

The Responsibility of Purpose

By Kai Cahil

Purpose is not something to be trifled with.

Many people seek purpose. In an ominous monologue by Agent Smith in one of *The Matrix* movies, he states in part that “purpose that pulls us, that guides us, that drives us; it is purpose that defines, purpose that binds us”. There is some truth to what he states in that scene, albeit in a vastly different context than what Agent Smith conveys. Yes, knowing your life’s purpose is a glorious and amazing thing. It provides higher levels of clarity and can both pull and push you through hardship, and align your path with the highest or greatest vision of what your life is meant to be. Knowing your purpose can satisfy one of the oldest and deepest questions of humanity: “Why do I exist?”. However, it’s worth knowing ahead of time what you’re getting yourself into. Remembering your purpose for this lifetime (why you chose to be born as yourself in this lifetime) is among the greatest revelations a human can have, and it’s also among the greatest responsibilities a human can have.

Now typically it would do some good to define purpose, but I like to get to the meat of an argument quickly so I’ll establish the landscape fairly quickly. When someone says “purpose” in the context of “what’s my purpose in life?”, what comes to mind is “a reason to exist”. But what exactly *is* a reason to exist? What kind of reason? Given by whom? And to what ends? These are important questions to ponder as a foundation for preparing oneself for purpose.

I’d frame it as a spectrum. Purpose can be light and non-serious, assigned by a friend or stranger. Purpose can also be heavy and, by some perspectives, ordained by “God” themselves. Conflating the source of purpose along that spectrum can cause some serious inner grief. In a beautifully created scene in *Rick and Morty*, Rick creates a robot to help pass the butter across the dinner table. When the robot spontaneously gains sentience and self-awareness and asks Rick “what is my purpose?” and Rick responds “To pass me the butter,” the robot responds “Oh god” in existential horror. That little scene points out an important caveat about purpose: purpose that is not self-administered and self-selected can be existentially dreadful; especially when it is assigned by someone else who may be no more divine, wise, or compassionate than oneself (and in the worst case, infinitely less so).

So again, what exactly *is* “purpose”? In the grand scheme of things, and in my own exploration of the topic, purpose is a reason; a defining drive behind existence *that goes beyond mere survival*. All life has an innate drive to survive, so it’s important to not confuse the drive to survive with the *reason* to survive besides for its own sake. As sentient beings, we humans have the blessing and curse of assigning meaning to our definition of purpose. Meaning exists as a translational layer between what could be called “divine truth” and the actual manifestation

of what we can innately know of that “divine truth”. And herein lies the burden, and the lightness, of purpose.

In practical first-person shorthand, “purpose” can be defined as “the reason I exist”. Defining one's purpose is arguably the most worthy endeavor in life apart from enacting the purpose you discover for yourself. So many humans (nearly all humans ever) have asked themselves this core question: “Why am I here?” or “What is my purpose in life?” or “Why do I exist?” It's not a small question to ask yourself by any means. Hardly anyone has a clear answer for themselves. Entire industries have been built around the question. Generations have lived and died a hundred times over in pursuit of answers. Many have lived entire lives without ever finding an answer. In many ways it's one of the most fundamental human questions. The ability to conceive of the concept of purpose as something apart from ourselves is a gift of mankind and part of what separates us from nature. Yet it's also a ball-and-chain in some ways. It anchors us to the pursuit of meaning, purpose, and the quest for answers.

There are ways to find one's purpose in this life. Many lineages and wisdom traditions, both ancient and modern, exist to shorten the path to finding an answer to the question. Before I speak on what worked for me, it's important to know what you're getting yourself into with the pursuit of purpose.

What does it mean to have a purpose? Well, it can mean a lot. Having a purpose is a responsibility. In the order of importance of responsibilities, it's among the most important possible. Let's say that the pursuit of purpose leads one towards the highest possible knowing: an understanding that transcends a single human lifetime. Depending on your spiritual lenses, it could look like “the reason I incarnated into this lifetime”, it could look like “my dharma for this life”, it could look like “the reason God put me on this earth”. Whatever your spiritual framework, it is a divine knowing that extends beyond your lifetime to serve a greater cosmic purpose, both inner and outer.

