
Linus Gjøstøl Wardenær, St. Hallvard videregående skole, Norway

“Accept the fact that the achievement of your happiness is the only moral purpose of your life, and that happiness—not pain or mindless self-indulgence—is the proof of your moral integrity, since it is the proof and the result of your loyalty to the achievement of your values.”

Ayn Rand (1905–1982), *Atlas Shrugged* (1957), Random House, p. 1059.

The quote addresses the meaning of life, asserting that happiness is the only moral purpose in life. However, it specifies a deeper form of happiness—one rooted in following and achieving personal values. The quote raises many interesting philosophical questions, such as: What is happiness? How does personal happiness relate to collective morality? And in this essay, I will be examining and reflecting upon the meaning, and the questions that arise from such a bold and philosophically rich quote.

The quote starts off boldly: “the achievement of your happiness is the only moral purpose of your life.” This wording, especially the use of the word “fact,” feels presumptuous. How can anyone claim something so subjective as an absolute fact? While it’s fine to debate whether happiness is the sole purpose of life, calling it a “fact” makes me question the speaker’s credibility. Although perhaps it’s just meant as rhetorical emphasis, but it’s worth noting that claiming certainty on such topics might undermine credibility rather than strengthen it.

The statement begins by asserting that “the achievement of your happiness is the only moral purpose of your life...,” which may seem problematic at first, as happiness in all forms doesn’t necessarily have ethical boundaries. Many might initially disagree with the idea that happiness, in any sense, is the sole moral purpose. However, the quote clarifies its meaning when it continues, “... and that happiness—not pain or mindless self-indulgence—is the proof of your moral integrity, since it is the proof and the result of your loyalty to the achievement of your values.” Here, it specifies that the focus is not on happiness derived from instant gratification or selfish desires, but rather on the deeper happiness that comes from being loyal to one’s values. Although the exact nature of these values is not clearly defined, it is evident that the type of happiness referred to is rooted in fulfilling one’s principles, not in fleeting pleasure. In essence, the happiness that demonstrates moral integrity is not merely about feeling good but about staying true to one’s values and principles, suggesting that the only moral purpose in life is to achieve one’s values and find happiness as a result of that achievement.

To unpack the quote more clearly: when simplified, it suggests that the achievement of your values is the only moral purpose in life. By “the achievement of your values,” it implies the realization or commitment to a structured hierarchy of beliefs about what is most important, particularly regarding what one deems right and wrong. When the quote states that this is “...the only moral purpose in life,” it conveys that fulfilling one’s values is the sole purpose in relation to ethics and morality. This philosophy advocates for an ethical view in which living a fulfilling life means aligning with and realizing one’s values, ultimately leading to the happiness that arises from this fulfillment—referred to as “the only moral purpose.”

Immediately to challenge this statement and ethical view of living, I raise the point that values are not necessarily and inherently good—good for society, others, or even oneself. For example, a sadist, who derives pleasure from hurting others physically and or psychologically,

could achieve “moral purpose” according to this quote by living out their values, even if those values involve harming others. In this framework, the sadist would attain happiness by fulfilling their values, no matter how destructive those values might be. A counterargument could suggest that the quote excludes such behavior because it specifies “not pain or mindless self-indulgence.” Hurting others might be considered self-indulgent and therefore irrelevant to the idea of moral purpose. However, the quote uses “mindless self-indulgence,” not simply “self-indulgence.” For a sadist, tormenting others could be deliberate, calculated, and central to their joy, thereby fitting into the framework of values-based happiness. Other examples of people achieving moral purpose through values that are broadly accepted as immoral include psychopaths and pedophiles. Though their values are widely condemned, they are still values and, according to the statement, leads to happiness and “moral purpose”. To conclude this critique, there are no ethical boundaries stated in the statement for what one can have as a value, thus this philosophy excuses immoral actions by letting immoral values and actions shine in the same light as good and moral actions.

