

## On the Basic Dimensions and Functions of Life Purpose

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### Abstract

Outlook on life is the helmsman and key of life, whose core is a life purpose. Life purpose is a person's fundamental thinking and pursuit of the question "why do people live," is the consistent recognition and practice of the existing highest ideal, ultimate goal and highest value. The purpose of life includes two basic dimensions, "what to pursue" and "pursue for whom". A correct life purpose is able to guide, promote, support, comfort and protect people's best existence.

**Key words:** Life purpose; Dimension; Function

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### INTRODUCTION

At all times and in all countries, whether philosophers or ordinary people, are keen to explore the problem of "why do people live". Many people have understood the true meaning of life purpose, so they can not only obtain an eternal motivation of individual life, constantly enhance the existing abilities, realize success and achieve a happy life, but also make outstanding contributions for others, society and mankind by "setting virtue", "making contribution" and "expounding ideas in writing", realize the value and meaning of life, to be praised and commemorated by future generations, and achieve the

"moral realm" and "world realm" of life; there are also many other people, waste and give up the life, lose human subjectivity, transcendence and existing powers and the abilities, stay on a life of "natural status" due to confusion and loss of ultimate goal of life; or lose the life, human emotion, morality and nobility in extreme ego in pursuit of excessive materialism, money, fame, status and pleasure, stay on a life of "natural status" and "utilitarian status". So how to understand the basic dimension of life purpose, and how to recognize the importance of life purpose?

Marx said, "conscious life activities distinguish people from animals directly", indicating that people not only can have a purposive life but also must have a purposive life. So what kind of life purpose should people have? What does life purpose mean to people's best lives?

### 1. THE TWO FUNDAMENTAL DIMENSIONS OF LIFE PURPOSE

At all times and in all countries, people's understandings on life purpose vary, but they can be all reduced to two dimensions of "what to pursue" and "pursue for whom".

#### 1.1 On What to Pursue, Happiness Is the Ultimate Pursuit of Life

The reason that happiness is the ultimate pursuit of life is because of its "ultimacy" and "truth, goodness and beauty of nature." Happiness, as a persistent, "consummate" and most beautiful feeling occurs when an individual's intelligence, virtue, physical and mental health can be freely and comprehensively developed, when the individual can coexist with others, society and nature in harmony, when his material, spiritual and psychological needs can be fully met, and after and on top of it, the individual does not wish for anything. Therefore, happiness has a final destination, highest purpose, highest value and other "ultimate" features. As Aristotle said: "Only the purpose selected by itself rather than for

others is to be final. It seems this is the only thing can be qualified as happiness. We choose it for its own sake, but never because of something else.” (Aristotle, 2003)

Meanwhile, happiness also has “truth, goodness and beauty of nature.” Every people has the right to access to “as much as” happiness through their own efforts, so “happiness” has the feature of “truth”; People can only get real and lasting happiness when they are needed and contribute to others, the society and country, so “happiness” has the natures of “altruism” and “contribution”; The happiness is essentially in line with “truth”, “goodness” and embodies the ideal state of comprehensive and free development of human intelligence, physique, psychology and morality, hence has a “beauty nature.” Marx’s saying “human well-being and our own consummation.” (Xu et al., 1999) Chen Duxiu’s life pursuit “when an individual makes efforts to create happiness, he will enjoy the happiness, but if the happiness remains in the society, the coming individuals can also enjoy it, give and receive it alternatively and permanently” (SDX Joint Publishing Company, 1984, pp.239-240) are the profound interpretation to the ultimate pursuit of life.

