

Life: The Hows and Whys

[Asking about the Philosophy of Life](#)

Asking about the philosophy of life has always existed. Many people around the world have posed the question. Basically, once any conscious human being succeeds in releasing his “self” from the ocean of anxieties, joys and tensions of his fatalistic, natural life and consider life itself, he will immediately reach the question of the philosophy of life. Without a correct interpretation of life, man will fall into nihilism; this became quite intense ever since machines dominated life increasingly in the 18th century, making people shout about the emptiness they feel in their lives.

In order to understand nihilistic feelings, we must first consider the mental characteristics of a nihilistic person:

- 1- A nihilist does not regard life as a necessary issue. He hates life rather than enjoying it.
- 2- For nihilists, the facts, principles and relationships of life undergo dramatic change. Beauty and ugliness are meaningless, orderliness becomes a mere hallucination.
- 3- A nihilist's soul is influenced quite quickly and easily, sometimes even taking his consciousness away. As Jalal-addin Muhammad Molawi (Rumi) says:

میگزینند از خودی در بیخودی یا به مستی یا به شغل ای مهتدی

With the occupation or infatuation they acquire, they are fleeing from self-consciousness toward unconsciousness, but they do not know that they will be pulled back into their natural, physical self by the chains of their desires and whims, for their escape was not upon God's command.

- 4- Values are worthless in the eyes of a nihilist; greatness and degradation are no different to him.

The first two groups basically do not ask about the philosophy of life at all. The first group, who cannot abstract life from themselves, are unable to consider the phenomenon of life. The second group,

although developed people, regard life as a part of the whole universe, heading for the aim of creation. The second group are quite joyous people.

به جهان خرّم از آنم که جهان خرّم از اوست عاشقم بر همه عالم که همه عالم از اوست

I love this world because God has created it. The beauty of the world comes from God.

Sa'adi

Motives for Asking about the Aim of Life

The various motives for seeking the aim of life can be thus categorized into these four groups:

1- Negative aspects of life: Human life tends to dynamically develop, and if its movement and progress becomes stagnant, the questions arises – what is the philosophy of life? The negative aspect of asking about the philosophy of life is quite a despaired, hopeless one. However, not all people are influenced by negative motives; some people, when facing those stagnant, miserable beings, believe that if such people cannot realize the true taste of life, others can do so very well. Some people have a nihilistic philosophy for themselves, while others endeavor to overcome the factors that inhibit the dynamic progress of life.

2- Positive aspects of life: Those who live a purely natural life and are satisfied with it will sooner or later realize that they have lost their true self, and become captive to something artificial and unreal. They cannot present themselves with the true form of life in order to search for its philosophy. Even if they start inquiring about the aim of life, their questions will not be real ones.

3- Secondary, consequential aspects of life: Sometimes man sets for himself some ideals and interprets life on their basis. When he fails to achieve his ideals, life will seem worthless to him, and he begins to question the philosophy of life. For instance, some people who go after science, at first think science is the absolute aim of life; when they fail, they hopelessly turn nihilistic. Some others turn to despair when they cannot achieve wealth and luxury. Such people cannot find the correct answers, for they do not ask the correct questions.

4- Neutral aspects: feeling the necessity of a general viewpoint of life: If man is to ask questions about something, the subject matter must be outside his human nature; he should look at it from a superior point of view.

We must keep in mind that asking about the aim of life never includes asking about the means and levels of life, for each part of life has its own philosophy; thus, any thinker exploring the philosophy of life should not consider all components of life. The human ego should rise higher than natural life to be able to question it.

This is when the human ego does not search for the philosophy of life in purely natural life anymore. Unless one reaches the highest levels of the human self, distinguishing the aim of life from its shadow will not be possible. One cannot deserve to ask about the philosophy of life without stepping beyond his normal life, which is riddled with material things and feelings.

The Necessity of Recognizing the Ultimate Aim of Life

We can present several reasons why it is necessary to recognize the ultimate aim of life:

1- Many schools of thought throughout history have attempted to seek and present the aim of life. They regard goals merely higher than the petty goals of life as the ultimate end of life. If the relative goals in natural life really could provide the ultimate goal of life, there would be no more need for research on the philosophy of life.

2- As man's knowledge and dominance over his life increases, it has been proven that man's true life is meaningless without choosing higher aims for life. Without an intelligible aim, human life will lose all its value and significance.

3- If the universe and the phenomenon called life have no aim, life will have no meaning at all. As Nasser Khusro, the renowned Iranian poet says:

روزگار و چرخ و انجم سر به سر بازیستی گر نه این روز دراز دهر را فرداستی

All this world and stars are not all of what there is; someday, all this will come to an end.

Various Viewpoints on the Aim of Life

There are many different schools of thought on what the aim of life is. Let us study some of them further:

1- Personal goals: Some people consider what they desire, like money, power, science and maybe even serving people as their main aim in life.

2- Power: Some intellectuals, like Nietzsche, believe power to be the main aim of life.

3- Making the best choice: Some people, like Nero, Genghis Khan, Alexander and the pharaohs, are regarded as the best choice in natural life schools of thought.

