



Title	The Value of Life: the Concept of good and its Relation to Value of Life in the Western Philosophy
Author	Dr Tun Shwe
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# **The Value of Life: The concept of good and its relation to value of life in the Western philosophy**

**Tun Shwe<sup>1</sup>**

## **Abstract**

Studying the value of life is one of the functions of philosophy. So, it can be seen that there are so much values of life in different philosophical systems of the Western philosophy. Some philosophical systems regarded happiness as the value of life. But for some, harmonious life is valuable. And for Epicurus trying to gain pleasure of intellectual life is the value of life whereas existentialists regarded as freedom, creativity, and authenticity. Nevertheless, the Western value of life generally can be seen that it includes moral goodness, spiritual goodness and intellectual goodness, although each philosophical system cannot provide the complete value of life.

**Key words-** value of life, harmony, happiness, mental pleasure, intellectual pleasure, freedom

**1. Introduction-** It is said that there are four main questions concerning life. They are –

1. What is life?
2. What is the cause or origin of life?
3. What is the meaning of life?
4. What is the value of life?

The first question mainly concerns with the characteristic of life. The answer for this question is that which characteristic and quality are involved in life or living organism. The second question chiefly regards with the cause or the origin of life. Regarding this, there are some alternative questions such as how did life get here. Why are we here? How did life start? etc.

The third question is very clear that it investigates the meaning of life. The last question is also clear that it is searching for the value and purpose of life. It is making assessment of the value and purpose of life in various philosophical systems. This paper mainly concerns with the last question.

So many ordinary men may think that the value and purpose of life lies in the concept of fame, status, power, wealth etc. However, most philosophers never regard fame, status, power, wealth as the true value and purpose of life. Instead, they advocates happiness, harmony, knowledge etc are the true value of life.

If we look at the history of Western philosophy, diversity of values and purposes of life can be seen. For example, some thinkers regarded the harmonious life as good and valuable. For some philosophical systems, happiness or pleasure is the only good and valuable. For some, God is the source of all goods. However, for some just man is the center of all values etc.

The main purpose of this paper is to show the diverse values and purposes of life in the history of the Western philosophy. In the conclusion, by evaluating and making assessment on the Western value of life, it can be said that some value of life in some philosophical systems are good, and hence acceptable since they regarded the value of life as the concept of mental pleasure, reason, harmony, knowledge, freedom etc.

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<sup>1</sup> Lecturer, Dr, Department of Philosophy, University of Mandalay



## 2. The Concept of Good and its Relation to the Value and Purpose of Life in the Ancient Greek Philosophy

**2.1. The valuable life as goodness** - It can be said that if someone has a good life, then his or her life is valuable. In other words, if someone's life is good, then he has valuable life. That is why Socrates said that -

'...a life which is always inquiring and trying to discover what is good is the best kind of life, the only life worth living.'

Actually, the concept of good and the concept of value are related to each other. Studying the concept of value without the concept of good is cooking without salt. That is why Gonsalve said in his *Fagothey's Right and Reason* that,

'There is no agreement on the definition of value than there is on the definition of good....'<sup>2</sup>

Thus, in order to be a good life, it is necessary to know what the good is. In the history of the Western philosophy, some thinkers regarded happiness or pleasure as good. Thus for them in order to be a good life, it is necessary to get happiness or pleasure.

Similarly, for some, a good life must be harmonious with its opposites. Some philosophers like Kant, hold that 'good will' is the key to the good life. However, for some religious thinkers, the source of the good life is God. The followings are the views concerning the concept of good and its relation to the value and purpose of life in the history of the Western philosophy.

**2.2. The good life as harmony-** The Greek philosophy can be divided into two categories: Ionian or Cosmological tradition and Socratic or Humanistic tradition. Thinkers from the first tradition, especially emphasized on nature and reality of the external world. The second one mainly focused on man and his problems. However, it can be said that thinkers from both traditions were somehow interested in discussing the value and purpose of life.

Regarding the value and purpose of life, those who especially emphasized on nature had discussed in terms of natural principle. However, those who mainly focused on man and his problems, discussed within the context of knowledge, moral, ethics, reason etc. Nonetheless, in the early Greek philosophy, it can be seen that a good life must be happy and rational. Moreover, it must be harmonious.

Firstly, it can be seen the idea that a good life must be harmonious. Probably, Heraclitus was a pioneer of this view. He believed that good and evil are two notes in harmony. For him, all things are changing into their opposites. For example, ice, which is hard, changed into water which is soft. According to him, the combination of opposites resulted in a whole in which there is harmony. For him musical harmony results from combination of low and high notes. Therefore, in the universe harmony results from the combination of opposites good and evil.

