

Lesson Nine
The Good Life

Memorizing these ideas is easy. Living them takes a lifetime of practice. Fortunately, the heroes of all time have walked before us. They show us the path.

CREATING "THE GOOD LIFE"

This book started with an invitation to see your own seeing by stepping out of your culture, biases, and assumptions to see that much of what you take for granted as reality is very different in other cultures. In doing this, we discovered a tremendous wealth of possibility in the human condition – physical capacities we did not know we had, unique and insightful ways of seeing and talking about the world, and different ways of surviving and thriving in many different environments. We also encountered different ways of thinking about love, identity, gender, race, morality, and religion. All of this can seem remarkably liberating, giving us a broader vision of what is possible. As anthropologist and psychologist Ernest Becker once wrote:

"The most astonishing thing of all, about man's fictions, is not that they have from prehistoric times hung like a flimsy canopy over his social world, but that he should have come to discover them at all. It is one of the most remarkable achievements of thought, of self-scrutiny, that the most anxiety-prone animal of all could come to see through himself and

discover the fictional nature of his action world. Future historians will probably record it as one of the great, liberating breakthroughs of all time, and it happened in ours."

But the discovery of our "fictions" is not because of anthropology. Rather, anthropology is itself a product of larger social and intellectual trends that moved our society away from the shackles of tradition toward the more intentional creation of modern society. In this sense, the ideas, ideals, values, beliefs, and institutions of modern society are constantly under scrutiny for ways in which they might be changed or improved to maximize human flourishing.

Most people would not question the value of these modern projects, and few would want to return to the more rigid traditional hierarchies and moral horizons of older social orders. However, the modern revisions come with a cost. The old orders provided exactly that: *order*. In order, there is meaning. In a clearly defined social role, there is purpose. In stable institutions, there is a promise for the future. With meaning, purpose, and the future now in question, we cannot help but constantly ask those three big questions: Who am I? What am I going to do? Am I going to make it?

In his landmark book, "Man's Search for Meaning," Victor Frankl claims that it is our Will to Meaning that is the dominant human drive, stronger than the Will to Pleasure or any other drive. But he worries that we now live in an "existential vacuum" due to two losses – first, the loss of instincts guiding all of our behavior, forcing us to make choices, and second, the loss of tradition. "No instinct tells him what he has to do, and no tradition tells him what he ought to do; sometimes he does not even know what he wishes to do."

Compounding the crisis, the last chapter makes it evident that we now live in a time in which it is entirely possible to imagine cataclysmic change so dramatic that it would effectively constitute "the end of the world as we know it." Nuclear war, climate catastrophes, global economic collapse, and the possibility of

totalitarian super-states are ever-present threats, with constant reminders bombarding us throughout the 24-hour news cycle. And so we also must constantly ask those other three big questions: Who are we? What are we going to do? Are we going to make it?

These two sets of questions are interconnected. In order to find a personal sense of purpose in the world, one must have some vision of where the world is going and what would constitute a good and virtuous life. As Anthony Giddens has suggested, personal meaninglessness can become a persistent threat within the contexts of modernity that provide no clear framework for meaning.

Modernity leaves us with two unavoidable projects. First, as Giddens puts it, "the self, like the broader institutional contexts in which it exists, has to be reflexively made. Yet this task has to be accomplished amid a puzzling diversity of options and possibilities." This "consists in the sustaining of coherent, yet continuously revised, biographical narratives." Second, we have to choose or create values, virtues, and meanings in a world that does not offer a shared, definitive, unquestioned moral order that could define these things for us. In other words, we are freer than ever to be, do, and think whatever ... but when we all make different choices about who we will be, what we will do, and how we will think, we lose a shared system of meanings and values upon which we can find meaning, construct viable identities, and feel a sense of purpose and recognition.

Until recently, anthropology has been mostly silent on questions of "the good life." While documenting a wide range of different cultures, each of which may define "the good life" in different ways, anthropologists have been hesitant to offer any prescriptions for how one should live. But recent studies are changing that. In this lesson, we will see what anthropology has to tell us that might help us on our own projects of building meaning, setting the stage for your next challenge – to do what you have spent your whole life doing, revising your story and defining your core values.

ARE THERE UNIVERSAL VALUES?

In the late 1990s, psychologists Martin Seligman and Chris Peterson set out to explore the brighter side of human nature. They had grown concerned that psychology was focused only on problems and pathology. They turned instead to the ideas of happiness and human flourishing, and founded the field of positive psychology. One of their first projects was to construct a list of widely shared human values, characteristics, and virtues that would be more or less universally valid and recognized among all cultures. Given the tremendous diversity of cultures in the world, they knew they could not attain true universality, so they settled instead on finding "ubiquitous virtues and values ... so widely recognized that an anthropological veto ("The tribe I study does not have that one!") would be more interesting than damning."