## **1.2 On Pursue for Whom, People Should Always Be in Pursuit of the Common Happiness of Individuals and Humanity**

Human instinct always unconsciously decides to put personal happiness in the first place, but experience tells us that we must firstly or simultaneously take care of others’ happiness. Because an individual is “weak” and “incapable”, the physical, mental and psychological conditions required by personal happiness cannot do without the supports of others, groups and society. This “co-existence” relationship between people determines that when an individual is in pursuit of personal happiness he must firstly or simultaneously take care of others’ happiness, because any behavior taking one’s own needs as the starting point and destination will be subject to the same “treatment” of others, leading to complete destruction of the “co-existence” relationship and individual well-being, so people’s ultimate purpose cannot be only personal. As Marx said, “If a person works only for himself, he may be able to become a famous scholar, great philosopher or outstanding poet, but he can never be an unblemished great man” (Xu et al., 1999), “history admits that those people working for the common goal to be great men because of their nobleness; experience praises those people bringing well-being to most people are the happiest people” (Ibid.). Marx and Engels’s “making benefits for the majority of people”, Lenin’s “serving for tens of thousands of working people,” Li Dazhao’s “making benefits for the groups”, Mao Zedong’s “serving for the people”, Xi Jinping’s proposal “‘China dream’ of national prosperity, national rejuvenation and people’s happiness” all emphasize the essence of “common happiness” of ultimate life purpose.

## **2. THE FUNCTIONS OF LIFE PURPOSE**

The “purpose”, “value” and “ultimacy” of life purpose determine that a proper life purpose is able to guide, promote, support, comfort and protect people’s best existence.

### **2.1 A Better Life Requires the Guidance of Life Purpose.**

Human potentials enable that people are “likely” to have a “good life”, but the “good life” is most likely and most effective to be achieved by conscious and purposeful pursuit, or the “good life” would have a chance to fail or take place elementarily. Everyone’s existence has possibilities, namely a person’s life can have multiple states, and having what “possibility” depend primarily on the planning and design for life due to one’s limited life time and efforts.

Life purpose sets out the general direction of life activities, directing the specific activities that people should be engaged in. Under the guidance of an intended purpose, a person will not loss himself because of “crossroad” or “temptation” along the way, but focus on building capacity, strengthening his will to forge ahead, working hard to achieve the purpose, thus live a better life; Under the guidance of a stated purpose, people will not be idle or aimless, won’t waste time on “selection”, “waiting”, “laziness” or be tangled in a variety of excuses. Although what Feuerbach highly praises is religious belief, his discussions about faith, purpose, and target are truths,

Since the devout believer has a memorandum, there will be a rendezvous with a target. Because of the target, there will be a solid basis and foundation... If a people has an ultimate target, he will be subject to the law of the target: For this people, he will not only direct himself, but also to be guided. If a people has not an ultimate target, he will have no home, no temple. The greatest misfortune is to be aimless, and a people setting a very ordinary target is better than those not setting targets at all. (Feuerbach, 1984, pp.104-105).

If there is no purpose and target, people will not know where to go. This “loss” makes people either waste a lot of time and efforts in the thinking and confusion of “what should I do”, going no further to reach the “best life” because of “fantasy”; or act randomly by instinct, not only failing to make a better life they expect, but also affecting the overall life because of misbehaviors, ceasing the “best life” due to “blindness”, or people are controlled by the instinct of inert, pursuing only an “instinctive” life, and ceasing the “best life” due to “laziness”.

A correct and firm life purpose and faith enable people to have an enriched heart because of firm belief, have full confidence to the future rather than indulge in fantasy or loss in wasted time because of blindness, or feel empty, bored and reject life because of nothing accomplished. A correct and firm life purpose and faith also enable people to make tireless dedication to their life pursuit, to be

dedicated to “truth, goodness and beauty” in life, and to be away from the earthly bustle, fickleness and temptation, so they can have a peaceful heart, be harvested, and eventually live a real good life.

At all times and in all countries there are many brilliant people with lofty ideals, such as Marx, Mao Zedong and Zhou Enlai, etc. who established a correct life purpose in their youth, and made right choice in the face of a series of major issues of life, so as to make progress in the right direction of life. All people accomplishing nothing or being driven into the historical pillar of shame are mostly closely related to their wrong life purpose. A people with a wrong life purpose, or who excessively pursues material, wealth, status and pleasure because of selfishness will become a member on the “historical pillar of shame”, or becomes unaccomplished because of no ambition. Therefore the most fortunate thing in life is to establish a correct life purpose, and the most unfortunate thing is having no life purpose or wrong life purpose.

