

Positive Subjectivity - A Guide to a Meaningful Life

— “Good Life” Final Essay

Are there any rules for living a meaningful life that can apply across different cultures, societies, and situations? When asked, people often tend to look for one or some specific overlapping rules in different cultures¹ that lead to ‘meanings’ in human’s life such as having love, being virtuous, carpe diem, keeping independent sanity, rational thinking behind the veil of ignorance, etc. However, the results coming from this way of thinking is inherently flawed after a logical deduction: while each culture has its own definition of ‘meaning’ and numerous subordinate rules leading to meanings, the relationships among those rules of culture should be accord with a **topological nature** as demonstrated in the following Venn diagrams:

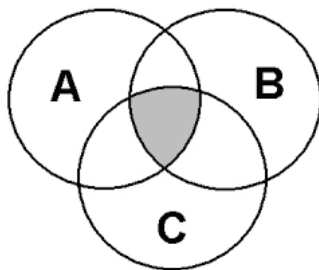


Chart 1



Chart 2²

While there are basically countless cultures existing in the real world and theoretical world, the more cultures there are, the less overlapping part of “rules for meaningful life” exist as the grey area in Chart 1, especially when there are some totally contradictory cultures such as

¹ Throughout this essay, ‘culture’ represents the concepts of society, situation, ideology, and so on.

² Ellsworth, J'Anne. *Overview of Educational Philosophies*, jan.ucc.nau.edu/jde7/ese502/assessment/lesson.html.

conservatism and liberalism. More likely, the existing rules in cultures should be accord with chart 2, which indicates that we should not look for specific rules leading to meaningful life **shared** by different cultures if we want to find the most fundamental rule for basically all cultures. Therefore, in order to discover the paramount rule, we should find the rules **covering** different cultures as followed in chart 3: the most **fundamental source of meaning in life**.



Chart 3

In Oxford Dictionary, ‘**meaningful**’ is defined as “having a serious, important, or useful quality or purpose”,³ which means that the meaning of life is not an **objectively-defined** or physically-perceivable existence like pleasure or happiness, but totally a **subjective concept**. Considering and comparing the discussions in different schools of thoughts that how to achieve the **ultimate good**, we can realize that though philosophers want to find a way to impartially and rationally achieve good or meaning (like purely rational thinking system in utilitarianism), they have already presumptively defined their own understanding of meaning in a subjective way (as utilitarianism presumptively takes utility as the ultimate good). All the rational and objective deductions, therefore, are based on the subjective fundamental definition of meaning. Thus, there is never an absolute ‘rational’, ‘objective’, ‘right’, ‘self-evident’ or ‘inherently-existing’ meaning of life, which consequently leads to the most fundamental basic ground for **meaning**: the meaning of life should first be subjectively defined, and **something is meaningful just because and only because people think/believe it is meaningful**. The logic behind this statement could be

³ Halliday, Tony. “Meaningful.” *Oxford*, APA Publications, 2016.

analogized as René Descartes’s famous saying: “**I think, therefore I am.**”⁴, while the rationality of meaning’s existence is subjectively self-evident. Hence, if a person wants to live a meaningful life regardless of the culture, society, or situation in which he or she lives, the most fundamental and reliable way is to actively and subjectively define the meaning of life and then live for it steadily.

To be more specific, usually there are two ways to subjectively define the meaning of life: **actively finding one** or **passively accepting one**. As the characters in *Old Man Goriot*⁵, an epitome of European society in 19th century, ordinary people like Eugène and Goriot live their lives according to their environments and rooted ideology, without seeking the essence of their lives and the society. Vautrin, a renaissance man with a mysterious past however, doesn’t take rules and purpose of life at that time for granted, but critically examine the laws and conditions of society, trying to achieve his own value without caring about the existing institution and system of morality. Though Vautrin’s behaviors such as killing people are extreme to some degree, the distinction between him and other people in the story can demonstrate how people vary from each other in their awareness of meaning in life.