They proceeded by brainstorming characteristics they thought might be universal, and then compared them against key texts from Asian and Western religions, world philosophies, and wisdom traditions. An obvious shortcoming of their study is that they did not include any representation from the Americas or Africa other than Islam. Nonetheless, their lists of virtues and positive character traits are an interesting start toward finding some universally agreed upon human virtues and values. The list of 24 character strengths is broken up into six core virtues:

- Wisdom (curiosity, love of learning, judgment, ingenuity, emotional intelligence, perspective)
- Courage (valor, perseverance, integrity)
- Humanity (kindness, loving)
- Justice (citizenship, fairness, leadership)
- Temperance (self-control, prudence, humility)
- Transcendence (appreciation of beauty, gratitude, hope, spirituality, forgiveness, humor, zest)

These six virtues mirror the six foundations of morality established by Jonathan Haidt, and we can see how each virtue might provide evolutionary advantages that ensured our survival. We need wisdom and courage to survive. We need humanity, justice, and temperance to care for one another and work through inevitable social problems. A sense of transcendence (even of the secular sort) can provide us with a sense of meaning, purpose, and joy that motivates us through life.

The virtues are abstract enough to allow for significant cultural difference while still capturing some sense of what all humans value. Jonathan Haidt points out that we cannot even imagine a culture that would value their opposites. "Can we even imagine a culture in which parents hope that their children will grow up to be foolish, cowardly, and cruel?"

Probably not. But there are cultures where someone who is foolish, cowardly, and cruel will be greeted with kindness rather than scorn. Jon Christopher tells a story from his fieldwork in Bali, where a local drunk was constantly causing problems and failing to provide for his family. Instead of people judging him harshly, he was greeted with "pity, compassion and gentleness." The only way to understand this response is to understand the broader cultural frameworks of the Balinese. They see reality as broken up into two realms; the *sekala* or ordinary realm of everyday life, and the *niskala*, a deeper level of reality where the larger dramas of souls, karma, and reincarnation ultimately shape and determine what happens in the ordinary realm. This man deserved pity and compassion because his behavior in *sekala* was a reflection of the turmoil his soul was facing in *niskala*.

In fact, most cultures, including Western culture up until the Renaissance and Enlightenment, see the world as broken up into two tiers. One is an all-encompassing cosmological framework that provides meaning and value to the other tier of ordinary day-to-day life. According to philosopher-historian Charles Taylor, the West's cultural drive to flatten traditional hierarchies and inequalities through the Protestant Reformation, Enlightenment, democracy, and

the scientific revolution called these ultimate cosmological frameworks of the top tier into question, and ultimately rendered them arbitrary at best, and at worst, a threat to human freedom and flourishing.

As a result, hierarchies were flattened and the two-tiered world collapsed. We were left with a worldview that places the individual self at the center as the sole arbiter of meaning and value. Our moral system came to champion the individual's right to choose their own meanings and to pursue happiness however we choose to define it, just as long as we do not impinge on the ability of others to pursue happiness, however they might define it.

Seligman's list of virtues is in many ways an attempt to use reason and science to discover meanings and values that, by virtue of being universal, might not feel so arbitrary. "I also hunger for meaning in my life that will transcend the arbitrary purposes I have chosen for my life," Seligman wrote in 2002 as he was working on the inventory of virtues.

Jon Christopher argues that while Seligman's list is an admirable effort and one worthy of continued discussion and exploration, it is ultimately limited by the Western cultural framework. Remember that Seligman and his colleagues started with a list of virtues, and then tried to find them in other traditions. This had the effect of flattening complex ideas like "wisdom" and "justice" so much that the real wisdom of other traditions was lost in translation.

THE VALUE AND VIRTUE OF OTHER VALUES AND VIRTUES

Christopher points to the example of Chinese philosophy that places five core values at the center of their moral world:

- Role fulfilment.
- Ties of sympathy and concern based on metaphysical commonalities.
- Harmony.

- Culmination of the learning process.
- Co-creativity with heaven and earth.

The contrast with Seligman's list is profound. In fact, "role fulfilment," which is a common value throughout much of the world, is not highlighted in any of Seligman's character strengths. But at an even deeper level, values that are based on "metaphysical commonalities" and "co-creativity of heaven and earth" signal a very different cosmological framework and, in fact, a different theory of being itself. Specifically, the Chinese virtues depend on a two-tiered model that places value on serving and maintaining the upper tier that provides meaning and significance, while Seligman's list depends on a cultural framework centered on individualism and the self.

Other research indicates that cultures live in a different emotional landscape. For example, in Japan the emotion of *amae* is often translated as a desire for indulgence or dependence. It is the feeling a twelve year-old child might have in asking a parent to "baby" them by tying their shoes. According to Takeo Doi, who first introduced the concept of *amae* to the Western world, the full experience of the emotion depends upon a larger cultural context that values interdependence and harmony, so there can be no adequate translation into the Western context.