## 2.2 A Better Life Requires the Promotion and Supports of Life Purpose

Only a plan and design still make “good life” remain in the state of “possibility”, therefore action is the key. Life purpose and life goal established under the guidance of life purpose enables people to establish the faith of “not to stop until one reaches the Huanghe River”, and keeps striving and enterprising in the face of both good times and adversities. For example, for a people hoping to become an excellent teacher, he won’t change his mind by more money or the temptation of “fame” from the outside world, and won’t give up his pursuit because teachers’ occupational status or treatment is not high.

If there is no purpose and target, people will tend to produce a “tolerance” attitude on whether doing something or not doing with their own inertia. Even though they take actions, there is no “sufficient reason” for them to persevere, and are destined to retreat or give up halfway when encounter frustrations. The “good life” cannot get ahead of the “escape”; if there are no “established” purpose and target, people are likely to fall into endless waiting and become increasingly idle and undisciplined by the “temptation” of indolence instinct. Their lives will become more and more inefficient, and the “good life” will stop at the infinite “waiting”; if there are not lofty purpose and target, people will have no “awe” and “sense of seriousness” to themselves and life. They will muddle along, or do what they wish without restraint, putting their lives at risk or in danger of illegality and immorality. Ma Jiajue, Yao Jiabin and Lin Senhao are the best examples for this circumstance.

Conversely, if there is a noble purpose and target, we will be able to withstand all pressures. As young Marx said,

If we choose an occupation which is best for human welfare, then the burden cannot overwhelm us because this is devoted for

everyone; we will no longer feel poor, limited and selfish joys, our happiness will belong to millions of people, our cause will quietly but eternally exist, and noble people will shed tears in the face of our aches. (Xu et al., 1999)

Under the guidance of a noble purpose and target, people will neither forget their true pursuit in temporary favorable circumstances, nor belittle themselves and lose courage and confidence in temporary difficulties, so as to live an efficient and better life.

## 2.3 A Better Life Requires the Comfort And Security of Life Purpose

As *The Great Learning* says,

only with a purpose we can make a firm ideal; only with a firm ideal we can stay calm; only with a calmness we can feel contented; only by feeling contented we can have a careful consideration; only with a careful consideration we can make an achievement. (Zeng, 2007)

Purpose is the premise for us to have the “ideal”, “calmness”, “consideration”, “achievement”, and reap rewards in thinking, knowledge and morality, therefore life purpose is the guarantee of successful career and happy family.

At the same time, life purpose and life goal are the protection of our physical and mental health, because “the pursuit of certainty is a kind of spiritual need of mankind”. When people do not know what to pursue in life and do not know where to go, they will have panic, anxiety and irritability, thereby affect the physical and mental health; people without a purpose or target are often in poor mental state, even feel that life is meaningless, lose the desire to live and have no fun of existence. US scholar Richard Leider states in *The Power of Purpose: Creating Meaning in Your Life and Work*,

people are born to be animals seeking purposes. In order to ensure the health and survival of our own, purpose is indispensable. If you doubt it, then go check the morbidity and mortality of people who lost or gave up purposes. People having nothing to do after retirement has much higher mortality and morbidity than the retirees having a pursuit;

In a US university, when the researchers asked 60 students why they wanted to commit suicide, 85% of the students answered that they wanted to commit suicide because “life seemed to be meaningless”. More importantly, 93% of the students distressed apparently because of a lack of purpose in life, even though they usually actively participated in social activities, had good academic performances and harmonious relationships with families. (Leider, 2007)

Without a faith in life purpose, people’s all kinds of behaviors will be disordered due to the lack of planning, traction and evaluation of the “chief architect”, so

faith provides a kind of realistic life goal and life order to people, thus combines human cognition, emotion and will, not only to maintain individual psychological health, prevent

schizophrenia, but also to provide the contents of life, enrich life with real contents, and fulfill it. (Liu, 1998)

The faith of life purpose has a sense of security not only because of the certainty of the purpose itself, but also because of the firm belief to the purpose. The “double” certainties bring people with a sense of calmness and a sense of home.

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## CONCLUSION

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In summary, life purpose is the integrated well-being of individuals and humanity; a proper life purpose is able to guide, promote, support, comfort and protect people’s best existence.

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