Thus, the good life for man is that life lived in harmony with the universal reason, the law which pervades all things. Man should seek to understand this harmony in the universe and to fit into it so that his actions are in accord with the principle governing the whole universe.<sup>3</sup>

Similarly, stoics said that man's highest good lay in acting in harmony with the universe. Man for stoics, is part of the universe, with a definite function to perform for the complete development of the whole universe. Here stoics believed that reason is the ruling power of the universe. That is why, the good man for them is that -

'The good man is one lives so that fits into the scheme of nature, obeys its laws, and is determined in all he does by reason which is part of the universal reason.'<sup>4</sup>

Moreover, stoics affirmed that if we have a good life, we must have happiness in our life. The following is the concept good and its relation to happiness.

Thus, man must know the laws of the universe. If he knows the good, knows his place in the scheme of things, knows what is expected of him by nature, he will be good. And the result of such living is happiness. Happiness is not to be sought after nor is it to be gained by itself. We do good, live a virtuous and happiness inevitably follows.<sup>5</sup>

In addition, concerning this, Democritus also discussed about the concept of harmony. Nevertheless, it can be seen in the early Greek Philosophy, a good life and its relation to harmony. In other words, harmonious life is regarded as good, and then it is valuable.

**2.3. Happiness as the good life -** It is natural that man always wants happiness or pleasure. Thus, man usually seeks it as possible as he can. So many thinkers, throughout the history of Philosophy, took into account that happiness as the goal or purpose of life. These thinkers seem to think life without any happiness is not a good one. Actually, a good life should have a certain form of happiness. In life, if there is no any happiness or pleasure, there cannot be a good life. Consequently, the unhappy condition cannot lead a valuable life.

Some early Greek thinkers also accept the idea that a good life should have happiness. For them, the goal or purpose of life is happiness or pleasure. Such idea can especially be found in Democritus and the Epicureans. Even, Plato and Aristotle did not seem to deny this idea.

In the Greek Philosophy, Democritus who holds **happiness or pleasure as the goal or purpose of life**. That is why Frost put in his *Basic Teachings of the Great Philosophers* that Democritus, the leading figure of the Greek Atomists, taught that the goal of life is happiness. At all times man should seek happiness. For him, happiness was an inner condition or state of tranquility, which depended upon harmony of the soul. He taught that one should not depend for happiness upon things of the world since these come and go and a lack of them causes unhappiness. Rather, happiness should be a state of the inner man, a balance of life, an attitude which combines reflection and reason<sup>6</sup>.

In addition, concerning this, the Epicureans in the early Greek, were regarded as the most outstanding thinkers.

'Epicurus taught that the goal of all human activity is pleasure, that happiness is the supreme good for all'.<sup>7</sup>

However, he reminded that there must be careful in choosing the happiness. For Epicurus, some immediate pleasures eventually result in pain and suffering. Moreover, he pointed out that **mental pleasure is better than physical pleasure**. For him, desire is not real pleasure, since he regarded the idea that freedom from the pain of desire is good. Frost writes,

For Epicurus, mental pleasures are better than physical pleasures, and it is wise to choose pleasures of the intellectual life....he pointed out, that we obtain pleasure by satisfying desires or by being free from desires. Therefore, we should seek to get rid of desires by satisfying them completely. This brings freedom from pain, the pain of desire, and is therefore good.<sup>8</sup>

Actually, the idea concerning happiness or pleasure of Epicurus is very great, since he emphasized on the points of mental pleasure. Moreover, he also focused on the points of pleasure of the intellectual life. His idea '**pleasure of the intellectual life**' is, to great extent, acceptable, since it seems to depict a true picture of the happiness.

**2.4. The good life as knowledge, reason and intellect-** Socrates, Plato and Aristotle, the three famous classical philosophers also did not forget in discussing about the good and its relation to the value and purpose of life. However unlike the previous thinkers, these philosophers discussed about that in terms of knowledge, reason and intellect etc. Firstly, Socrates who said



that 'Virtue is knowledge, knowledge is virtue' is interested in search for living a good life. According to Socrates, to be a good life or to be a virtuous life, someone must have the knowledge of what is good.

'For Socrates, being virtuous is a purely intellectual matter; it simply involves knowing what is good for human being.'<sup>9</sup>

Then, Socrates regarded knowledge as the highest good. That is why Frost said that It was Socrates' firm belief that there must be a basic principle of right and wrong, a measure which would apply far beyond the beliefs of any one individual. Thus, he asked time and again: What is the good? What is the highest good by which all else in the universe is measured? And his answer was that knowledge is the highest good.<sup>10</sup>

Secondly, Plato also discussed the goal or purpose of life in connection with his ontology.

