



LIVING WELL

RICHARD DOCWRA



SUMMARY

The first release from The Big Questions, a new series of ebooks from Humanists UK offering humanist perspectives on how to lead confident, happier, and more fulfilled lives in this the one life we have.

What is the meaning of life? How should we live? What happens when we die?

In this new series of publications we aim to explore these – and other – big questions, in order to help you live a good life. Each publication gives an accessible outline of the ideas behind a particular big question, as well as some clear, practical guidance on how to build this wisdom into your life.

This first publication pulls together some of the topics that we will explore in more detail later in the series – from finding meaning in life through to being good – into an overall guide on how to live well.

CREDITS

Written by Richard Docwra

© Richard Docwra 2017

Published by Humanists UK

Chapter 4 includes extracts from 'How to think about death (and life)' by Richard Docwra, published by Life Squared 2015.

CONTENTS

Introduction	5
Thinking well	6
Finding meaning	12
Being good	18
Dying well	24
Conclusions	28



INTRODUCTION

**'TO LIVE IS THE RAREST THING IN THE WORLD.
MOST PEOPLE EXIST, THAT IS ALL.'**

Oscar Wilde

You are unbelievably lucky. Why? Because you are alive.

Your atoms have coalesced into a viable living creature, formed on a planet with the highly fortunate placement in its solar system to be able to accommodate life.

Through a lucky draw in the evolutionary lottery, you were born and have survived up to the point where you are now reading this. What's more, you have been born into a species with the capacity to reflect on its own existence and to appreciate the fact it is alive – a quality that, as far as we know, other species do not possess.

You have emerged temporarily out of the non-experience of not-living, for a brief period of at most 90 years or so, to be living.

So, what are you going to do with that 90 years of life? And how should you behave in it?

These are the issues that have challenged philosophers, religions, and every person living on this planet since human beings began not just to think, but to reflect.

They are not easy questions and there are no immediate answers, but this guide and others in this Big Questions series aim to give you some ideas about how you might start to think about them, to help you live a fulfilled and meaningful life.

As the first publication in this series, this guide aims to give an initial overview of some of the areas we'll be covering in more detail in later publications – from how to find meaning in your life through to how to think about death.

We will show how a compassionate and considered approach to living can help you to find wonder, joy, solace, and fulfilment.



chapter 1

THINKING WELL

'THINKING IS THE HARDEST WORK THERE IS, WHICH IS THE PROBABLE REASON WHY SO FEW ENGAGE IN IT.'

Henry Ford

An ability to see the world clearly and think well is an important foundation for building a life that is wiser, happier, more confident, and more fulfilled.

We are not suggesting that human beings are simply 'thinking machines' that can or should use rational thought to optimise every aspect of their lives. The latest psychological research¹ shows that we are far less 'rational' than we might think and that it is instinct that often rules our behaviour and decision making. We do however have the ability to refine or adapt our behaviour through the use of rational thought. So, it makes sense to use it in our lives when we can do so to our advantage.

The notion of 'thinking well' may seem an abstract concept, but it is actually quite straightforward. It is a collection of skills and attitudes that enable us to live our lives in a reflective and well-informed way. These include critical thinking and seeing the world with a sense of wonder and curiosity.

In this chapter we'll present some of the most important aspects of what it means to think well. It's not an exhaustive list, but it should provide a useful set of initial ideas that you can put into action.

GAIN PERSPECTIVE ON YOUR LIFE

Within the rush of everyday life, it can be easy to lose sight of the big picture surrounding your own existence – including the fact that you are materially better off than the vast majority of other people, living or dead; that you are simply another member of the animal kingdom; and that you are just one of 7.5 billion human beings living on a tiny planet in a vast universe.

It is useful to be able to see the big picture on a wide range of topics, a few of which we will outline below. Gaining a reasonable understanding of questions such as how we got to this point in history, how people work, and how to navigate complex ideas can help us to adopt a broader, wiser, and more considered approach to life.

So, take some time to stand back from your life and view it from a wider perspective. You could think about:

THE UNIVERSE

Understanding the sheer scale of the universe, from the massive to the minute, can provide us with a sense of awe, put a more realistic spin on our problems and worries, make us feel part of a bigger picture (whether it is human beings, the natural world, or the universe generally), and give us a more modest sense of our own importance.

OUR PLANET

Building an overview of the rich diversity of the planet's terrain, animals, plant life, and makeup can help us appreciate the wonder of life on Earth, and give us greater motivation to protect it. It can also remind us that we are simply another example of life on Earth.

HUMAN LIFE

Gaining a picture of your place in relation

to the other 7.5 billion people on the planet will help you to appreciate the massive differences in wealth, lifestyles, education, and life opportunities across this population, and how lucky you are in relation to the vast majority of them. It could also lead to a better understanding of the varied cultures and beliefs around the world, and could therefore promote greater empathy.

PHILOSOPHY, SCIENCE, HISTORY, AND POLITICS

Gaining an insight into philosophy, science, history, and politics could give you perspective on the history of ideas, not only understanding those that have defined people's lives and societies throughout history (in areas from religion to politics), but also how they have evolved and fallen in and out of favour. It will also help you question some of the ideas and institutions dominating our lives today – from neoliberal economics to the idea of moral progress – and give you a better appreciation of the alternatives.