Many traditions suggest that the self is in itself the problem. Hinduism suggests that enlightenment can only occur when one recognizes that the self (Atman) is one and the same as the Absolute all or Godhead (Brahman). Buddhism goes a step further by suggesting the concept of anatman or "non-self," which denies the existence of any unchanging permanent self, soul, or essence. Taoism suggests that one must put one's self in accord with the "tao" or way of all things. This "way" is beyond words and cannot be spoken about. It can only be known through living in accord with the "way" of life, nature, and the universe. In all of these traditions, the "self" as it is normally celebrated in the West is a hindrance to the good life.

Western psychology tends to judge "the good life" with measures of subjective well-being (often referred to in the literature as SWB).

Research participants are asked to rate items such as "In most ways my life is close to my ideal" or "I am satisfied with my life." But in many other cultures, what is "ideal" cannot and should not be determined by the individual, and subjective well-being is not necessarily "good." For example, in many non-Western cultures, negative emotions are valued as a sign of virtue when they alert the person to how they are not living in alignment with their role or social expectations. Measurements of subjective well-being often fail in cross-cultural contexts, because subjects refuse to consult their own subjective feelings to assess whether or not something is good. They tend to evaluate the good based on larger cosmological and social frameworks rather than their own personal experience.

But the modern West is not the first worldview to do away with the "second tier" and leave it to individuals to try to construct values and meaning. When Siddhartha Gautama Buddha laid out the original principles of Buddhism he did so in part as a critique of what he saw as a corrupt Hinduism in which authority was abused, ritual had become empty and exploitative, explanations were outdated, traditions were irrelevant to the times, and people had become superstitious and obsessed with miracles. Cutting through the superstition and corruption, the Buddha offered a philosophy that required no supernatural beliefs, rituals, or theology. Instead, he offered a set of practices and a practical philosophy (which together make up the eightfold path) that can lead to one living virtuously.

Of utmost importance to virtue in the original Buddhism was the idea that it is not enough simply to know what is virtuous or to "hold" good values. It is easy to know the path. It is much more difficult to walk the path. Therefor Buddha offered practices of mindfulness and meditation to quiet selfish desire, center the mind, and help people live up to their values.

The Buddha saw the source of human suffering in misplaced values. People want wealth, status, praise, and pleasure. But all of these are impermanent and out of one's control. In desiring them, we set ourselves up for disappointment, sadness and suffering. As

Buddha teaches in the teaching of the eight worldly winds, “gain and loss, status and disgrace, blame and praise, pleasure and pain: these conditions amount human beings are ephemeral, impermanent, subject to change. Knowing this, the wise person, mindful, ponders these changing conditions. Desirable things don’t charm the mind, and undesirable ones bring no resistance.”

The goal of Buddhist practice is to only desire the narrow path of mindful growth and development and to shrink selfish egotistical desires. As such, the practitioner comes to desire what is best for the world, not what is best for the self, and then feels a sense of enlightened joy and purpose.

The ancient Western world also offers an example of a tradition that did away with the “second tier” in Stoicism, which flourished in Greece and Rome from the 3rd century BC to the 3rd century AD. While the Stoics did believe in God, they saw God not as a personified entity but as the natural universe itself imminent in all things. In order to understand God, they had to understand nature, making the study of nature and natural law essential to living a good and virtuous life.

Despite notable differences with Buddhism, the Stoics developed a similar method for arriving at good values and virtues. In short, we should not value those things that are out of our control. As Stoic philosopher Epictetus summed it up, “Some things are up to us, and some things are not up to us. Our opinions are up to us, and our impulses, desires, aversions – in short, whatever is our own doing. Our bodies are not up to us, nor are our possessions, our reputations, or our public offices, or that is, whatever is not our own doing.”

Such words and the foundational philosophy of stoicism were essential to Victor Frankl as he endured the horrors of concentration camps in WWII. In the midst of unimaginable suffering, starvation, humiliation, and death he found a place to practice his “Will to Meaning” by recognizing the Stoic truth of detaching from what is out of his control, and instead working to control what he could – his thoughts. He and his fellow prisoners “experienced the beauty of art

and nature as never before,” he writes. “If someone had seen our faces on the journey from Auschwitz to a Bavarian camp as we beheld the mountains of Salzburg with their summits glowing in the sunset, through the little barred windows of the prison carriage, he would never have believed that those were the faces of men who had given up all hope of life and liberty.”

Stoicism has had a big impact on modern psychology, forming the philosophical foundations of Frankl’s Logotherapy and Cognitive Behavioral Therapy, the most common form of therapy now used in clinical psychology.

