achieved through greed. I am speaking here not only of the “base” desires

that led to the invention of fire, but more refined desires, such as the desire for freedom, the desire for knowledge, even the desire for higher intelligence. Not even superintelligence is an end in itself. The only reason to do a thing is *because it is right*. There is no end which we ought to pursue even if we knew it to be wrong. Living for happiness is wrong in the *logical* sense—whether avarice walks paths that are noble or mean, it is a sign of a disorganized philosophy. Goals have to be *justified*.

The second theory might be called “confusion” —roughly, the belief that we can’t really be certain what’s going on, because the human species isn’t smart enough to Figure It All Out. Confusion is the simplest of all philosophies, and the most durable. Confusion is the underpinning of altruism. Avarice shades into confusion through the hope that a superintelligence will explain things to *you*; confusion shades into altruism through the hopes that a superintelligence will know and *do*, whether or not it chooses to explain.

Altruism supplies direction. Altruism can provide a full, logical justification for a course of action. The price of that is the loss of simplicity. Only altruism qualifies as a genuine Meaning of Life. Altruism is the simplest explanation that relates choices to reality; confusion is the simplest explanation that relates choices to mind.

Is my life significant?

Nobody’s life has exactly zero significance. By the time you were born, you’d already used up some resources. Nobody is going to break *exactly* even. The real question you’re asking is:

Is my life worth living? Did I break even? By how much?

Even that is hard to answer. Consider all the coincidences that combined to make you the person you are. Consider the books that sculpted your mental landscape, books you just happened to run across in the library. Consider how unlikely was your particular genetic mix (around 8.8 trillion to one). And consider how easy it would have been for someone else to change things.

Your greatest deed may have been disarranging a few books on a shelf; your most hideous act may have been jostling someone on a subway. Life is a chaotic place.

The real question you’re asking is:

How much positive significance do my deliberate efforts have?

That depends on your profession.

Some people definitely lead significant lives. This would include farmers, anyone who has a job that involves actual sweat, and anyone who has to show up at work on Labor Day. It includes rich families who give more to charity than they spend on themselves, and venture capitalists who invest in technology companies. It includes any scientific researcher who’s made a discovery, or even established a given area as being a blind alley. It includes any

computer programmer who's helped build a widely used tool or published a new programming technique. Most directly, it includes cognitive scientists, neuroscientists, and Artificial Intelligence (AI) programmers.

It includes anyone who uses their muscles, their brains, or their property to grow, build, discover, and create. It includes science fiction writers who inspire others to enter a career in research or AI. And it includes parents and teachers who have raised children (this *definitely* counts as "actual sweat") who work in any of the above areas.

Some people, at most, break even. This includes bureaucrats, marketing personnel, stock traders, and venture capitalists who fund leveraged buyouts. It includes the generic middleman and anyone whose job title is "Strategic Administrative Coordinator." It includes modern artists, professors of communication, and psychoanalysts. It includes most lawyers and middle management. If your job involves going to meetings all day, using terms with no real meaning, or shuffling paper (which includes stock certificates), you probably aren't breaking even. We could easily get by on 20% of the workforce, in these professions. As it is, only about 5% are breaking even. These are the professions which, on this particular planet only, happen to be overvalued, and thus over-occupied, and also easy to fake.

Some people manage to do a huge amount of damage. This includes politicians, royalty in the Middle Ages, dictators, the management of large and ossified companies, high-level bureaucrats, environmental activists, televangelists, and class-action lawyers. Are there exceptions? Yes. Benjamin Franklin was a politician, for example. However, as a general rule, no more than 2% of the people in such professions manage to break even. On the other hand, the 0.1% that do *more* than break even can make up for a lot.

Who has led the most significant life?

If I had to name a single human with the most concentrated significance as of 2000, it would be Douglas R. Hofstadter. Dr. Hofstadter's Copycat is a significant advance in AI, he has sponsored an AI paradigm shift in the right direction, and he has inspired millions through his Pulitzer Prize-winning and amazingly good book, *Godel, Escher, Bach: An Eternal Golden Braid*.

Runners-up include K. Eric Drexler, Douglas Lenat, Isaac Newton, Albert Einstein, Francis Bacon, and Socrates.

What is the problem of asking "What is the meaning of life?"

Why should we get up in the morning? What should we choose to do? Why should we do it? "The Meaning of Life" isn't just about knowing that our lives are having an impact; it's

also about dispelling the philosophical fog. It's not only knowing exactly why you got up in the morning; it's knowing the rules you used to make the decision, where the rules come from, and why the rules are correct.