These are just a few of the most important areas you could choose to explore. Ultimately, developing a broader perspective on things could be one of the most personally rewarding things you will ever do.

SEE THE WORLD WITH A SENSE OF WONDER AND CURIOSITY

The attitude with which you live your life matters. We should approach life with a sense of wonder and curiosity.

It may be tempting to describe this sense of wonder as 'child-like', but this would imply it is a naive attitude, or one we should grow out of when we have matured. On the contrary – it is one we should seek to maintain throughout our lives, partly for



the joy and energy it will bring us, but also because our lives and the universe hold an infinite array of wonders. To quote the great Carl Sagan, 'Somewhere, something incredible is waiting to be known.'

If we tire of discovering these wonders, we tire of life.

The same applies to learning. We should see the whole of our lives – not simply the period in which we are at school – as a learning experience. We should be open to learning and absorbing new things throughout life, as even (indeed, especially) the most intelligent and wise people never stop learning.

THINK CRITICALLY

Critical thinking is the art of questioning the messages that we receive from any external source – whether it is friends, newspapers, television, the internet, or anything else. This isn't confined to specific messages such as advertisements or conversations but also broader cultural, political, or social orthodoxies such as religious thinking or the importance of striving for ever greater material wealth.

Critical thinking is both a skill and an attitude towards the world. An attitude not of suspicion but of curiosity and scepticism – a desire to challenge whatever you are told until you can assure yourself that it is genuine. A commitment to not just accepting what you're told.

There are many things we can't control in the world around us. But by learning how to think critically, we start to impose some personal control where it really matters. It means that we think for ourselves, rather than being carried along by the tide of other people's opinions or influence.

With the vast range of communications flying around in the modern world, it is important that we each get into the habit of questioning any messages we receive, so that we can evaluate whether the sources are reliable, what the purpose of the message is, how we should interpret it, and whether it is something to be digested or ignored.

When you receive any message, whether it is in a social conversation, at work, in a newspaper, or on television, think first about whether you want to pay attention to it or ignore it. You may decide to ignore a particular message because you don't feel the topic is important and can be 'filtered out': an advertisement, for example.

If you decide to pay attention to the message, consider the source it came from and whether it might have a particular agenda. If you feel a particular message or source is too biased, you may want to get a more balanced view of the topic by exploring messages from a few different sources with different perspectives (for example, looking at the same story in other newspapers) or by finding a source you can trust before you make a judgement.

This process of evaluation is not always easy as we each bring our own existing biases to it (such as our political views), but we should still try to undertake it, as it helps us achieve a more balanced and realistic perspective on the world. We can also become quicker and more effective at this evaluation process over time.

DEVELOP A STRONG (BUT FLEXIBLE) SENSE OF YOUR OWN IDENTITY, VALUES, AND BELIEFS

Our personal identity is not simply the labels that we or others apply to ourselves – such as our gender, religion, or country of origin. It is our sense of who we are as



an individual, what matters to us, and how we feel about ourselves. Our ability to build, nurture, and protect it has a significant bearing on what we get from our lives and our experience of them.

A strong sense of identity gives you a secure place from which to deal with the world around you – a set of judgements and instincts you can trust in a complex world full of competing pressures and influences. You can also return to this place whenever you like to remind yourself of who you are, what your qualities are, and what makes you happy.

We develop this sense of identity over time rather than instantly and it needs to be nurtured and tended to. Try to develop an honest sense of what you are really about, including what makes you happy and fulfilled, what makes you unhappy or uncomfortable, what your priorities are in life, and how you really want to live.

Another important element of your identity is learning to be happy with yourself – or at least accepting who you are at a particular point in time. This includes accepting your natural tendencies, qualities, and physical features and realising that you are neither perfect nor imperfect: you are just yourself.

It also means being a friend to yourself – seeing the best in yourself and making the best of yourself, rather than attacking yourself with self-doubt and negative thoughts. Trust yourself and be comfortable with your judgements and choices unless you have good reason not to. Stay open minded, but resist attacks to your identity. This will help you to live on your own terms, rather than feeling you have to follow others. Don't be afraid to be yourself and to let yourself flourish.

A final point – our sense of identity also needs to be flexible. We need to be open to change as we travel through life and

prepared to accommodate new ideas and discoveries – both about the external world and ourselves.

BE RESILIENT

Resilience is much more than just a thinking skill; it is a life skill that takes courage and perseverance to develop. Yet it is vital in helping us negotiate the peaks and troughs that we all encounter in life without being completely derailed by them. Here are some basic pointers on how to develop resilience.

When you encounter adversity or major challenges, see them in a wider context. Remind yourself that you are not alone in your situation or the goals you are trying to achieve, and that continued effort and a positive attitude will eventually pay off. The adversity you are going through may eventually subside and the efforts that you are putting in will make a difference.

You may find there are times when even perseverance doesn't help you overcome particular problems or challenges. At this point you may need to accept the situation, try to make the best of it and move on to focus on other challenges rather than becoming fixated on issues you can't ultimately control.

Your capacity for resilience can be strengthened by finding some sources of support for yourself. When you can, spend time with people who make you feel good about yourself, who understand you and who like and respect what you're about. When you're not around those people that care for you you can still draw support from these friendships and the positive sense of self that you get from them.