Further, in real life, most people’s understanding of life’s meaning is passive, since they usually are unable to **recognize subjectivity** as the essence of “meaning” as discussed above. Influenced by education, family, social relationships and so on, people tend to unconsciously form their ideology about their goal of life ranging from wealth, pleasure, virtue, and so on. While such passively formed ideas of meaning are natural, it is not the best solution in the view of Aristotle. As Aristotle’s well-known saying goes, “**The unexamined life is not worth living.**” When

⁴ Descartes, René. *A Discourse on Method*. J.M. Dent, 1912.

⁵ Honoré De Balzac, *Old Man Goriot*, 1834

comparing these two ways of meaning-taking, the active way can offer the **possibility** for people to realize things that are not coordinate with their own goods or society’s overall goods, by which humanity and society can actually evolve. In *The Escalator of Reason* excerpted from *How Are We to Live?*⁶ by Peter Singer, he discusses the positive subjectivity as followed:

“Anyone can become part of the critical mass(the idea of living an ethical life) that offers us a chance of improving the world before it is too late. You can rethink your goals and question what you are doing with your life. ...More often, the commitment to a more ethical way of living will be the first step of a gradual but far-reaching evolution in your lifestyle and in your thinking about your place in the world. One thing is certain: you will find plenty of worthwhile things to do. You will not be bored or lack fulfillment in your life. ”

From Peter Singer’s discussion, we can learn that one of the main **benefits** of **positive subjectivity** is that it offers basically unlimited things to do and fulfills one’s expectation of life. Indeed, if a man only spontaneously follows his desire and nature, his freedom and space for life’s meaning is limited since he is only a “**slave of desire**”⁷ according to **Kantianism**. Thus, it is solid that people should **actively** define their own meaning of life, instead of following society’s value and treating themselves “as means instead of ends”⁸.

Then, after finding one’s own definition of meaning, how to develop such subjective good during a life? Specific solution may vary from one to another while different goods are weighing on different dimensions such as **depth** and **breadth**. **A dichotomy in Daoism**, however, can

⁶ Peter Singer, *The Escalator of Reason*, Page 10

⁷ Michael J. Sandel, *Justice: What’s the Right Things to Do*, Page 38

⁸ Michael J. Sandel, *Justice: What’s the Right Things to Do*, Page 104

reasonably distinguish a better way from others. In *Tao Teh Ching*⁹, a fundamental book for Daoism, the idea of **Dao** is described as “**compatible**”, while the contradictory concept **Fa**(produced by Dao as said “Dao produces one, one produces two, two produce three, three produce everything.”) is described as “**independent**”. When considering meanings of life, this idea of **compatibility** can be widely applied. In the view of society, for example, material things like wealth and sensorial pleasure is Fa, while they are limited resource and people cannot mutually share the good. **Humanity** like virtue and freedom, however, is Dao, which means a little change in humanity can unlimitedly reproduce and spread in the world, achieving meaning both in depth and breadth. In the same perspective regarding individuals, the **progress of humanity** like Confucius’s contribution to Chinese’s culture is hence much greater than Steve Job’s contribution to the limited convenience of human’s life – Confucius fundamentally changes human, which is also exactly what many cultural workers are aiming to do, writing books and making films to bring something meaningful to the humanity itself, even a tiny piece of change could be eternal and unlimited.

In general, after the consideration and comparative analysis of how to actively define, find, and develop the meaning of life, we can therefore conclude that a life is enriched with meaning regardless of cultures by subjectively being recognized with certain significance, and such significance can be elevated while it can compatibly be achieved by individuals.

Born as human, we people are determined to spend the whole lifetime searching for meaning, and the **humanity** is the paramount subjectivity shared by all of us. Hope every individual with different cultures and background can always come to the ground of such positive meaning, and

⁹ Laozi, and Herrymon Maurer. *The Way of the Ways = Tao Teh Ching*. Schocken Books, 1985.

all of we human live for it steadily. Then, we can proudly call it a life, a **meaningful** life.

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6. Michael J. Sandel, *Justice: What’s the Right Things to Do*, Page 38
7. Michael J. Sandel, *Justice: What’s the Right Things to Do*, Page 104
8. Peter Singer, *The Escalator of Reason*, Page 10