That's a big deal. Like a really big deal. It means that you basically have a responsibility to yourself, your soul, “The Universe”, “God”, “Karma”, time & space, and maybe even all of the above, to “do something” with and during your brief time as a human being in this current lifetime. It means a responsibility to act on your purpose and to explore what it means to fulfill it.

It also means a responsibility to continue questioning your purpose and your belief in it. The continued questioning is really one of the best and only ways to turn belief into knowing. It is what worked for me. Keep asking yourself, in many circumstances and situations. My late mother used to say “A belief is the result of a decision to stop asking questions”. This is true, and it's only one step in the process. Knowing is what comes after belief. If you ask yourself the same question 1000 times and you get the same answer 999 of the times, chances are pretty high that the answer has some truth to it. But truth can be a terrifying thing, especially with regard to the responsibility it implies.

Once you get a “divine purpose” for your life, it's worth asking yourself what it means to avoid it and/or do nothing. After all, if you find that a part of yourself exists beyond a single lifetime and

carried some level of intention regarding your activities and accomplishments during your current life, then who are you letting down by avoiding your own responsibilities? If you take the confirmation of your purpose to a level of divinity then you could be basically “disobeying the word of God” to put it in a narrow religious context; put more broadly, you could be “going against the flow of the universe”.

This itself is a big reason why it’s worth pursuing “grand” purpose in the first place: you may well find that the purpose you encounter comes from a much bigger source than yourself in this one lifetime. It may come from somewhere or something much grander than you had ever imagined to exist. The responsibility of purpose extends across your own life as well as from whence it came. Once you have a purpose greater than yourself, you suddenly become burdened with the responsibility of enacting it.

Acting on your purpose is a responsibility to yourself in this lifetime as well as beyond it. It’s a responsibility to use your limited time as a human to honor the inner work you’ve done to get this far, the work you’ve done to ask yourself the question “why am I alive?” and “What is my purpose?” so many times that you’ve transcended your own belief into outright knowing. That in and of itself is no small feat. Few people can bear to ask themselves these questions and face the uncertainty a single time, let alone hundreds or thousands of times; however long it takes you as an individual to move beyond belief and into knowing. There’s a beautiful affirmation of certainty in receiving the same answer time and time again, but it comes with an equal measure of responsibility. After all, if you reach a point of knowing beyond belief, what does it mean to turn your back on the truth you’ve discovered? You may very well find that it requires reorienting your entire life in order to pursue your purpose.

It’s also important to think about the moral landscape relative to purpose: to what ends will you pursue your purpose? It goes both ways. Pursuing purpose can mean overcoming obstacles, but at times it can also mean becoming an obstacle to others. It’s important to spend time thinking about how “Purpose” with a capital P fits into your personal moral landscape; specifically, where its pursuit crosses moral or personal boundaries. “To what end shall I pursue my purpose?” is a deeply personal question and one well worth starting to think about now rather than after you get there.

In one sense, purpose beyond one’s current life is a grander thing than personal moral conditioning. However, it’s very important to consider the perspective of your higher self or the “source” of your knowing of purpose. At some point, the pursuit of an aligned purpose may begin to corrode the foundation upon which that purpose was identified, if it requires doing so at the expense of others. And there’s even the possibility yet still that the purpose identified is specifically to dismantle the moral structures upon which modern society stands. So telling someone to explore their purpose to the point of knowing is not something that ought to be taken lightly either. In the Netflix series *Ingress*, a line beautifully illustrates how serious this can be. When asked “How far?”, the antagonist responds, “To the end of the line, *wherever that may be*. That is the path I have chosen to carve.”

Given that purpose is such a personal matter, and that there are billions of instances of individualized purpose present on Earth at this moment, it would stand to reason that at least some of those individuals would align with a destructive type of purpose. However, it is a personal belief that those polarities of purpose, destructive versus generative, would balance out in a way that is best for humankind. The quote from Loki of the MCU comes to mind: "I am Loki of Asgard, and I am burdened with glorious purpose". Purpose can be a massive fuel of negative egoistic action. But it can also be a source of hope and endurance through as-yet-to-be-imagined trials for oneself and others.