1 For example, 'Thinking, Fast and Slow',
Daniel Kahneman, Penguin London, 2011



FURTHER READING

What on Earth Happened?...in Brief - Christopher Lloyd, *Bloomsbury, London 2009*
Letters to a Young Contrarian - Christopher Hitchens, *Basic Books, New York 2005*
Flat Earth News - Nick Davies, *Vintage, London 2009*



chapter 2

FINDING MEANING

'THERE IS NOT ONE BIG COSMIC MEANING FOR ALL; THERE IS ONLY THE MEANING WE EACH GIVE TO OUR LIFE, AN INDIVIDUAL MEANING, AN INDIVIDUAL PLOT, LIKE AN INDIVIDUAL NOVEL, A BOOK FOR EACH PERSON.'

Anaïs Nin

What is the meaning of life?

This is a question most of us have wrestled with at some point or another, and is perhaps the one that people have struggled with the most throughout the ages. People have come up with a range of answers – including 'Sex and drugs and rock and roll' and '42' (the latter courtesy of the great Douglas Adams) – but you probably feel that neither of these provide a satisfactory answer for you.

In this chapter we will explore this question, and show how we can each find meaning in our lives. We will also briefly explore some of the common things that give people meaning.

THINKING ABOUT MEANING

Let us begin with a brutal fact. As far as we know, life has no specific meaning. We are a group of life forms made of the same stuff as all the inanimate, lifeless objects in the universe. Life on Earth emerged by chance and a fortunate set of conditions, and has evolved over billions of years to bring about the creatures we see today – including human beings. There is no great purpose to why we are here, despite what believers in the supernatural would like you to think.

Given this reality, the meaning of life is subjective – it is the meaning each of us attributes to our own life. We create the meaning in our own lives.

And although there is no objective, external meaning to our lives, there is plenty of meaning to be found within them as conscious creatures with particular senses, instincts, needs, and ideas. Later we will explore some of the things that might give us most meaning as well as some of the things that seemingly don't.

OBSTACLES TO FINDING MEANING

Many of the things that give us meaning are actually quite simple and sitting right in front of our eyes – for example, human relationships. We often however find ourselves unable to clearly see these things that give us meaning, as obvious as they might be. We can find ourselves wandering through life either believing that there is no meaning to be found, or seeking it desperately, feeling unable to find it. Our apparent inability to find meaning in life could be for a number of reasons.

To start with, we may be searching for the wrong thing. Our search for meaning in

life can be elusive if we become fixated on the idea of finding 'meaning' itself, as this doesn't exist as a specific thing – it is simply a made-up human concept. It will therefore slip through our fingers if we try to grab it. To find meaning, we have to focus on the things that give us meaning – not on the idea of meaning itself.

Another important reason why people might struggle to find meaning in their lives is that they are confused about what might give them meaning. This can be a particular challenge in the modern world, as there are many strong social, cultural, and commercial influences encouraging us to seek meaning in certain things that don't actually bring much meaning for most people.

Take material goods, for example. Many people spend a great deal of time trying to acquire more of them. They may not only sacrifice their leisure time to do so, but also their work lives, in order to earn enough money not just to subsist but to acquire more of the latest material goods. Those who aren't able to earn enough to consume at this level sometimes take big risks like getting into large amounts of debt in order to pay for them. Yet, the evidence suggests that we're unlikely to find meaning from consumerism. Any positive effects we do get from new material goods tend to be short-lived as we adjust quickly to them, and then return to the state of wanting more. And so the cycle (or 'hedonic treadmill') continues.

Yet the influences (such as advertising) that pedal these spurious ideas of meaning are extremely powerful, as they surround us in our daily lives, and represent 'reality' for many people. They can act as a 'fog' that makes it harder for us to see what really gives us meaning. And they can distract us with sparkly things that may well give us short-term pleasure, but that ultimately fail to satisfy us or give us real meaning.



We can also end up constantly comparing our own lives with those of other people, such as celebrities. This is not only unrealistic, but is based on a one-dimensional 'fantasy' picture of their lives. This tendency to compare can nevertheless make our own lives feel inferior to others and make us yearn for what they have, whilst taking our attention away from our own lives and what really gives us meaning. It is therefore, ultimately, an unfulfilling approach because it is about what others have and not what we really want ourselves.

In the end, we should seek to make our own meaning in life – without being influenced by external forces.

This is no small task, but the thinking tools that we set out in chapter 1 can play an important role in helping us to recognise the external influences on us and to think clearly about what really matters to us.

HOW TO FIND MEANING

The solution is therefore for each of us to acknowledge the many influences and distractions around us, try our best to temporarily remove ourselves from them, and be honest with ourselves about what really does give us meaning.

You don't have to be a philosopher in order to find meaning in life. You don't need to overthink things. You just need to be able to be honest with yourself about what gives you a sense of purpose, fulfilment, and enjoyment in life. You don't have to emerge with any great, profound, and snappy soundbite to describe it either – you can keep it in your own head as a fluid, rough idea of what matters to you.

And remember: you are answerable to no-one else for what gives you meaning in life, so don't try to judge your ideas against

those of other people. You are however responsible for how you behave: morality matters, as we will be exploring later.