Another counterargument is the quote’s reference to “not pain,” suggesting that values which cause pain to others or perhaps even oneself cannot lead to moral purpose. However, I would argue that the distinction between pain and suffering is more appropriate here. Pain, such as the discomfort of exercising to achieve a greater goal—whether that be a better physique or improved health—is often necessary for growth. A deeper example is Jung’s concept of the shadow, which illustrates how confronting and integrating one’s darker aspects can be psychologically painful but essential for personal development and a deeper understanding of oneself. If we exclude all forms of pain, then achieving moral purpose becomes, in my opinion, implausible. I would say pain is an integral part of the process of both realizing one’s values and achieving them. The word “suffering” might better capture the idea of needless or harmful pain, while still allowing for the beneficial pain/discomfort that accompanies the pursuit of personal values. While the quote makes a strong connection between happiness and moral integrity, it doesn’t impose restrictions on immoral values and seems to overlook the crucial role that pain can play in personal growth and achieving one’s goals/values.

Another point of critique of the statement is its focus on the individual, ignoring the importance of the collective and society, as the only moral purpose is in relation to oneself. One could argue that the quote is overly individualistic, raising questions about how such an outlook would fit into a larger societal framework. If everyone’s only moral purpose was their own happiness, would society suffer from self-centeredness and disregard for the common good? However, there is a counterpoint worth considering: while the quote promotes individual happiness, it also ties that happiness to the achievement of values. If most people have values centered around kindness, altruism, and contributing to society, then a society driven by individual moral integrity might actually be more compassionate and cooperative. The fear that such individualism would erode social bonds might be unfounded if we assume that most individuals naturally value the well-being of others. In fact, a society where people pursued happiness by living authentically and adhering to their core values might reduce hypocrisy and cowardice, leading to a more harmonious and honest community. Therefore, while it may initially seem that this philosophy could undermine social cohesion, I would say that it probably would rather foster a society where people are more committed to their values and, by extension, to helping others, and therefore fits well both as a societal framework and an individual one.

Furthermore, I believe such a framework would uplift truth and create a society in which people could proudly and safely be their authentic self. The authentic self represents the idea of a person who is fully in tune with their values and lives by them without compromise. This philosophy offers the possibility of said authentic self, suggesting a society built on integrity instead of hypocrisy and cowardice. In such a society, people would feel free to show their true selves, creating trust and teamwork. If we as individuals would stick to our values, we would encourage others to do the same, leading to a community where values and honesty would be the pillars upon which we would build our society. This philosophy does not only bring personal satisfaction but also helps build a culture where moral courage can flourish, benefiting everyone. Living authentically highlights how important it is to let integrity guide our actions and relationships, paving the way for a kinder and fairer society. Still, I feel it is important to emphasize that such a society works only if man is good, which I fortunately believe to be true. Exert truth upon reality, and reality will exert happiness upon you.

Lastly, I feel I should raise perhaps the most important point of critique. Since I mentioned how this framework would work both at the individual level and at the societal, I want to emphasize that this only works theoretically. If we assume both that man is good and that we have the capability at a societal level to incorporate such a moral framework, it is only then that this framework could become a reality. I do not believe we can do so; therefore, I question the pragmatism of this philosophy. Although I still see it as an ideal, a societal ideal and an individual ideal. And perhaps this was what Rand meant for it to be, an ideal.

In my opinion, this quote is nothing more than another philosopher or thinker boldly claiming they know the meaning of life or, as it is written in the quote, “the only moral purpose of life.” To anyone who dares make such a claim, I have respect for their belief and courage, but I also remain skeptical. The complexity of the human experience makes it difficult to reduce the meaning of life to any singular idea, and bold assertions like this should be met with both curiosity and critical thinking. I would even be skeptical about whether the philosopher fully believes their own claim or whether they present it as an ideal to strive for. Ultimately, this raises the eternal question: what is the true meaning of life? I believe no one will ever definitively know the answer.

Given that, I cannot blame anyone for allowing and wanting the illusion of meaning to fall over their eyes, consciously or unconsciously. Perhaps, in seeking to live authentically and by our values, we come closer to an answer for this eternal question, even if it is only personal and subjective. And even if no universal truth exists, the journey of striving for such meaning—living according to values, maintaining integrity, and seeking happiness—may be just as important as the answer itself. This endless pursuit might be what gives life its richness and depth, allowing for personal and societal growth, even in the face of uncertainty.