

# What is a good life?

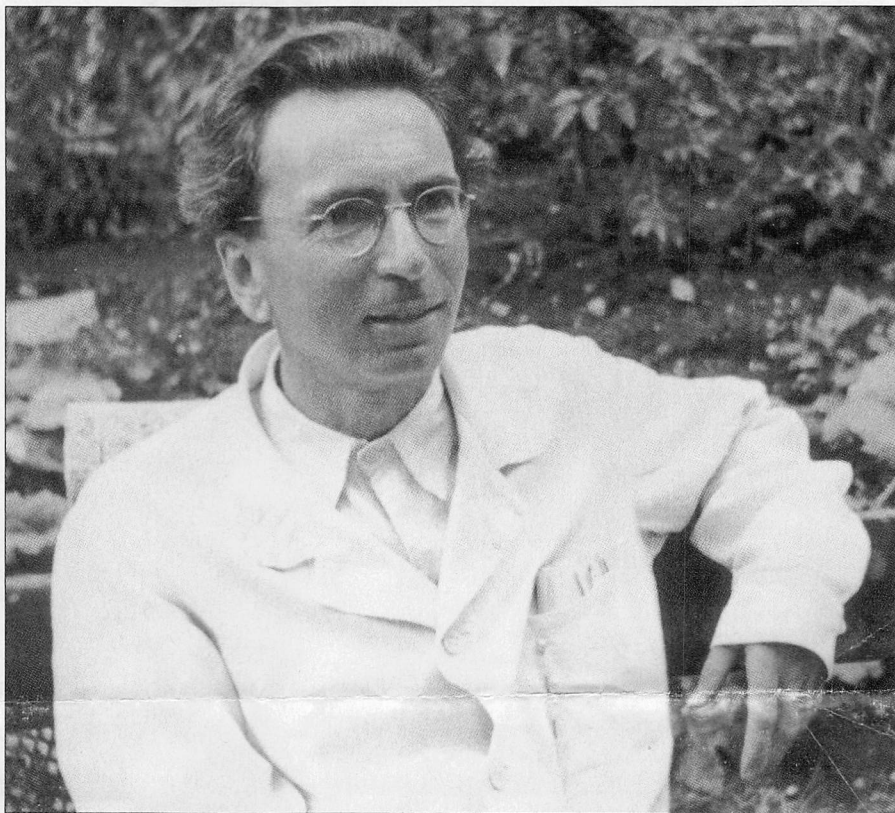
*People pursue happiness, says Emily Esfahani Smith, but it's always temporary. Pursue meaning instead.*

**I**N SEPTEMBER 1942, Viktor Frankl, a prominent Jewish psychiatrist and neurologist in Vienna, was arrested and transported to a Nazi concentration camp with his wife and parents. Three years later, when his camp was liberated, most of his family, including his pregnant wife, had perished—but he, prisoner number 119104, had lived. In his best-selling 1946 book, *Man's Search for Meaning*, Frankl concluded that the difference between those who had lived and those who had died came down to one thing: meaning.

As he saw in the camps, those who found meaning even in the most horrendous circumstances were far more resilient to suffering than those who did not. “Everything can be taken from a man but one thing,” Frankl wrote in the book, “the last of the human freedoms—to choose one’s attitude in any given set of circumstances, to choose one’s own way.”

In his book, Frankl gives the example of two suicidal inmates he encountered in the camps. Like many others there, these two men were hopeless and thought there was nothing more to expect from life, nothing to live for. “In both cases,” Frankl writes, “it was a question of getting them to realize that life was still expecting something from them.” For one man, it was his young child, who was then living in a foreign country. For the other, a scientist, it was a series of books that he needed to finish. Frankl writes: “This uniqueness and singleness which distinguishes each individual and gives a meaning to his existence has a bearing on creative work as much as it does on human love.... A man who becomes conscious of the responsibility he bears toward a human being who affectionately waits for him, or to an unfinished work, will never be able to throw away his life. He knows the ‘why’ for his existence, and will be able to bear almost any ‘how.’”

In 1991, the Library of Congress and the Book-of-the-Month Club listed *Man's Search for Meaning* as one of the 10 most influential books in the United States. Today, the book's ethos—its emphasis on meaning, the value of suffering, and responsibility to something greater than the self—seems to be at odds with our culture, which is more interested in the pursuit of individual happiness. “To the European,” Frankl wrote, “it is a characteristic of the



*Frankl circa 1947: ‘Happiness cannot be pursued; it must ensue.’*

American culture that, again and again, one is commanded and ordered to ‘be happy.’ But happiness cannot be pursued; it must ensue. One must have a reason to ‘be happy.’”

According to Gallup, the happiness levels of Americans are at a four-year high. On the other hand, according to the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, about four out of 10 Americans have not discovered a satisfying life purpose. Forty percent either do not think their lives have a clear sense of purpose or are neutral about whether their lives have purpose. Research has shown that having purpose and meaning in life increases overall well-being and life satisfaction, improves mental and physical health, enhances resiliency, enhances self-esteem, and decreases the chances of depression.

This is why some researchers are cautioning against the pursuit of mere happiness. In a new study, psychological scientists asked nearly 400 Americans aged 18 to 78 whether they thought their lives were

meaningful and/or happy. Examining their self-reported attitudes toward meaning, happiness, and many other variables—like stress levels, spending patterns, and having children—the researchers found that a meaningful life and a happy life overlap in certain ways, but are ultimately very different.