What are choices? What are goals?

Some of the human rules would be:

- A choice is when you can act in a number of different ways. We'll call the set of possible actions the "choice," and each possible action is an "option."

For example, you have the choice of where to go for dinner. One option is Bob's Diner. One option is McDonald's.

- Each option leads to a different outcome. You choose the option that leads to the best outcome.

Presumably you'll make this choice by thinking about what will happen if you go to Bob's or McDonald's, and not by writing down the options and picking the one with the largest number of vowels.

- You determine which outcome is "best" by how well, or how strongly, the outcome fulfills a "goal."

Likewise, when you think about what will happen when you go to a restaurant, you'll care about the food and the prices, rather than the latitude and longitude.

- A goal is a state of your world that you "desire"—a statement about the world that you want to be true, and that you act to make true.

For example, if you care about prices, the statement might be "I want to spend the least possible amount of money" or "I prefer to spend less money." If you care about food, there are probably several statements: "I want to lose weight," "I want adequate nutrition," and "I want to eat something that tastes good."

We also plan—that is, take multiple actions directed at a single goal. To fulfill the goal "get to my office at work," you might need to fulfill the *subgoals* "get in the car," "turn the car on," "drive to work," "park the car," "turn off the car," "get out of the car," and "walk into my office." To fulfill the goal "get in the car," you might need to fulfill the subgoals "unlock the door," "open the door," and "sit in the seat." That's how the very-high-level goal of "get to my office at work" gets translated into immediate actions.

And of course, if asked why you wanted to be in your office in the first place, this goal itself would probably turn out to have a *supergoal* of "being paid a salary," whose supergoal would be "being able to buy dinner"... and so on.

Another important point is that the actions we take depend not just on our *goals*, but also on our *beliefs*. If I believe that dropping an object into water makes it wet, and I have the goal of getting a sponge wet, then I can form the subgoal of dropping the sponge into water. If, on the other hand, I believe that objects can be made wet by setting them on fire, then I will set the sponge on fire. Our model of the world determines which actions we think will lead to our goals. The choices we make are the combined products of goal-system and world-model, not just the goal-system.

What do we do in the case of multiple goals, or conflicting goals, or when we're not sure which future an action will lead to? Well, what we try to do is take all the possibilities, and all the goals, into account, then sum up the contribution of each goal and possibility.

Where do goals usually come from?

We haven't said anything about where goals come from. Sure, subgoals come from supergoals, but where do supergoals come from? Or rather, where *should* supergoals come from... but let's deal with the historical question first.

When we were born, evolution hands us a certain set of goals: Survive. Eat. Er, reproduce. Rest when you're tired. Attract a spouse. Take care of your children. Protect your tribe. Act with honor (especially when you're in public). Defend your social position. Overthrow the tribal chief and take over. Learn the truth. Think. Et cetera.

You've noticed that there is doubtfully any reason, any justification, that comes with the emotions. You want to know *why*. Unfortunately, all the emotions I listed above are fundamentally arbitrary. It's not that the reason is hidden; the reason is completely known. The reason evolution produced these emotions is that, in the environment of evolutionary ancestry, it maximized the number of surviving grandchildren.

The reason we should maximize the number of surviving grandchildren is that we're all the grandchildren of people optimized that way. And we know, to our sorrow, that it isn't always the good people that survive, much less reproduce. The goals we're born with are the products of expediency, not philosophy.

In 20th-century life, a lot of our built-in goals don't serve any coherent purpose. To quote *Tooby and Cosmides*: "Individual organisms are best thought of as adaptation-executers rather than as fitness-maximizers." Our starter set of goals can't even be viewed as having a purpose. It's just there.

The built-in desires are, in a fundamental sense, arbitrary. Taken as a set, they are maladjusted to the modern environment and internally inconsistent, making them unsatisfactory as final sources of motivation.

I'm not saying that emotions are worthless. I'm just saying that they can't all be right. They can't all be true. We can't blindly accept them as final justification.

Are there any other common sources of moralities?

As children, we pick up more supergoals, from sources ranging from the television set, to our fellow children, to our teachers, to our parents—goals ranging from “Obey the rules of society” to “Save the world from animated demons” to “Make fun of authority to gain status.” It is often useful to view these culturally transmitted ideas as *memes*—a term which refers to the concept that ideas, themselves, can evolve. Each time I tell you about an idea, the idea reproduces. When you spread it to someone else, the idea has had grandchildren. If the idea “mutates” in your possession, either due to an error in transmission, or a faulty memory, or because you deliberately tried to improve it, the idea can become more powerful, spreading faster. In this way, ideas are optimized to reproduce in human hosts, much like cold viruses. Ideas evolve to be more appealing, more memorable, more worth retelling—sometimes the idea even evolves to include an explicit reason to retell it.

