

Paradise Lost and Restored: Who is Man? (Part 2)

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I. Introduction

Because of modern philosophy most people today probably think that life has no meaning. There is no ultimate purpose to all this. But this wasn't always the case. Ancient philosophers like Aristotle actually gave man a noble purpose. But was the answer of the ancient philosophers enough to satisfy man's search for his destiny? If theirs is not the answer, then what is....what is the meaning of life?

II. What is the Purpose of Life?...What is the Ultimate Meaning of Life?

Man's purpose according to man, there are essentially two ways to look at man: you can define him with or without God (and by God, I mean the God of the Bible). And it's not that without God, man came up with no purpose for himself. For example, ancient man,¹ individuals like Socrates (469-399 B.C.) and Plato (428-347 B.C.) believed that there was a purpose to life and that purpose was quite noble. Plato, who was taught by Socrates, believed that there was an infinite, impersonal, absolute good that illuminated everything else, especially the way to happiness. By its light you were able to discover justice which was the only way to happiness. And to Plato justice meant everything; it was the key virtue. His idea of justice included the other three important virtues: wisdom, courage, and moderation. His argument in *The Republic* is that sin is never fun, that injustice is never profitable, that being good is the way to happiness. Thus, if you truly understood what justice and injustice were, then you'd see that moral virtue is the only way to happiness.

Aristotle (384-322 B.C.) took his teacher's (Plato) ideas and added a human dimension. Plato, like Socrates, believed that man was his soul/mind; the body was insignificant. Aristotle, however, believed that there was a relationship between the body and the soul/mind. So unlike Plato who thought that virtues like justice originated in another realm inaccessible to man, Aristotle thought that these ideal virtues originated with man. So Aristotle defined things like justice from real life and he specifically refuted the idea that life had no meaning (very few in his day—the Sophists for example—believed in a meaningless existence and subjective truths). Aristotle too believed that man's ultimate purpose was to be happy. But he didn't mean what we mean by *happy*. His definition of happiness meant a lasting, objectively real state, that was centered more in the soul than in the body, and which was only achievable by being good. Additionally, to Aristotle being happy, being good, and being fully human were the same thing. Aristotle's final definition of happiness was, "An activity of the soul in accordance with virtue in a complete life with enough material goods." But this caused him problems since fate/chance played a role in the *material goods* side of things. Thus, Aristotle concludes that you can never really know if someone's happy until they die, i.e., you'll have to wait and see the end of a person's life before you know.

¹ The information about Socrates, Plato, Aristotle, and the modern philosophers in this outline comes from Dr. Peter Kreeft's lecture series *What Would Socrates Do? The History of Moral Thought and Ethics*, Barnes & Noble Audio Book, 2004.

Thomas Aquinas (1225-1274), a Dominican friar, who relied heavily on the philosophers who came before him, especially Aristotle and Boethius, took a close look at the basic answers to the question, "What is the meaning of life?" He concludes that God is the only thing that can provide man perfect happiness. But before he does, he tells us what's wrong with the other answers. Wealth, power, and health won't do because each of these is a means to something else; they are not an end. Honor won't work because it points beyond itself, thus, it too is not an end. Fame likewise fails because the glory you get from it resides in the minds of others not your own. Pleasure won't do either because it is a result of happiness, i.e., the reason you're delighted is because you possess something good, but what is that ultimate end you possess which brings you pleasure? Perfection of the soul through rational wisdom and virtue (which would be akin to Plato's and Aristotle's answer) doesn't work either because the soul cannot be its own end. That is, it is through the soul that happiness is attained, thus, to say that the soul is the end is to say that the arrow is also the target.

Machiavelli (1469-1527), unlike the ancient philosophers, modern philosophers came up with the idea that life is meaningless (a product of modern man developed in the past 500 years). Today, the typical ethical philosopher would say that there is no ultimate goal in life and that ethics is relative. Depending on the context or culture, man can create a new morality to accommodate it. In fact, what people value most today is survival, self-preservation. This comes from philosophers like Machiavelli. He was a materialist; he believed that reality consists only of material facts not ideals or virtues. He also believed that man is by nature wicked, competitive, and immoral and that human history can be treated as a science experiment which shows that there are only two things that matter: power and fortune/chance. You have to maximize power in order to minimize fortune/chance. And if you observe history, those who maximized power at any and all costs succeed, and those who don't are martyred. One of his famous sayings is, "Unarmed prophets have failed, armed prophets have succeeded." Thus, in his landmark book *The Prince* he sets out to teach you how to be immoral. He turns ancient wisdom upside down. To him the idealistic virtues have to be judged by reality not the other way around. And to discover whether or not ideals have worked all you have to do is be a historian not a philosopher, moralist, or a saint. Thus, science is the standard for ethics; empirical facts are the standards for moral ideals. He treats ethical ideals as theory and history as data. Machiavelli is usually seen as bold and proactive, but he's actually a wimp. How so? At one point he advises that princes should not honor their word. Why? Because men are wicked creatures who won't honor their word. In other words, Machiavelli is letting others dictate his actions. Something else, to Machiavelli image was everything. But if your image is everything, then you will modify it based on what you want others to see and once again, others are setting his standard. Finally, in the last chapter of *The Prince* Machiavelli concludes that since fortune/chance is changeable, you have to adapt to the times. That is, in order for power to conquer fortune/chance, power has to conform to it; power has to be its "yes-man."