For him, goodness is tied up with his theory of the nature of the universe. The world of sense, he taught, is unreal, fleeting, changing. This is evil. The real world of pure, unchanging ideas is the world of good. Man can know this real world only through his reason. Therefore, reason is the highest good for man. The end or goal of life is release of the soul from the body so that it can contemplate the true world of ideas.<sup>11</sup>

In addition, Plato also accepts that a good life must have harmony between reason and feeling. Thus, Frost said that

Plato also taught, reason is only a part of man. He also has feelings, desires, and appetites. Therefore, a good life is one in which all these factors are realized in perfect harmony, in which reason rules and the feelings and desires obey. The goal of human life is a rational attitude toward the feelings and desires.<sup>12</sup>

Thirdly, Aristotle regarded self-realization as good as well as a good life. The following is a discussion concerning this by Frost.

What, he asked, is the highest good, the good for which all else is done? He reached an answer to this question by pointing out that the aim of everything in the universe is to realize itself to the fullest. Each thing is different from all others. It has certain talents, abilities. Thus, it is good when it has realized these talents and abilities to the fullest. Thus, self-realization is for, Aristotle the highest good, the goal of all else, that is done.<sup>13</sup>

Thus, it can be said that, for Aristotle the highest good of man is the complete realization of his reason. In addition, he introduced the way to obey for the good man. It is nothing, but **the golden mean**. For him the good man is one who lives a life in accord with this golden mean. That is, he does not go to the extremes in action but balances one extreme over against another.

According to Aristotle if someone has the highest good or the complete realization of his reason, then his life must be happy or pleasurable. That is why Frost said that,

Therefore, the highest good of man is the complete realization of his reason. This, Aristotle believed, brings happiness. Pleasure accompanies the full realization of man's reason; it is a natural result of such realization.<sup>14</sup>

**3. Value and Purpose of Life and its Relation to God in Medieval Philosophy-** Before the medieval philosophy, many religious thinkers always associated their ideas with the concept of God. This is true in the idea of value and purpose of life. For example, Philo, one of the early religious thinkers said that **the source of all good is God** and matter is the source of all evil. For him, '...

the goal of man is freedom from the body and all its sin, and return to God and perfect goodness;<sup>15</sup>

Similar idea can be seen in Plotinus.

Saint Augustine, one of the famous medieval philosophers believed the idea that **'The union with God as the goal of life'**.

'St. Augustine believes that the end for human conduct is happiness and that happiness is to be found in the attainment and possession of the eternal and immutable object, God. This means the union of mind with God.'<sup>16</sup>

According to St. Augustine, the love of God is a key to the union with God.

'This union with God is to be attained through love of God as opposed to love of the world.'<sup>17</sup>

In addition, so many scholastics were also interested in discussing the value and purpose of life. Thomas Aquinas, the greatest of the Scholastics hold that 'servicing to God as ideal and valuable'. The following are his idea regarding this.

'God made everything, including man, for a purpose, and the highest good of all things is the realization of this purpose'...'Therefore, the highest good is the realization of oneself as God has ordained'.....'The best way to attain goodness is to abandon worldly goods and seek the life of God. Thus, the life of the saint in monastery devoting himself entirely to service to God is ideal.'<sup>18</sup>

#### 4. The Value and Purpose of Life in Some Modern Thoughts

**4.1. The good life and its relation to 'will' by Kant and Schopenhauer-** I have already expressed that the concept of good and its relation to value. In addition, It can be understood the concept of value by studying the concept of good. Some modern thinkers also seem to agree this, because they also discussed moral goodness as the way to be a good life. The following is Kant's idea concerning moral goodness.

In the moral philosophy of Kant, the concept of **'good will'** can clearly be seen. Kant discussed this good will in connection with the idea of duty.

'Kant accepted as fundamental the principle ..., that the only absolutely good thing in the universe is human will governed by respect for the moral law or the consciousness of duty.'<sup>19</sup>

According to Kant the only good will is more important than the other.

Thus, for Kant, consequence is not to be taken as determining the rightness, or wrongness of an act. Whether the resulted of an act are productive of happiness or of pain is not the matter of greatest concern. If the actor performs the act with good intentions, out of respect for the moral law, it is thereby good.<sup>20</sup>

Actually, Kant's idea to the great extent is acceptable since the good will is regarded as basis for good moral foundation. Regarding the concept of good will, another alternative saying can be seen in Schopenhauer (1788-1860). For him, **'will'** is fundamental to the universe. However, he said that the concept **'will to be'** or **'will to live'** is just selfish or evil.