To help you begin the process of identifying what really matters to you, imagine yourself in many years' time, lying on your deathbed. When you look back over the details of your life, what will be the things that gave you most meaning? Things you wished you'd given more time to? Make a short list of the most important things and reflect on them occasionally. Elements of your list may well change as you go through your life.

Once you've gained a sense of what gives you meaning in life, you can then choose to live in a way that embraces and is consistent with that meaning. This doesn't mean striving or setting yourself goals to live in line with what gives you meaning – it doesn't need to be a chore. It could simply be about choosing to do more of the things that give you meaning and fewer of the things that don't. For example, if you spend most of your waking time at work but place a higher value on family life, try to redress the balance. It's about living in line with your priorities so that you can look back on a life well lived.

WHAT GIVES US MEANING?

You will of course need to answer this question for yourself, but in this section we can summarise some areas that seem to provide meaning in many people's lives, no matter what their culture or background.

You'll notice in this section that we've not noted specific life goals (such as 'win the Nobel peace prize' or 'have three children'), even though they may be meaningful to some people. This is because setting goals for your life can be counterproductive, as you may not be in control of whether you achieve them or not (this applies to both

examples above), so they may leave you with potential to brand your entire life as meaningless or a failure if you've been unable to meet them. It can be fulfilling to continually challenge ourselves, but basing our entire lives around goal fulfilment is likely to lead to disappointment and regret.

As discussed already, our lives are packed with potential sources of meaning as conscious, social creatures with particular senses, instincts, needs, and ideas. With this in mind, some of the things that might give our lives meaning are:

HUMAN RELATIONSHIPS

Many people class their friendships, family and personal relationships as among the most important things in their lives. Yet it's amazing how much we can neglect or overlook them in favour of other things that give us less meaning.

MAKING A CONTRIBUTION

Doing things to help other people, participating in our communities, or trying to make the world around us better provides many people with a great deal of fulfilment. It also enables them to feel they have left some sort of legacy once they have passed away.

SAVOURING THE EXPERIENCE OF LIFE

People use many terms to describe their particular ways of savouring the experience of life – including mindfulness, reflection, and contemplation. But it ultimately boils down to some common ideas, such as the practice of contemplating our existence and acknowledging our sense of awe and wonder about it.

Here are a few simple things we can do to savour the experience of existing. First, take time each day to reflect on the simple, remarkable fact that you exist. Just register your gratitude and appreciation for this. You don't need to direct your gratitude to anyone or anything (like a god) in

particular. The important thing is simply to acknowledge your luck in existing.

Doing this can help us to see our lives in a positive way and give us some perspective, no matter what daily life might throw at us. It can also help us to ease the pressure we put on ourselves to 'succeed' in life. Many of us strive for particular goals in our lives – from material success to the desire to be loved – but perhaps we don't need to achieve any goals in order to appreciate our lives, as the very experience of existing itself is amazing enough.

It is also useful to face up to the fact that life is short, and we should make the most of it.

We should also take time to truly absorb the reality we live in. There is endless wonder in the commonplace, yet we tend to take myriad wonderful things for granted – for example the fact that there are feathered creatures flying in the air around us, that the sun creates a beautiful orange light when it sets, and that we can create books and poems simply from the ideas in our brains.

These, and millions of other incredibly simple things, pass us by most of the time. So, make it an aim to try to truly see the world each day. This produces a sense of wonder that is open to all of us, and which we should savour.

It can also be useful to extract ourselves from the rush and detail of everyday life and take time each day to seek peace and simply stop and reflect. You could reflect about anything – from your experiences in the previous day to your situation as a small human being in a massive universe. You could also use this time to not reflect on anything, but instead seek stillness and peace through practices like meditation.



Taking this time to stand back, reflect, and appreciate the experience of life can be fulfilling in itself. It can give us a sense of calm and a clearer sense of our life's context.

Reflection doesn't have to always mean sitting in a field with our legs crossed though. We can appreciate the busier aspects of life as well as the quieter ones. For example, it can be satisfying to reflect on the enjoyment we are feeling when we are in the middle of busy, social experiences with other people, such as parties. Taking a few seconds to do this occasionally can enable us to 'check in' with ourselves during these experiences and fully appreciate them.

PLEASURE

Although most people would acknowledge there is more to life than pleasure alone, experiences of pleasure can lend a great deal of meaning to our lives. From sensory pleasure, such as enjoying food or living in a warm climate, through to intellectual pleasures such as reading a good book.

CREATIVITY

Both the process of creativity and the completion of a creative project can be highly fulfilling. There is an almost boundless range of ways we can be creative, including cooking, writing, music, gardening, and imagining.

DISCOVERY, ADVENTURE, AND LEARNING

Life could be viewed as an opportunity to explore our endlessly rich world, discover new things and develop our skills and talents. The actual process of applying our concentration and efforts to tasks and projects can also give us a great sense of meaning and fulfilment. This comes not just from the achievement or completion of the tasks themselves, but in the process of undertaking them in the first place. This could include learning a skill such as a language or musical instrument, or simply undertaking an intellectual task such as a crossword.