Meme-based supergoals are sometimes inconsistent with the basic emotions, and *very* often inconsistent with each other, since memes come from so many different sources. I'm not saying all memetically transmitted supergoals are worthless. I'm simply establishing that, regardless of whether the ideas are *in fact* true or false, being told them as children isn't enough to establish their truth; they need to be justified. All of us, I think, believe that we're supposed to judge these cultural goals, rather than blindly accepting the memes spread by the television set or our parents. After all, almost anyone will regard at least one of these as an untrustworthy source.

The idea that we should judge the basic emotions is less common, but still prevalent—most of us, for example, would regard the “Eat sugar and fat” emotion as being inconvenient, and the “Hate people who are different from you” emotion as being actively evil. Personally, I don't see any philosophical difference between getting an unjustified goal from evolution and getting an unjustified goal from public television. Neurons are neurons and actions are actions; what difference does it make whether a pattern is caused by genes or radio waves?

Again, I have neither proved, nor attempted to prove, that cultural goals and emotions are meaningless. I am simply attempting to demonstrate that these goals require justification before we can accept them as true.

What is the meaning of life?

To clear things up, it's not the reasoning that's important; it's what the reasoning represents.

The sense of “What is the meaning of life?” we’re looking to answer is not “What is the ultimate purpose of the Universe, if any?”, but rather “Why should I get up in the morning?” or “What is the intelligent choice to make?”

The choices an intelligence makes—whether AI or human—don’t have to be arbitrary; they can be entirely determined by arguments that are entirely grounded in facts, in memories of the world, in history, in scientific experiments—ultimately, in the immediate experiences available to each of us.

For almost any ultimate goal—joy, truth, God, intelligence, freedom, law—it would be possible to do it better (or faster or more thoroughly or to a larger population) given superintelligence.

The more intelligent you are, the better your chance of discovering the true meaning of life, the more power you have to achieve it, and the greater your probability of acting on it.

Isn’t “happiness” the meaning of life?

No.

What *is* happiness? What’s it made of? Where does it come from?

To over-simplify things down to the basic evolutionary origin, happiness is what we feel when we achieve a goal. It’s the indicator of success. (The actual emotion of happiness is far more complex in rats, never mind humans, but let’s start with the simplest possible case.) By seeking “happiness” as a pure thing, independent of any goals, we are in essence short-circuiting the system. I mean, let’s say there’s an AI with a little number that indicates how “happy” it is at any given time. Increasing this number to infinity, or the largest floating-point number that can be stored in available RAM—is that meaningful?

Or to put it another way, how do you know you’re happy? Because you think you’re happy, right? So thinking you’re happy is the indicator of happiness? Maybe you should actually try to spend your life thinking you’re happy, instead of being happy.

Once you place the indicator of success on the same logical level as the goal, you’ve opened the gates of chaos. That’s the basic paradox of “wireheading”, the science-fictional term for sticking a wire into the brain’s pleasure center and spending your days in artificial bliss. Once you say that you should take the indicator of success and treat that as success, why not go another step and trick yourself into just thinking that you’re happy? Or thinking that you think you’re happy? The fact that evolution has reified the success-indicator into a *cognitively* independent module doesn’t make it *logically* independent.

There’s also the problem that seeking “true happiness” is chasing a chimera. The emotions of happiness, and the conditions for being happy, are all evolutionary adaptations—the

neurologically reified shapes of strategies that promoted reproductive fitness in the environment. Or in plain English, when we're happy about something, it's because being happy helped you survive or have kids in hunter-gatherer tribes.

Punchline: There is no point at which the optimal evolutionary strategy is to be happy with what you have. *Any* pleasure will pall. We're programmed to seek after true happiness, programmed to believe in it and anticipate it, but *no such emotion actually exists within the brain*. There's no evolutionary reason why it should.

Isn't pleasure the meaning of life?

The possibility does exist that the conscious experience of pleasure is in fact the True Ultimate External Meaning of Life. I mean, conscious experiences are weird, and they seem to be really real, as real as quarks (and a lot more complex), so maybe the conscious experiences of goals are actual goals, purpose made flesh. If I had to point to the thing *most* likely to be meaningful, in all the world, I would pick the conscious experience of pleasure.