**H**OW DO THE happy life and the meaningful life differ? Happiness, they found, is about feeling good. Specifically, the researchers found that people who are happy tend to think that life is easy, they are in good physical health, and they are able to buy the things that they need and want. While not having enough money decreases how happy and meaningful you consider your life to be, it has a much greater impact on happiness. The happy life is also defined by a lack of stress or worry.

Most importantly from a social perspective, the pursuit of happiness is associated with selfish behavior—being a “taker” rather than a “giver.” The psychologists give an



evolutionary explanation for this: happiness is about drive reduction. If you have a need or a desire—like hunger—you satisfy it, and that makes you happy. People become happy, in other words, when they get what they want. Humans are not the only ones who can feel happy. Animals have needs and drives, too, and when those drives are satisfied, animals also feel happy.

“Happy people get a lot of joy from receiving benefits from others, while people leading meaningful lives get a lot of joy from giving to others,” says Kathleen Vohs, one of the study authors. In other words, meaning transcends the self while happiness is all about giving the self what it wants. People who have high meaning in their lives are more likely to help others in need. “If anything, pure happiness is linked to not helping others in need,” the researchers write.

What sets human beings apart from animals is not the pursuit of happiness, which occurs all across the natural world, but the pursuit of meaning, which is unique to humans, according to Roy Baumeister, the lead researcher of the study.

The study participants reported deriving meaning from giving a part of themselves away to others and making a sacrifice on behalf of the overall group. Having more meaning in one’s life was associated with doing activities like buying presents for others, taking care of kids, and arguing. People whose lives have high levels of meaning often actively seek meaning out even when they know it will come at the expense of happiness. Because they have invested themselves in something bigger than themselves, they also worry more and have higher levels of stress and anxiety in their lives than happy people. Having children, for example, is associated with the meaningful life and requires self-sacrifice, but it has been famously associated with low happiness among parents, including the ones in this study.

“Partly what we do as human beings is to take care of others and contribute to others. This makes life meaningful, but it does not necessarily make us happy,” Baumeister told me in an interview.

Meaning is not only about transcending the self, but also about transcending the present moment—which is perhaps the most important finding of the study, according to the researchers. While happiness is an emotion felt in the here and now, it ultimately fades away, just as all emotions do; positive affect and feelings of pleasure are fleeting. The amount of time people report feeling



Meaning flows from concern for others.

good or bad correlates with happiness but not at all with meaning.

Meaning, on the other hand, is enduring. It connects the past to the present to the future. “Thinking beyond the present moment, into the past or future, was a sign of the relatively meaningful but unhappy life,” the researchers write. “Happiness is not generally found in contemplating the past or future.” That is, people who thought more about the present were happier, but people who spent more time thinking about the future or about past struggles and sufferings felt more meaning in their lives, though they were less happy.

Having negative events happen to you, the study found, decreases your happiness but increases the amount of meaning you have in life. “If there is meaning in life at all,” Frankl wrote, “then there must be meaning in suffering.”

**W**HICH BRINGS US back to Frankl’s life and, specifically, a decisive experience he had before he was sent to the concentration camps. In his early adulthood, Frankl had established himself as one of the leading psychiatrists in Vienna and the world. As a 16-year-old boy, for example, he struck up a correspondence with Sigmund Freud and one day sent Freud a two-page paper he had written. Freud, impressed by Frankl’s talent, sent the paper to the *International Journal of Psychoanalysis* for publication.

While he was in medical school, Frankl distinguished himself even further. Not only did he establish suicide-prevention centers for teenagers—a precursor to his work in the camps—but he was also developing his signature contribution to the field of clinical psychology: logotherapy, which is meant to help people overcome depression and achieve well-being by finding their unique meaning in life. By 1941, he was working as the chief of neurology at Vienna’s Rothschild Hospital, where he risked his life and career by making false diagnoses of

mentally ill patients so that they would not, per Nazi orders, be euthanized.

That same year, he had a decision to make that would change his life. With his career on the rise and the threat of the Nazis looming, Frankl had applied for a visa to America, which he was granted in 1941. By then, the Nazis had started rounding up the Jews and taking them away to concentration camps, focusing on the elderly first. Frankl knew that it would only be time before the Nazis came to take his parents away. He also knew that once they did, he had a responsibility to be there with his parents. On the other hand, as a newly married man with his visa in hand, he was tempted to leave for America and flee to safety.

As Anna S. Redsand recounts in her biography of Frankl, he was at a loss for what to do, so he set out for St. Stephan’s Cathedral to clear his head. Listening to the organ music, he repeatedly asked himself, “Should I leave my parents behind?... Should I say goodbye and leave them to their fate?” He was looking for a “hint from heaven.”

When he returned home, he found it. A piece of marble was lying on the table. His father explained that it was rubble of a nearby synagogue that the Nazis had destroyed. It contained a fragment of one of the Ten Commandments—the one about honoring your father and your mother. With that, Frankl decided to stay in Vienna and forgo whatever opportunities for safety and career advancement awaited him in the United States. He put aside his individual pursuits to serve his family and, later, other inmates in the camps.

The wisdom Frankl derived from his experiences there, in the middle of unimaginable human suffering, is just as relevant now as it was then: “Being human always points, and is directed, to something or someone, other than oneself—be it a meaning to fulfill or another human being to encounter. The more one forgets himself—by giving himself to a cause to serve or another person to love—the more human he is.”

By putting aside our selfish interests and serving someone or something larger than ourselves—by devoting our lives to “giving” rather than “taking”—we are not only expressing our fundamental humanity, but are also acknowledging that there is more to the good life than the pursuit of simple happiness.

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