ENJOYING NATURE

Many people find that having a regular connection with nature is essential to the sense of fulfilment they get from life. This may be through walking in the countryside, stopping to appreciate a beautiful view, or having a pet. It is another component of 'savouring the experience of life'.

EXERCISE

There is great meaning to be gained from exercise of any sort. It can provide us with a chance to apply ourselves, experience nature, and savour the experience of being alive. Above all, it can simply make us feel good, both physically and mentally, as well as improving our health in both the short and long term.



FURTHER READING

What's it All About? Philosophy and the Meaning of Life - *Julian Baggini, Granta, London 2005*

Flow - *Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi, Rider, London 2002*

Man's Search for Meaning - *Viktor Frankl, Rider, London 2004*



chapter 3

BEING GOOD

'ONLY THROUGH KINDNESS CAN THE HUMAN RACE ACHIEVE HAPPINESS.'

Bertrand Russell

This chapter will explore how we can live good, moral lives. But before we consider how we can be good, we need to explore what it actually means to be good.

WHAT IS MORALITY?

Morality is a concept that we have developed as human beings. It includes a set of labels we have made up (such as 'good' or 'bad' and 'right' and 'wrong') that we use to make judgements about the world and people's behaviour, and how they should be. There is no specific quality in the universe of 'good' or 'bad' - as these labels didn't exist before human beings came along and applied them.

This may seem like a controversial statement to make, but this is because we are so used to being told that these moral ideas are somehow absolutes, or have been imposed on us from on high by a god or external force. They are not and have not.

And as we will see, the 'made up' nature of morality as an idea does not mean that it is meaningless, relative, or that we can just behave as we like. This is because we care about things as human beings. We are social creatures with particular senses, instincts, needs, and ideas, so certain things matter to us no matter who we are or where we live in the world. For example, we find it important to protect our children, avoid pain, and try to set up rules and arrangements with other people to ensure we won't harm each other.

So, the content of morality matters, even if the label itself is made up. Indeed, if we eventually get the opportunity to look back at the end of our lives, an important factor in whether we judge them to have been fulfilling or not may be whether we feel we were able to identify our values and live in a way that was consistent with them.

What's important about morality is what it stands for. It is an attempt to judge how we should each think and behave while we are alive – towards other people, ourselves, other creatures, and the wider world. We could see it as our personal contract with the world. Our values (also an abstract concept we've made up) are our judgements about how we should – or shouldn't – behave.

Because it is an abstract concept, morality can be hard to get a grip on sometimes, as it doesn't consist of clear boundaries between 'right' and 'wrong'. In truth, it is a collection of grey areas and questions of degree. By its nature, there will be moral questions that people don't agree on.

It is useful to see morality in this light, as it gives us a more realistic view of how moral language and arguments work, and a more reasonable expectation of what we can expect from our own moral behaviour and values when we start to consider them.

Our sense of morality (or 'how we should behave') is informed by a range of factors. These include:

INSTINCTS

Our sense of morality is partly informed by certain natural instincts we have and may have emerged as a result of our biological makeup – for example, the desire to survive or to protect our children and close family. Some recent research suggests we have an 'empathic bias': 'an evolutionary tendency to help those with whom we share the most genes; i.e. our primary group.'² This would

include family, friends, and the people closest to us.

RATIONAL AIMS

Other aspects of morality have perhaps emerged as a result of trying to achieve particular practical goals. This might include having environmental values so that we don't live in a degraded world, or setting up an informal 'social contract' as a society so that people have some basic rules as to how to treat each other.

INFLUENCES

Further ideas of how we should behave might have been made up to support religious ideas, maintain power, or support prejudices.

Our judgements about what we should or should not do could therefore have arisen for various reasons. We may feel strongly about some of these judgements (for example, a desire to protect our loved ones) but it is also quite possible for other people to indoctrinate us with values that we don't genuinely believe in.

We therefore need to be careful about the values we choose to adopt. We each need to think for ourselves about our values and try to identify those that we genuinely feel rather than those that others might be trying to instil in us. Follow your values rather than basing them on deference to authority – of any kind.

ARE WE MORAL?

Another important insight that the abstract nature of morality gives us is understanding why it is sometimes hard for us to consistently meet some of the moral standards we set ourselves. This is because these standards are not only arbitrary and made up, but are also sometimes inconsistent with our natural inclinations.



We can override some of these instincts with rational thinking and determination, but this is not always possible and nor should we expect it to be so.

This doesn't mean that human beings are intrinsically 'bad' or 'sinful' as some thinkers and institutions would have you believe. But nor are we intrinsically 'good'. Instead, we are social creatures that generally see the benefits of cooperation (both for rational and instinctive reasons) and want to put standards and systems in place to achieve this. Some of our natural behaviour is consistent with these moral standards and systems (e.g. caring for our family) but some of it (such as self interest and aggression) can conflict with them.

In reality, morality is therefore an ongoing and uneasy balancing act in both our individual lives and wider society - between our instincts and rationality. We often fail to recognise this fact, both in our individual lives and in our political discourse. This can lead to us setting unrealistic expectations of ourselves, others and the society we live in. If we acknowledged the balancing act required by morality, we could therefore improve our moral expectations, as well as our lives, relationships, and moral and political discourse in general.

