

Is purpose a decision or a discovery?

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We would all like to have a sense of purpose in our lives that drives us forward regardless of the obstacles in our path. But is our life purpose a decision or a discovery? Many of us are drawn to the notion of a singular, overriding passion. We are often encouraged to identify this passion as early as possible and to pursue it with unwavering determination.

This advice is prevalent in self-help literature, career counselling, and motivational talks. The idea is that knowing your true calling early on can streamline your efforts, focus your energy, and ultimately lead to success and satisfaction. However, the reality of life is often more complex. People frequently find that their interests evolve, their priorities shift, and unforeseen opportunities arise. In a world where change is the only constant, adhering rigidly to a single path can sometimes feel limiting or even counterproductive.

In the classic film, *Mr. Holland's Opus*, the musician Glenn Holland takes a job teaching music theory to high school students to pay the bills while he pursues his dream of writing a great symphony which will be his crowning achievement.

He never wrote that symphony, but he spent the next 40 years teaching at that high school and touched the lives of many different children who go on to achieve remarkable things. As one former student of his who has gone on to become a State Governor says to Glenn Holland during his farewell ceremony: "Look around you. There is not a life in this room that you have not touched, and each one of us is a better person because of you. We are your symphony, Mr. Holland. We are the melodies and the notes of your opus. And we are the music of your life."

Contrary to the advice of locking onto a single passion, there is a growing recognition that purpose can be an emergent quality. This means that instead of being something we decide at a specific point in time, our purpose can unfold and reveal itself through our experiences and the choices we make.

The idea of purpose as an emergent quality aligns with the view that life is a dynamic journey rather than a static destination. It acknowledges that our understanding of ourselves and what we find meaningful can evolve. This perspective allows for greater flexibility and openness to new experiences, which can ultimately lead to a more authentic and fulfilling sense of purpose.

Philosophers such as Aristotle and Immanuel Kant have engaged in profound debates regarding the nature of life's purpose, questioning whether it is an inherent discovery or a constructed decision. Aristotle, in his teleological worldview, posited that every entity in nature has a *telos*, or inherent purpose, which unfolds through its natural development. He famously stated, "The soul never thinks without a picture," highlighting his belief that purpose is ingrained in the essence of beings and discovered through their natural capacities and virtues.

In contrast, Kant emphasised a more constructivist approach, arguing that individuals must actively reason and choose their purposes based on moral principles and rational deliberation. According to Kant, personal autonomy and the exercise of practical reason are crucial in constructing a purposeful life. He asserted, "Two things fill the mind with ever-increasing wonder and awe, the more often and the more intensely the mind of thought is drawn to them: the starry heavens above me and the moral law within me." Here, Kant underscores the importance of moral law as a guiding principle in shaping personal goals and decisions.

Victor Frankl, a Holocaust survivor and renowned psychiatrist, profoundly explored the quest for meaning in his seminal work *Man's Search for Meaning*. He posits that discovering purpose in life is not merely a luxury but a fundamental human drive, often unearthed through profound suffering and adversity.

Frankl writes, “When we are no longer able to change a situation, we are challenged to change ourselves,” emphasising his belief that even in the darkest moments, individuals can find meaning by transforming their inner attitudes and responses. Through his experiences in Nazi concentration camps, Frankl observed that those who maintained a sense of purpose and meaning were more resilient and had a greater will to survive, illustrating his view that purpose can emerge from the depths of despair.

Frankl’s perspective challenges the notion that purpose is solely a result of deliberate decision-making. Instead, he suggests that it often emerges organically through the struggle to find meaning in suffering. He articulates, “Ultimately, man should not ask what the meaning of his life is, but rather must recognise that it is he who is asked.”

This statement underscores Frankl’s existential belief that meaning is not imposed but discovered through personal engagement with life’s challenges and responsibilities. By embracing the inherent freedom to choose one’s response to circumstances, Frankl asserts that individuals can forge a sense of purpose that transcends mere survival, fostering resilience and inner strength amidst adversity. His insights continue to resonate as a testament to the human spirit’s capacity to find meaning even in the most harrowing of circumstances.

Adaptability is essential in navigating the complexities of modern life. It allows us to pivot when needed, to learn from our experiences, and to grow in ways we might not have anticipated. Embracing adaptability can help us find purpose in places we might not have looked and in ways we might not have imagined. While purpose can be discovered over time, this does not mean that decisions are irrelevant. On the contrary, our choices shape our experiences and influence the paths we take. The key is to strike a balance between making conscious decisions and remaining open to discovery.

Setting goals, making plans, and taking deliberate actions are important aspects of living a purposeful life. However, it is equally important to remain receptive to new possibilities and to be willing to adjust our course as we gain new insights and experiences. This balanced approach allows for both intentionality and flexibility, enabling us to navigate our journey with a sense of direction while remaining open to the unexpected.