It's worth also addressing the presence of fear. Purpose can be terrifying. Apart from the level of responsibility it entails and implies (cosmic level responsibility), it can also mean embarking on the journey of making changes so vast it requires letting go of much of what you've come to know as making you *you*. Or, it may not.

If you're lucky enough to be presently aligned with your purpose, then you can let go of the tension created by the pursuit of an answer: you learn that you are and have been the answer and can continue forth with confidence and gratitude for your existing alignment. If you find your purpose may require you to reorganize your life and make drastic changes, then you've got some work ahead of you. It's also worth knowing that your life's journey up until the point of transition from belief to knowing is likely an important context and perspective necessary for the ability to act on your own remembered purpose for this life. Some perspectives and frameworks are necessary to be understood in order to know what the opposite can truly mean.

There's also a responsibility to the communities and individuals who you might help along the way. Few things can be truly accomplished alone, and getting help from others in enacting a life's purpose is honorable work. It also allows you to be a beacon to others. Especially in this day and age, so many people turn away from the questions of "why am I alive" and "what is my purpose" that it's a rare and inspiring thing to say to a stranger, new acquaintance, and even a well-known friend "I'm living my life's purpose and I need your help to see it through".

Hopefully your own conviction can be a light shining through the cracks in the walls that people build in order to protect themselves from the uncertainty of not having an answer to such defining questions. To be certain, these walls can protect us, but they can also keep us from going out and actually doing the great things we're truly capable of. Often times they're necessarily built in order to maintain a stable world view in the absence of personally identifiable purpose. Have compassion, especially for the most cynical skeptics of the concept of purpose.

It seems like it only makes sense that after going through untold amounts of difficulty in order to realize a life's purpose, there would be some kind of tangible reward at the end. That after going through whatever you had to in order to reach soul-level certainty about the purpose of your current life, things *should* get easier.

Spoiler alert: they don't.

If anything, life can get temporarily harder. Life may become significantly more meaningful immediately, but it may not necessarily get easier.

It's important to be aware of your relationship with time and how that might change post-purpose-revelation. To be frank, the realization of a greater purpose for your life might suddenly make your remaining years feel overwhelmingly inadequate to complete the task. This is not a bad thing, though: overwhelming pressure can be a catalyst for out-of-the-box creativity in how you go about executing your mission. On the flip side, it can also eliminate boredom and change the meaning of your "free time".

Awareness of purpose can suddenly make unscheduled time no longer feel so free. If you have a greater purpose for your life, after all, then what does it mean to have undedicated time? If anything, realization of purpose can make time suddenly feel extraordinarily precious. Undedicated time ("free time") is an important thing to have for yourself, and becomes something important to schedule into your life.

The clarity of purpose certainly helps with understanding the necessity of time being present with whatever work your purpose may require, as well as consciously stepping away from those activities in order to recharge and recuperate and get perspective on what you're doing to advance your purpose. After all, what you do to recharge your mind, body and soul may not be the same thing that you exist to achieve, do, or experience.

On that note, it's also important to release any expectation that purpose will pay your bills. If you're very lucky you may find a way to do so immediately or at least very quickly. However, more likely than not, it will take time to get to the point of paying for existence with the work of your purpose. This is one of the unfair feeling things about purpose: knowing why you exist can unlock a phenomenal amount of drive and motivation to execute, and can even compensate to some degree for a higher wage, but it doesn't always outright immediately connect to keeping a roof over your head. As with most things: having a financial buffer makes acting on a discovered purpose significantly easier than attempting to do so with little to no resources. In a sense, it's likely the case that growing your own financial means is a supporting activity of your life's purpose; just make sure you don't conflate growing your means with the pure action of executing your purpose; and if you find you have a surplus beyond what you require, then please for the love of the greater good, give to those who have also found their purpose but lack the means to execute.

Realization of purpose rightfully produces many questions, not all of which have easy answers. You will, however, have an easily available barometer for alignment: you can simply ask yourself "does this align with my purpose or not?". If you don't get a strong "Yes" then chances are high that there might be a different and more aligned way. You'll also get a good measure of how much alignment you're doing by watching how often you ask yourself that very question.

Again, a part of the responsibility of purpose. A responsibility to ask and learn, to believe, to know.

Purpose is not something to be trifled with, but if you choose to pursue it, then part of the work is learning how to carry its weight.