We're capable of good or bad, and the conditions in the environment and society around us (from our education to our relationships and economic situation) can have a significant influence on how we behave. Our task is therefore to build a society where the conditions are created to promote 'good' behaviour.

WHAT ARE YOUR VALUES?

So, how can we work out what our own values are?

In the modern world it can be a lot harder than it looks to identify what your values are, as there are many powerful influences trying to persuade you that their values are best, which can cloud your own vision of what really matters.

As already mentioned, we're animals that possess certain instincts and that are prone to certain patterns and responses in our thinking. Both of these can be exploited by unscrupulous people who understand how to manipulate them. For example, our tendency to be influenced by the behaviour and attitudes of large groups of people can lead us to supporting or condoning values that we might otherwise reject - such as the sexist or unequal treatment of women in a male-dominated workplace.

The solution is firstly to clear away the 'fog' of these pressures and influences by learning how to think well (see chapter 1), including exercising critical thinking. We should then take some time to stand back from the world and think about what our values actually are.

Simply take a few minutes to step back and think about what your values are. What are the things you really care about? How should people treat each other and the world around them? Try and come up with a few principles that summarise how you want to try to live your life. You might also find it useful to discuss your values with other people, as this can help us challenge our assumptions and bring our ideas into sharper focus - especially if you've not explored these issues in depth for a while.

This process doesn't have to be a big intellectual struggle – your values may well be a mixture of instinctive and rational ideas. Some of these will be values you aspire to, even if you don't feel you consistently match up to them yet in your life – for example, being open to helping anyone you see in need.

Other values may simply be instinctive reactions and feelings (e.g. a desire to ensure other animals are protected) rather than carefully thought-out rational principles. Be careful though to check that these feelings aren't purely driven out of fear, anger, suspicion, or other negative emotions.

But don't be put off if your own values don't directly match the accepted ideas of what is good and admirable today, as some of these accepted ideas (for example, the idea that we need to be aggressive and competitive to succeed in life) may actually be inconsistent with human flourishing. The point is to identify what really matters to you and to not be ashamed of it.

We should provide a caveat here that while it's important to be strong about your values (a point we'll explore further shortly), it's also important to be open to reason and reflection too. We should be prepared to review and adjust our principles in the light of better evidence or arguments. This doesn't mean you are betraying your beliefs. It just means they are evolving and becoming more refined.

BEING GOOD

Just like finding the things that gives our lives meaning, our values are subjective to some extent, so you have to reach your own view of what yours are. In this section however we've set out some common values held by many people and thinkers that you may feel you hold as well. All of

them contribute towards the overall aim of seeking a fair and just society – with basic principles to help us coexist peacefully.

These principles together could be said to form the Golden Rule, which says 'treat others in the way you wish to be treated'. This principle has formed a common spine through both Eastern and Western traditions of thought, espoused by figures as diverse as Confucius, Jesus, John Stuart Mill, and Immanuel Kant.

This is just an initial, non-exhaustive list, and we've provided it simply to give some examples, and also to show how you can start putting these values (and any others you may have) into practice in your daily life:

TREAT OTHERS WITH KINDNESS

It could be argued that kindness is one of the most important moral principles there is, as it is done for its own sake and expects nothing in return. It can also make us feel good about ourselves. Showing people kindness and compassion in simple daily behaviour could include smiling at others, reaching out to people, and seeing what you can do to make the world better.

SHOW EMPATHY

Think about your effects on others and the outside world. Also, put yourself in the position of other people and consider how they might feel.

LIVE PEACEFULLY

Seek peaceful coexistence with people. This doesn't mean you have to be a pushover – just seek peace where possible and be willing to be the one taking the extra step to do it when you think it's required. For example, pausing before you decide to shout back at someone who has insulted you, and considering whether there is a better way to handle it. But at the same time, holding your position and taking a stand in a reasonable, calm way if you feel it is necessary.



HELP OTHERS

Approach life with the desire to help and be 'of service' to other people. Look beyond yourself and your own interests. For example, give time to people in need when you see them – from visiting an isolated elderly neighbour to volunteering for a good cause.

PROMOTE FREEDOM

Respect and help to protect each person's ability to live their life as they wish, as long as it doesn't harm others.

BE JUST AND FAIR

Live with a sense that everyone should be treated equally and fairly, with the same rules applied to all. Also, help to support these rules and the consistent application of reasonable consequences for those who don't follow them. On a day-to-day level, this could include behaviour such as paying your taxes in full, not demanding special treatment above others, and being honest with people. It could also mean seeing every human being as equal, and treating everyone with equal respect and compassion.

SHARE RESOURCES FAIRLY

This point is part of 'fairness' above but is so fundamental we are listing it alone. It is the principle that everyone should have access to food, water, shelter, and the other resources essential to a reasonable human life, such as access to education and health care. This could bring some interesting moral challenges for our personal behaviour, such as only taking the basic resources we need, sharing any excess resources we have (including income) and having a principle to never exploit other people.

PROTECT THE NATURAL WORLD

Concern and respect for the natural world has been an important human value for thousands of years, but we live in a time where this principle is particularly important

– not just as a means to an end (such as ensuring good lives for future generations) but as an end in itself (to protect the natural world for its own sake).