This will to be, will to live, is the cause of all the struggle in the world and thus of all evil and suffering. A world where blind wills are struggling with each other to live, where the more powerful kill and devour the less powerful that they may live, is a world of evil. Will to live begets selfishness.<sup>21</sup>

However, Schopenhauer takes the concept of **sympathy or pity**, which is also a good will, as a good moral foundation. For him, in order to be a good life, man should try to get rid of his individual will. Instead, man should try to cultivate the sympathetic understanding. Here, Frost's discussion is as follow.

Thus, for Schopenhauer, sympathy or pity is basic to morality. To the degree that one has sympathy for others, he will act not for himself but for them, and thus be good. The way to this good life is through denial of the individual will; self-sacrifice brings happiness and peace. When we reach this understanding, we will stop struggling and will develop sympathetic understanding.<sup>22</sup>

Nevertheless, Schopenhauer seemed to regard that 'will to be' or 'will to live' is the cause or origin of all suffering. Such idea is very similar to the idea of *Tanah*, craving in Buddhism.

**4.2. The Utilitarian approach to the value and purpose of life-** In the history of Western philosophy, it can be seen that the Greek hedonism gradually declined and ceased to accept due to the advent of Christianity. However, hedonism arose again in the time of modern thinkers, especially some English speaking moralists and philosophers such as Mill, Bentham, Hume and Paley.

According to utilitarianism, **the end or goal of human action or life is happiness or pleasure.** And then, the concept of good and bad is also determined in terms of the principle of pleasure and pain. Such idea can be seen in J.S Mill's famous work '*Utilitarianism*' that,

'It is the creed which accepts, as the foundation of moral utility, or the greatest happiness principle, and holds that actions are right in proportion as they tend to promote happiness, wrong as they tend to produce the reverse of happiness. By happiness is intended pleasure and the absence of pain; by unhappiness, pain and the privation of pleasure.'<sup>23</sup>

Moreover, he measured the concept of good with the idea that the greatest happiness for the greatest number or the pleasure of maximum amount of number. However, he firmly holds the idea that 'good of intellect are better than good of the sense.' This is he seems to admit the idea that good differs in quality.

Regarding the concept of good and evil, Jeremy Bentham is very close to Mill. He also bases good upon the utilitarian principle of 'the greatest good of the greatest number.' However, he disagreed with Mill that 'good differs in quality.'

His only criterion is the number of individuals affected by the act. Bentham justifies this position of the basis of self-interest, holding that to act will actually bring to the greatest good to the one acting.<sup>24</sup>

Therefore, it can be said that, the above modern approaches concerning the goal of life, can somehow be determined by social factors, since the consequence of one's act is always associated with the experience of the others.

**4.3. The views of some rationalists and empiricists-** In the history of Modern philosophy, the famous rationalists, Descartes, Spinoza and Leibniz also discussed the concept of good and its relation to value and purpose of life. However, most of their ideas are somehow related with God. Regarding this, Descartes' idea is that man's evil is due to lack of understanding to choose good.

According to Descartes, God is perfect, but man is not. Man used to make error or evil and suffer from his mistake. This is, for him due to power of man given to distinguish good and bad is not complete. Thus, man used to choose the wrong, evil rather than the good.

Spinoza also discussed this problem. For him error or evil is lack of Knowledge. Man action without knowledge will produce results which are not desired, and then pain will follow. Moreover, Spinoza put the concept of 'striving' and its relation to good. Such idea is somehow the goal or purpose of life of Spinoza.

Spinoza came to the conclusion that the fundamental striving of everyone is to preserve himself. This striving is good. Thus, anything which tends to block this striving is bad, and everything which helps man to reach the goal of his striving is good.<sup>25</sup>

However, for Spinoza man's striving must be rational. For him, merely to strive is not enough. Man must strive intelligently, realizing what he is doing and its consequences. Thus, for Spinoza,

'The highest happiness of man lies in the perfect understanding of what he is doing, his striving'.<sup>26</sup>



Moreover, Spinoza connected the idea of good with the phrase 'intellectual love of God. 'The highest good of man is this complete realization. In it, he sees that by loving himself he actually loves God. Spinoza calls this the intellectual love of God.'<sup>27</sup>

Concerning this problem, Locke one of the famous empiricists regarded happiness as good.