4- Hedonism: Hedonists believe that saturating one's need for pleasure is the main aim of life. They have mistaken the interpretation of the mechanism of purely natural life for the main aim of life.

5- Comfort and luxury: Some schools of thought see the main aim of life in having luxury and comfort. "Can anyone accept the logic that you should lose your life today, so that a living human being in future

may have a comfortable life? Now that life today is not any less comfortable than the future, why should it be sacrificed? Furthermore, those human beings whom history remembers as distinguished and aware, did not even consider their own comfort as their aim of life; how can they consider the comfort of beings like themselves in future as their aim of life?

6– Man: Some schools of thought believe that man is the aim of life. Moral ethics, avoiding disturbing others, activating human emotions and respect toward others are the main principles of this belief. The problem with it, however, is that it provides no logical grounds for man to give up his greed, and learn how to sacrifice his own wishes for the sake of others¹.

7– Abstracting the soul from material interests: Some Indian religions consider the aim of life as purifying the soul from all desires, whims and wishes. Although this belief reinforces one aspect of the soul, it ignores the others, which are activated by establishing a correct relationship between man and the universe.

The climax of this aim of life is when the abstraction–seeker considers himself as God, claiming that there is nothing in him but God. After quite convincing study and thoughts that satisfy my conscience, I have come to the conclusion that these Indians, having reached an extremely delicate view of the universe, where they are able to see the universe as a unit for their own perception, make a very strange mistake – instead of realizing how great their soul is, they make God seem smaller! We can say, however, that if the human soul makes such mistakes in these delicate states, their soul truly has made no progress at all.

8– Nirvana: Presented by Buddha, this belief is said to be achieved by abstracting the soul away from material and physical pleasures. Nirvana ignores man's talents and potentials, making the human ego fall astray from its true path. In other words, it omits some facts about man.

9– Absolute freedom: Here, being released from any form of confinement or limitation is considered as the aim of life. Simpletons who follow such a belief have not understood the meaning of freedom correctly, for freedom is a means, not an end. Freedom is the power to choose, and if accompanied by proper thought and choice, can elevate man. Since freedom arises from the dynamism of life, it cannot even be the partial aim of life, let alone the main one.

10– The ultimate aim of life in divine religions: Life, as seen in divine religions, is an outstanding effect of God's will. Thus, the aim of life is to reach God. The Holy Qur'an has also expressed the aim of life in various ways.

The Aim of Life as Seen in the Holy Qur'an

The verses in the Holy Qur'an that concern the aim and philosophy of life can be categorized into ten groups:

- 1- Verses saying that creation is not aimless. (3:191)
- 2- Verses implying the objective righteousness of the universe. (6:73)
- 3- Verses that show that life has an aim. (23:115)
- 4- Verses that state that the universe has not been created as a means for playfulness or amusement. (21:16)
- 5- Verses that believe God is the final destination of everything. (41:53)
- 6- Verses that say man will return back to God. (3:109)
- 7- Verses that say those who do good will go to heaven and evildoers will end up in hell. (Counsel, 41:22) and (4:140)
- 8- Verses that regard the end of life as meeting God. (18:110)
- 9- Verses that call drowning in purely natural phenomena as “worldly life,” and denounce such a life. (47:36)
- 10- Verses that state worship as the aim of life, encouraging man to be pious and pure. (51:56)

Studying these verses leads us to some conclusions:

a) The creation of the universe has not been in vain. We can conclude this principle by studying the external world and the order and harmony ruling it, and also by studying the internal world.

Ever since mental development begins, a kind of original perception occurs inside us that contends with the playful manipulations, hallucinations and imaginations about the universe. This battle, like the battle between the conscience and evil, goes on until it wins and shows man the ultimate aim of the world, or it loses, sending man off to a nihilistic place to hang about.

b) The universe is orderly and righteous; nothing in the universe moves outside the realm of values and proper merits.

c) The universe is not a plaything; it is quite serious in its creation. By understanding the mathematical face of the universe, we can realize how serious it is.

d) The universe is moving toward its final destination. Such a destination cannot be lower than the stages it passes through, and it cannot be equal to them either. The final destination of all movements and developments is God.

e) The law of actions dominates the universe. All of man's movements, developments, words, thoughts and actions lead to reactions in this world and the other world.

f) The aim of life is much higher than purely natural life. The supreme aim of life cannot be of the same kind as the advantages of natural life, for the benefits and desires natural life provides belong to natural life, which cannot be regarded as the real aim of life itself. Thus, the ultimate aim of life must be beyond the conditions of purely natural life.

g) The principle of reward and punishment shows that each human being will receive the rewards or punishment he should get with the aims he has set himself in his life.

h) The final aim of human life is the success of man's supreme nature in life, which begins from God and returns to God through worship. Worship means accomplishing the nature of life in its various aspects. Once man steps beyond his purely natural life, his worshipping will begin. If man understands himself as a part of the general rhythm of the universe, who must make efforts to activate the disposition of his existence, he will turn to worship. Thus, all aspects of man's life can be regarded as worship, and as Imam Ali says, the whole world can become man's mosque.