LIVING YOUR VALUES

Possessing a set of values isn't of any use unless you act in accordance with them in a reasonably consistent way and stand up for them – especially when others are behaving in ways that conflict with them. Let's deal with the latter point first:

STANDING UP FOR YOUR VALUES

The thing about values is that the times where they are most important are when they are most under pressure and you feel it most difficult to hold on to them. So, courage is a key ingredient in our ability to stand up for our values.

We need to get used to challenging and questioning things that instinctively don't seem right, fair, or just to us, and speaking out. This can apply to large-scale issues, such as getting politically active and helping to shape the society you live in. But it can also apply on a small scale, such as asking someone to pick up a piece of litter they've dropped in the street. This 'practice' of speaking up directly to other people could also give us the strength we need to stand up in the future when it really counts.

LIVING IN LINE WITH YOUR VALUES

We have provided a few examples of how to live in line with each of the values listed earlier, but here are some more general principles to help you live in line with any values you have:

Make some simple rules – establish a few simple, memorable principles of how to live (e.g. 'Be kind to everyone'). Having these in your mind can really help you to make better decisions quickly.

Identify some priorities – set out some basic actions you can take to live in line with each of your values – what would make the biggest difference? For example, you may decide to reduce your air travel or stop eating meat as part of your value of protecting the natural world. Focus on these priorities to start with, then try to move all your behaviour in line with these values.

Pause and think before acting – you don't have to think for several minutes before taking any action, but do just take a breath and check yourself before speaking or reacting, to assess what the impact of your action might be and what the best response might be. This is particularly important on occasions when you are inclined to react in an immediate, instinctive, emotional way, such as lashing out or shouting in anger. Just a slight pause can make a big difference to help you behave in a way that's consistent with your values rather than in a way that you will regret.

Be honest with yourself as to whether you're being consistent with your values or not, and then act accordingly if you're not. The most consistent response may not always be the easiest one, but it may well be the most satisfying in the long term.

2 Moral development and reality,

John C. Gibbs, OUP New York 2014, p.119



FURTHER READING

How Are We to Live: Ethics in an Age of Self-interest – Peter Singer, OUP, Oxford 1997

What is Good?: The Search for the Best Way to Live – AC Grayling, W&N, London 2007

Ethics: A Very Short Introduction – Simon Blackburn, OUP, Oxford 2003



chapter 4

DYING WELL

**'DO NOT ACT AS IF YOU WERE GOING TO LIVE
TEN THOUSAND YEARS. DEATH HANGS OVER
YOU. WHILE YOU LIVE, WHILE IT IS IN YOUR
POWER, BE GOOD.'**

Marcus Aurelius

The subject of death is one we spend much of our time trying to avoid, and yet thinking about it in a realistic and courageous way can have an almost unimaginably positive effect on our lives, giving us greater pleasure and infusing them with greater meaning.

This chapter will help you to think about death and its place in our lives. Many of the recommendations flow from a simple yet

powerful idea: the need to face up to the reality of your own death, and see life as a brief window of existence – when you have both sentience and consciousness – in an otherwise blank state of non-existence. You can then use this insight to inform your whole attitude towards how you live, as well as how you view death – both your own and that of other people. Let us then begin by facing up to death.

ACCEPT THE REALITY OF YOUR OWN DEATH

After about 90 years of living (if not quite a bit before), you are going to die.

Just reflect on this fact for a moment. For it is perhaps the most important fact of our individual lives, yet it is the one that most human beings spend their lives trying to ignore or avoid. Indeed, many of the most popular institutions and ideas in human society (from religions to medicine) could be seen as innovative ways we have come up with to avoid, deny, or ignore this reality.

We can, however, enhance our lives by facing up to this fact and using it to ensure we live fully while we can.

It can be quite difficult for each of us to 'process' the idea that we are going to die, as our consciousness is so busy and our experience of life so vibrant that it's very difficult to comprehend that this will stop. We are so used to existing we don't think about not existing. But try to think about this for a moment, and let the reality of it set in.

Just to press this point home, consider the age you are now. Then, consider the fact that you're likely to live for a maximum of around 90 years before you go through the final process of dying yourself. Do the calculations of what this means for you at this point in your life.

If this realisation of 'limited time left' hits you hard, then you are probably thinking about it properly. It's a sobering thought and is perhaps the starkest reality of life. But, for most people, it is obscured by our absorption in everyday life and the fact that death is a topic largely hidden from us in modern society. If we can apply this perspective to our lives in a positive way however, we can transform them.

SEE LIFE AS AN AMAZING OPPORTUNITY

It is easy for each of us to have a negative and doom-laden attitude to the idea of our own life and death. We often see our life as the focus point, and death as the end of it, where there begins an infinite period of nothing. But why can't we see it the other way round?

Rather than see death as the exception and life as the rule (i.e. death as the end of a life, and something to be dreaded), perhaps we should see life as the exception – a brief but amazing flash of light – a window within the darkness of non-existence that we should make every moment of whilst we have the profound luck to appreciate it. So, life as opportunity, not just death as loss.