As we can see, from ancient philosophy to modern philosophy, man's answer to the question, "What is the meaning of life?" is varied. We have a noble answer like Plato's and Aristotle's which is that man's ultimate purpose is to attain true and lasting happiness but it can only be attained through a life of wisdom and virtue. We also have Machiavelli's answer which is self-preservation at all costs. Most, if not all, would disagree with Machiavelli's answer—though every time we cheat, lie, or steal we're agreeing with Machiavelli's answer. Now some might find Aristotle's answer appealing. But remember that Aristotle himself didn't come to a complete answer. He wouldn't be able to say if a person attained true happiness until after they died. Thus, as noble as Aristotle's answer is, there's something missing that leaves man a bit incomplete. What's missing?

Man's purpose according to God, what Plato and Aristotle were missing is the inextricable link between God and man's soul which was fashioned after God's image. Plato was right that happiness could only be achieved through a virtuous life and he was right that there was an infinite absolute good which allowed us to define justice. What he failed to see is that this absolute good was a personal God who would not just shine a light on justice but personally define it for us. Additionally, Plato's philosophy led him to think that knowledge was enough: if we only truly understood that justice was better than injustice, then we'd all be saints. But when we sin, it's not simply an intellectual mistake. There's something else at work that Plato couldn't see: man's sinful nature which overrides his intellect. Aristotle was right that there is a connection between body and soul; the soul can be injured through physical suffering (unlike Socrates who thought that you could never truly harm a man because you could never touch his soul). But this led Aristotle to think that too much suffering or the lack of too many material goods could take a person's happiness away. He failed to see that ultimate happiness and completeness came from the God who made us. Therefore, if you suffered in service to Him, then this would lead to your glory as Jesus' death and resurrection clearly showed. And it's not that Aristotle didn't believe in a god; he did. But his god (though he was the first cause of the universe) like Plato's idea of absolute good, was impersonal. Further, Aristotle's god was too preoccupied with his own perfection to give imperfect man a second thought much less love him.

So what is the meaning of life, what's man's ultimate purpose? When God made man, He told him that his purpose was to populate the earth and rule over it, Genesis 1:28. This boils down to two things: work and relationships (family, friends, and strangers). It inevitably meant that man would one day build computer chips and land on the moon. But there was a caveat to all this: we could not live life without God. He is, was, and forever will be our source of life, Deuteronomy 30:15-20. And this is not a threat but a reality which Adam and Eve learned quickly after they tried to live life without Him and wound up losing paradise. Thus, in order for us to fulfill our ultimate purpose in life we have to live in relationship with God.

Now, within the overall purpose of work and relationships, God gives each one of us a specific purpose. Each one of us was made with certain talents and abilities that are to be used for the life God planned for us before we were ever born, Psalm 139:13-16. We see this in the lives of individuals like Moses. When God comes calling, Moses is 80yrs old and in his mind he is not the person who can lead Israel out of Egypt. But God made Moses a deliverer from birth, which is why he kills the Egyptian and stands up for Reuel's daughters. It's in his blood; he cannot stand to see someone being oppressed, Exodus 2-3. Thus, it is with each one of us. Each of us was made for a specific purpose...what's yours?

What is your purpose...the story of a woman who thought she was worthless, this woman believed that she was not good enough, a lesson she learned from her father. She walked around with scales in her hand and the bad always outweighed the good. This was the meaning of her life: to forever prove that she was good enough. Then one day she cried out to God for help. And He showed her that the identity that she'd been living was a lie. She was not a little girl who constantly had to prove herself. Instead God showed her who she really was. He said to her, "You are the lover of souls." And He proceeded to free her of the weight she'd been carrying all these years and to show her how she would become the 'lover of souls.' This woman is now loving other souls by helping them overcome their struggles with their identities and the things that enslave them.

III. Conclusion

...in your book were written, every one of them, the days that were formed for me, when as yet there was none of them.