Therefore, a university student, a farmer working on his farm, and a worker busy in his workplace are all worshipping God, provided that they consciously move along the path toward God. The ultimate aim of life as Islam sees it is:

The ultimate aim of life is making the ideals of this passing life with the waters of intellectual–spiritual principles and freely guiding the human character – which has arisen from earth – toward divine attraction, freeing it from natural factors and selfishness by means of awareness of pure soul, which is connected to the general rhythm of the universe.

A life with an aim is a conscious effort; every moment of the observable aspect of such a life is the preliminary to the next, evolutionary moment in a transparent world upon which divine light shines on man's pure conscience, and its deep aspect is drops pouring into the ocean of eternity, elevating the human character with its waves all the way to God.” That is a life with an aim – intelligible life, which means:

انّ صلوتي و نسكى و محياى و مماتى لله رب العالمين

“My prayers, worship and death are at the will of God, the Creator of the universe.” (6: 162)

The Characteristics of an Objective Life

If man sets himself an ultimate goal in life and aims for it, his life will find new qualities:

1– Realizing the value of life and not feeling emptiness: If man considers the aim of his life as worshipping God, he will believe that every moment of his life belongs to God. Such a human being will not only understand the value of life, but also never feel nihilistic, even if his wishes or dreams do not ever come

true.

2- Supreme responsibility; knowing where one stands in the universe: In an objective life, man both understands where he stands in the universe and also feels the necessity to move along the path of evolution.

3- Respecting one's own and others' nature: When there is an aim in life, man considers his nature as valuable, and also feels respect for the value of other human beings' nature, for he understands the unity among human beings in the talent to find God and move toward the highest goal of life.

4- Appreciating God's blessings: In objective life, man gains every benefit he gains – from science

5- Reasonably adjusting the relationship between the means and the end: In objective life, man does not make use of any illogical means for reaching his goal; he considers the logical relationship between the means and the goal, and chooses his goal by means of correct assessment of the means he uses.

6- Deep passion for work and activity: Since achieving the aim of life is impossible without moving along the path of divine attraction, serious work and effort is a crucial fundamental man with an objective life.

As Jalal-addin Muhammad Molawi says:

دوست دارد یار این آشفته‌گی کوشش بیهوده به از خفتگی

اندین ره میتراش و میخراش تا دم آخر دمی فارغ مباش

All this anxiety and effort – however it may be – is appreciated and approved of by God. He likes desperation and anxiety, and creates challenges and situations of hard effort for us so that we do not fall into sleep in this world. O people! Struggle, endeavor and carve yourself a life out of this rough path, and never cease trying.

7- Gaining supreme freedom: In an objective life, man's lusts and desires are harnessed in order to achieve supreme freedom

Life with supreme freedom is one of the characteristics of an elevated, objective life. Without such a freedom, which consists of man's release from selfishness, hallucinations and even other kinds of freedom gained for the natural flow of man's life, like social freedom and freedom of expressing one's ideas, we will have no logical response to the question of the meaning of life.

8- Freeing man from petty absolutism: The human mind always tends to aspire for absolutism, so man must always consider the supreme aim of life as the absolute, so that other affairs and things will seem to him merely as a means to achieve it.

The Six Kinds of Life:

1- A life with no consciousness, freedom, free will or independency of character: In this form of life, only things that are necessary for survival are of concern, like reproduction and resisting the adversities of nature. Man thinks about neither the meaning of life nor material life. Such people have no self-independence; they purely obey natural factors.

2- A worldly life purely for the world: Material life is sought and nothing else. These people do observe some of the laws about nature, and do not consider it as total farce, however. But they are content with their material life, and ignore higher aspirations. They are ignorant toward their standing in the universe, and do not tend to find answers to basic questions like: Where have I come from? Where do I go from here? Why am I here?

3- A spiritual life to provide spiritual delicacy (living purely for the other world) In this form of life, one spends his whole time struggling against his desires and natural emotions keeping them silent in order to purify his soul. Some ascetics believe that the highest aim of life is activating the delicate aspects of the soul.

4- A life aiming for both this and the other world (a life of two independent goals) In this lifestyle, attention is paid to both worlds. However, these people see no relation between this world and the other. They do not realize that man's life is an inseparable reality, despite its numerous aspects. They neglect the unity between life in this world and in the other.

5- A spiritual-looking life aiming for material life (pretending to aim for the other world, but actually aiming for this one) Those who have chosen this kind of life are incapable of understanding the truth about life, and merely pretend to know it. They ignore the fact that being pretentious will only fool the simple-minded, and even that for a short time. These people have actually tricked themselves, living a life of gradual spiritual suicide. They look quite like a saint, but are evil inside.

6- Living in this world on a path to life in the other (an intelligible life) This is the lifestyle prophets of God have approved of. They believed that life is a truly great reality, and that proper, pious knowledge and deeds are needed like two wings that can fly man toward evolution, guiding his worldly life toward a life in the other world. Man should make use of this world only to develop; however, the heart and soul of all of man's worldly activities relate to the other world. This form of life – worldly in appearance but in fact aiming for the other world – will never make man feel nihilistic, and its many problems are easily tolerable for man.

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