Let's briefly consider just what an opportunity life really is. **All you will ever experience as 'you' will happen in this short period of time – and never again.** All the love, pain, happiness, unhappiness, adventure, peace, learning, creativity – everything you will ever experience and think about – will only happen in this time. Once you are dead, your brain will 'turn off', meaning you'll never be able to experience anything ever again, and your thoughts will no longer exist or matter to you. This life is therefore your one chance.

When we finally accept that our own life is finite, and what life (and death) really means, we see its true importance and can begin to accept responsibility for how we live it – to climb into the driver's seat and take control, rather than sit in the back as a passenger.

The key lesson is therefore that we should make the most of life while we have it. This is not simply a meaningless cliché, as even hackneyed phrases like 'Life is



not a rehearsal' have some truth to them when you consider the power of their real meaning. And their real meaning is this: don't live as if life is just a dream or can be put on hold – this unique opportunity to exist is real, it's happening now, and will be over for you all too soon.

It doesn't matter what you do with your time alive – whether it's adventurous or quiet; successful or modest – as long as you're living in a way that's true to you. If you are holding yourself back from doing this for some reason, then you should return to these basic facts about the finitude of your life and use them to give you the bravery you need to overcome any fears or worries – as in the end, what are you really risking?

This is the only opportunity you will ever have to live as 'you', and once you've died, all the things that might have held you back, everything you've worried or cared about, will cease to concern you. Given the size of the opportunity and the minuteness of the risk, we should choose to unburden ourselves, be courageous and live the lives we really want.

APPRECIATE LIFE WHILE YOU ARE ALIVE

Many of us tend to be so busy and absorbed in the pressure and rush of everyday living that we rarely (if ever) take time to step back from our lives and appreciate the remarkable fact that we are alive and what this really means. In fact, one of the most mind-blowing aspects of being alive is realising what it means to be alive!

Learning to appreciate life like this, and reminding yourself about it regularly, can be one of the great pleasures of life, and can bring us a real sense of meaning. No matter how difficult everyday living may be sometimes, seeing our lives in this wider

context can help us to put everyday worries into perspective and give us a great sense of calm. It can also help us to think about death in a more realistic and helpful way.

See 'Savouring the experience of life' in chapter 2 for more ways you can put this into practice in your daily life.

UNDERSTAND WHAT DEATH IS – AND WHAT IT'S LIKE

By understanding the reality of the processes we and our bodies could go through when we die, we may well gain the final inspiration we need to convince us to live the lives we want, without letting them pass us by or burdening ourselves with unnecessary stresses and imaginings.

Death is a great leveller. No matter how rich, famous, or successful we were in our lifetimes, we all experience similar processes and environments as the end of our lives arrive. For the majority of people our final hours are spent in mundane places such as hospital wards, nursing homes, and our own bedrooms.

We also relinquish most of our control and agency in our lives when we get to their final stages. Ultimately none of us has the power to cheat death beyond a certain point.

These are yet further reasons to ensure that, while you are in control of your life, you make the most of this agency and ensure the time you have is well spent!

LET YOUR LIFE FLASH BEFORE YOUR EYES – WHILE YOU'RE ALIVE

A common myth peddled about people who have come close to death is that they 'see their life flash before their eyes' in the moments before they were likely to die. This may give us the sense that each of us will have the chance for a final 'review' of our lives before we die – a chance to reflect upon the journey we've been on.

Not only does research suggest this experience is largely apocryphal but the reality is that you may die suddenly and never get the chance to review the life you've led and cherish the memories you've accumulated. Life could end in an instant at any point and you may never get the opportunity for a neat 'tying up' of your own narrative – which, for many of us, would seem deeply regrettable.

So, why not spend some regular time reviewing the journey of your life and being thankful while you are living? In other words live 'with the constant awareness that one's existence is not only finite but always in danger of ending unexpectedly.'³ It could make your life more enjoyable and fulfilling.

3 How we die: reflections on life's final chapter, Sherwin B Nuland, *Vintage Books* 2002, p.242

CONCLUSION - HOW SHOULD WE LIVE WITH DEATH?

We don't need to dwell on death as we go through life. But we should live with a clear sense of perspective at the back of our minds regarding the brevity of life and the certainty of death – however much it may be hidden from us in modern society, and however far away we may feel from it when we are in the process of living.

Living with this perspective on death should encourage us to savour every moment of our lives and make the most of this unique opportunity to live them well.



FURTHER READING

How We Die: reflections on life's final chapter, Sherwin B Nuland, *Vintage Books* 2002
The Denial of Death, Ernest Becker, *Simon & Schuster*, New York 1973



CONCLUSIONS

This guide has been just a brief introduction to some of the big questions of life but we hope it provides a useful starting point for exploring them in more detail.

Our final conclusion is this – each of us can find meaning and fulfilment in our lives, but we can do this most effectively when we are the authors of our own lives rather than being swept along, influenced, or manipulated by others.

To do this we need to be able to think for ourselves and be honest with ourselves about the big questions, such as what gives us meaning and how we think we should live, regardless of whether our views are in line with what other people think.

Try this considered approach to living. We hope it brings you wonder, joy, solace, and fulfilment – in essence, a good life.



We bring non-religious people together to develop their own views and an understanding of the world around them. If you'd like to support our work you can join us at **humanists.uk/join**



39 Moreland Street,
London, EC1V 8BB

0207 324 3066

info@humanists.uk