How can I become a better person?

Grow. Build. Discover. Create. Help.

The only way you can make your life more significant is to try and be a better person, make your immediate vicinity a better place, contribute more to society—the path advised by the people who tell you “No one person can change the world, but all of us together can make a difference.”

How can I become a nicer person?

The widely-known formula for general niceness is universal across all social strata:

- Be nice to other people.
- Don't play zero-sum or negative-sum games (avoid benefits that come at an equal or higher cost to someone else).
- Don't stomp on anyone who doesn't deserve it.
- If you see an opportunity to do something good, take it.

Anything more complex than that gets us into the subject of mental disciplines, fine-grained self-awareness, self-alteration rather than self-control, and so on, all subjects on which I could easily write a book, which I don't have the time to write, so don't get me started.

I do feel that Claudia Mills's “Charity: How Much Is Enough?” “neatly raises the fundamental dilemma of trying to be a moral person: There's so much distance between “where we start” and “perfection” that trying to be perfect will use up all our available willpower and sour us permanently on altruism without accomplishing much of anything. For obvious reasons,

I tend to view lack of willpower as a fact about the mind rather than as a moral defect; something to work around, not something to cure. One of the keys is to realize that self-improvement is a gradual thing, opportunistic rather than abrupt; to be happy about a small improvement, rather than being guilty that it wasn't a larger one. If you feel guilty about small improvements, you're not likely to make further improvements; if you feel happy at a small improvement, you can also feel happy about having improved the prospect of further improvements. Trying for perfection can backfire, if you're not careful; trying for continuous improvement is better.

If you feel that giving 5% of your income to charity isn't enough, and that the moral ideal is 10%, try giving 6%. Make the best choices you can make with the willpower you have. The choice isn't between giving 5% and 10%; you don't have that much willpower in the bank. The choice is between giving 5% and 6%. The better choice is 6%. Now you've made a better choice; feel happy. Feeling guilty about *not* having willpower doesn't contribute to the development of willpower. Rather, try for the proper exercise of available willpower, and the slow reshaping of the self that results.

Remember, it also takes willpower to choose a particular purpose or to accept a particular result. Let's take the 5%/10% problem again. One reason to bump up to 6% is that it increases the eventual chance of giving 10%. But maybe even contemplating this path, and the sacrifices that lie at the end of it, takes too much willpower—thus decreasing your chance of giving 6%, or increasing the amount of willpower needed to do so. Fine. Just give 6%. No further increments planned. It's still better than giving 5%.

For obvious reasons, pragmatic as well as cognitive, you should concentrate on actions that lead to a better world without sacrifice on your part. There are probably more of those than you'd think. If you've got the intelligence, use intelligence instead of willpower. In the standard human morality, it's "better" to be a self-sacrificing saint than a genius. In practice, the genius usually has a much larger impact. Dr. Jonas Salk, inventor of the polio vaccine, sacrificed a lot less than Mother Theresa and did a heck of a lot more to heal the sick. And I can't think of any good reason why either of them should feel guilty.

Is playing a direct part more significant than just trying to lead an honest and moral life?

Yes.

If you choose to play a direct part, the Universe will be a better place. Obviously it's possible to carry that too far—the "too many chiefs, not enough Indians" syndrome—but we have a *long* way to go before we reach that point.

I'm not suggesting that you feel guilty if you don't immediately drop everything and start working on it. First, guilt binds people to past mistakes more often than it motivates change.

Second, very few people just wake up one morning ready to dedicate their lives to a cause. There's nothing wrong with trying to be a better person and reading science fiction and working *your way up* to being a better person. And if there's just no way you can help other than to keep plugging away at your current job, then keep plugging, but without feeling guilty or morally confused.

In the end, it all comes down to choosing the best alternative available. If you *can't bring yourself to make that choice*, it's nothing to be ashamed of—because being ashamed won't help. The mind in which you find yourself has its own rules for making choices, independent of your goals, and sometimes it takes work to change that. We only start out with so much willpower in the bank. The correct choice is to alter yourself, at whatever speed you can achieve, with the choices you can *bring yourself to make* at that time, until you can choose the alternative that you know is right.

Nobody wakes up one morning as a perfect saint. Sometimes it can take several weeks.

Writing Assignment

Write an essay of 800–1,000 words addressing one of the following two topics:

- “My View on Success”
- “My Mission” or “What Life Means to Me”