At the center of both Buddhist and Stoic practice is recognizing that emotions are simply signals that can be observed and acted upon, but are not "good" or "bad" in themselves. Such emotions can be observed, which disempowers them, allowing an inner calm to develop. Freed from emotional reasoning, a person is more capable of living virtuously even in the face of complexity, conflict, and turmoil.

In colloquial terms, Mark Manson calls it (in the title of his best-selling book) "The Subtle Art of Not Giving a F*ck." Influenced by Buddhist and Stoic philosophy, Manson notes that the idea is not that one should be indifferent, but that we have to be careful about what we choose to "give a f*ck about" – or in other words, we have to choose our values – "what you're choosing to find important in life and what you're choosing to find unimportant." Manson does not shy away from the fact most people in the West will deny all-encompassing cosmological frameworks as questionable and arbitrary, which means we cannot help but choose our values. However, we can use the basic tenets from different wisdom traditions such as Stoicism and Buddhism to help us evaluate our values.

Manson arrives at three principles for evaluating values. They should be:

1. Based in reality.
2. Socially constructive.
3. Within our immediate control.

Many of the most common values held by people, such as pleasure, success, popularity, and wealth, are not good values, because they are either socially destructive or not in our immediate control. Studies show that people who pursue pleasure end up more anxious and prone to depression. Short-term pleasure just for the sake of pleasure can also lead to dangerous addictions or impulsive behaviors that can lead to long-term trouble.

Good values include character traits that are socially constructive and within our control. These would include honesty, self-respect, charity, and humility as well as many of the items on Seligman's original list, such as curiosity and creativity. But importantly, Manson suggests that these values should not be judged on whether or not they "feel good." One should be honest even when it hurts, humble even if it means forgoing praise and pleasure.

Ironically, it may be our individualistic focus on positive emotions and the pursuit of happiness that make it so difficult to achieve positivity and happiness. As Manson observes, "Our society today ... has bred a whole generation of people who believe that having these negative experiences – anxiety, fear, guilt, etc. – is totally not okay." As he poignantly observes, "the desire for more positive experience is itself a negative experience. And paradoxically, the acceptance of one's negative experience is itself a positive experience."

This reflects a more profound vision of life in which avoiding problems and pain is not necessarily good. Instead, problems and pain become tools and opportunities for change. But studies show

that in order to get the most out of our problems and pain, we have to find ways to make sense of them. We have to make meaning.

ANTHROPOLOGY OF THE GOOD LIFE

In a recent study sure to become a landmark in anthropology, Edward Fischer sets out to study ideas of “the good life” in the supermarkets of Hannover, Germany and the coffee farms of Huehuetenango, Guatemala. The two could hardly be further apart, geographically, culturally, and economically. The Guatemalans live with just 1/8 of the income of the Germans, but even worse, must suffer the violence of drug trafficking, creating one of the highest murder rates in the world.

Though the cultural context varies tremendously, Fischer still finds common concerns and themes where visions of the good life overlap. He suggests that these may form the foundation for a “positive anthropology” similar to positive psychology. But while positive psychologists like Seligman and Peterson list internal individualistic character traits or virtues that we should cultivate, Fischer instead finds five elements that a culture or society should aspire toward to ensure that everyone has adequate opportunity to pursue virtue however they might define it. Every society should provide:

1. Aspiration (hope)
2. Opportunity: power to act on that aspiration
3. Dignity
4. Fairness
5. Commitment to Larger Purposes

The list provides an interesting alternative to the current mode of judging cultures and countries based primarily on their Gross Domestic Product (GDP). As anthropologist Arjun Appadurai notes, the “avalanche of numbers – about population, poverty, profit,

and predation” provides a limited view of the world that denies local perspectives. Instead, he advocates more nuanced ideas of the “good life” based on local ideals.

Fischer hopes that a turn in this direction could allow anthropologists to investigate and make suggestions about which cultural norms, social structures, and institutional arrangements foster wellbeing in different contexts. It is an inspiring idea. What if, instead of just trying to maximize wealth, we tried to maximize hope, opportunity, dignity, fairness, and purpose?

“It takes more than income to produce wellbeing,” Fischer concludes, “and policy makers would do well to consider the positive findings of anthropology and on-the-ground visions of the good life in working toward the ends for which we all labor.”



LEARN MORE

- ❖ The Good Life: Aspiration, Dignity, and the Anthropology of Wellbeing, by Edward Fischer
- ❖ Flourish: A Visionary New Understanding of Happiness and Well-Being, by Martin Seligman
- ❖ “Positive Psychology, Ethnocentrism, and the Disguised Ideology of Individualism” by John Chambers Christopher and Sarah Hickinbottom.
- ❖ The Subtle Art of Not Giving a F*ck by Mark Manson
- ❖ The Dhammapada. Translated by Eknath Easwaran
- ❖ Man’s Search for Meaning by Victor Frankl
- ❖ How to be a Stoic by Massimo Pigliucci