Locke taught that pleasure and pain are native to man. Nature has made it so that we enjoy happiness and seek to avoid pain. Therefore, those things which bring happiness are called good, and those which bring pain are called evil.<sup>27</sup>

Thus, Locke also seems to regard happiness as the value and purpose of life.

Thomas Hobbes (1588-1679), one of modern English thinkers, also solved this problem with a **materialistic basis**. According to Hobbes, motion is the fundamental factor in the universe. Hence, good and bad are the matters of motion. For him, motion is successful if it produces pleasure, and when it is unsuccessful pain results.

Actually, Hobbes's idea of good and bad is very close to Sophists, since good and evil are relative to the particular individual. Thus, his idea is materialistic and hedonistic or utilitarianistic. In *Basic Teachings of the Great Philosophers*, Frost writes,

That which pleases a man is good, and that which causes pain or discomfort is evil. Thus, good and evil are, as Hobbes sees it, relative to the particular man. That which pleases one man may not please another. Consequently, there can be no absolute good or evil. Both depend upon the nature of the individual at the time, and as he changes good things may become evil things good.<sup>28</sup>

**5. Some Contemporary Approaches to the Value and Purpose of Life-** There are so many thinkers who especially emphasized on the value and purpose of life in the contemporary philosophy. It is true since one of the characteristics of contemporary philosophy is to study man and his problems. Thus, it can be seen that so many movements or schools such as existentialism and pragmatism specifically focused on man and his problems.

The existentialist value and purpose of life can be seen in their discussion under the headings of the concept of **freedom, choice and decision, responsibility, authenticity, bad-faith, creativity** etc.

So many existentialists said that man must have freedom, since they identify **man with freedom**. Thus, man can do what he likes. This means man can make choice and decision what he wants. However, he must take the responsibilities concerning his making of choice and decision. According to Sartre, if one refuses to take the responsibility for his choice and decision, then he is in inauthentic existence, which is always associated with the concept bad-faith. Such kind of man, for existentialists, can be termed as **Das-man, faceless anonymous, dehumanization, objectification**, etc.

Thus, it can be seen that, for existentialist point of view, to be a good life, man must firstly have freedom that can make freely choice and decision. Then he must be in authentic existence. Moreover, it is necessary to have creativity, since there are no binding ethical codes for man. Then there is no moral code that can give guidance for man's action. Thus, according to Sartre, man need to create his value himself at all. In this way, for Sartre, **what is created by man is valuable**. Consequently, the man of creativity is valuable.

Thus for existentialists, in order to be a good or valuable life, it must have **freedom and creativity**. In addition it must be in **authentic existence**.

The value and purpose of life and its relation to good can also be seen in the ethical view of some pragmatists. For some pragmatists, the concept of good and evil is determined in terms of the social and individual consequence of activity. Such idea can be seen in both of William James and John Dewey.

'The good is that which serves the ends of the group and the individual in the group. A good act is one which considers the individual of an end in himself and not as a means. But, by so



considering each individual, we consider the welfare of the group. The human individual, as a social unit, in the ultimate measure of good and evil. That which enriches his life must necessarily enrich the lives of all<sup>29</sup>

**6. Conclusion** – It can be seen that there are so many values and purpose of life in the history of the Western philosophy. And to summarize the value of life from Thales to Sartre in the Western philosophy, at least nine categories can be seen. They are-

1. Harmony as good and valuable life
2. Happiness or pleasure as good and valuable life.
3. Union with God is a good life.
4. Man is the only source of good and value.
5. Knowledge, reason, wisdom as the value of life.
6. To be a good life, it must have 'the good will'.
7. The greatest good for the greatest number as criterion.
8. The true value of life lies freedom, creativity, authenticity.
9. The value of life lies on social as well as individual activity.

By making careful analysis the above mentioned categories, it can be said that the idea of value of life is always associated with philosophers' own respective philosophies. For Augustine, a devout religious thinker, God is the center of all values. Similarly, the concept of freedom, creativity, and authenticity are regarded as the true value of life in existentialist thinking.

And then it can also be seen that the some Western value of life are good, and hence they are acceptable. For example, the idea that 'mental pleasure is better than physical pleasure' of Epicurus is, very advanced. Then, Kant's conception of 'good will' and Schopenhauer's criterion of 'sympathetic understandings are also to great extent acceptable. Finally, it cannot be categorically stated that the existentialist criterion based on the concept of freedom, creativity, authenticity is wrong, since it can, to some extent, described the specific value of life

Nevertheless, the Western value of life generally can be seen that it includes moral goodness, spiritual goodness and intellectual goodness, although each philosophical system cannot provide the way to the complete value of life.

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