



THE PURPOSE OF LIFE

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This is one of the most fundamental and basic of all questions that a human being asks himself/herself. What is the meaning of Life and what purpose do I have to be here on this planet? What does it even mean to be “Alive”?

The meaning and purpose of life isn't all that easy to figure out. To answer the question involves answering other relevant questions: What does it mean to have meaning and purpose? How do you determine what that is? Do you choose your own method and meaning? Can you combine what you think is your own purpose with the purpose that others think? There are lots of questions and no easy answers.

However, here is an easy answer.

The Quran mentions:

(67:2) God, Who, created death and life that He might try you as to which of you performs the best deeds [Surah Mulk verse 2]

In Buddhism, the primary purpose of life is to end suffering. The Buddha taught that humans suffer because we continually strive after things that do not give lasting happiness. We desperately try to hold on to things - friends, health, material things - that do not last, and this causes sorrow.

The Buddha did not deny that there are things in life that give joy, but pointed out that none of them last and our attachment to them only causes more suffering. His teachings were focused entirely on this problem and its solution. However, a realistic approach to life surely demands a more meaningful purpose to our life than a constant running away from it!

What is the Purpose of Life?

Lets look at what an atheist view is about the purpose of life.

Following is an excerpt from an article by a well known atheist Alonzo Fyfe.

“The Christian view is that God has created an epic stage-play that embodies the struggle between good and evil, and that he has given each person a particular role to play, like Frodo in “The Lord of the Rings or Harry in Harry Potter”. Thus, the purpose of life is assigned to you by the Director. You are an actor in his stage-play, and your purpose is to play your role according to his script.

But if God does not exist, we find ourselves alone on the stage without a director. We have to come up with our own purpose, and

craft our own story. We have to figure out on our own what really matters and what to fight for.

Let us consider an important question:

Would you prefer it to be true that you were created with a divine purpose in life?

My answer is “No.” I would not like to have been created with a divine purpose in life.

What matters is the quality of a purpose, not it’s source.

To illustrate, Fyfe writes:

Perhaps I was created by a God who got bored and who was seeking some way to entertain himself. He came up with the idea of creating a planet and populating it with people who he [programmed to] have a strong disposition to accept religious teachings without question. He then went to different groups and said, “You are God’s chosen children. You have a right and a duty to rule over the world. All others are infidels who should be either converted or killed.”

When he was done, he sat back in His heavenly recliner with his heavenly beer and potato chips and watched the unfolding drama of Survivor Earth, and he saw that it was good. Or, at least, he was entertained.

Would I prefer to be a toy built to generate conflict and drama for the sake of entertaining some God?

Not only would I prefer not to have such a purpose, I would go so far as to actively thwart God's purpose if that were the case, and would count my life as having meaning in doing so. I would work to promote cooperation and well-being over conflict and suffering and, if this went against the purpose of my Creator, then so be it.

So God need not provide purpose in life, for what matters is the quality of a purpose, not its source.

Also, God cannot provide the purpose of life because God does not exist.

So, is there objective purpose to be discovered in the universe, or does it happen to be the case that life is ultimately purposeless? It depends what we mean by "purpose."

If "purpose" means "that for which we were intentionally designed by an intelligent Creator," then purpose does not exist. If "purpose" means "such as to bring about ends that have intrinsic value," then purpose does not exist (because intrinsic value does not exist) Under these definitions, "purpose" does not exist. But perhaps there is a sensible meaning of "purpose" which refers to something that does exist, just as there are sensible definitions for "water" and "atom" and "malaria" which refer to things that exist, despite our initial conceptual confusions about those terms.

For example, perhaps "purpose" has something to do with objective value. If objective value exists, then purpose exists. Or perhaps we might consider the various projects we take on (such as the project to raise one's kids or feed the poor or make the world a better place) and ask whether they have objective value. If

a project has objective value, then perhaps we can say that such a project provides true, meaningful purpose.

I have another proposal. I think a good synonym for “purpose” is “calling.” Are there things we are “called” to do? We are not called to do anything by gods or by intrinsic values, for these things do not exist. But are we nevertheless “called” to do some things?

Put another way, are there things we “ought” to do with our lives?

Ought, Value, and Moral Value

Ought, in this sense, is a moral term. Our question about purpose turns out to be a question about objective moral facts. Are we “called” by objective moral facts to do certain things or live a certain way? Are there any objective moral facts calling us, or is morality purely relative?

I think objective moral facts exist, and that they can provide a “purpose” or “calling” to life Value (in the general sense, not the moral sense) is a relation between states of affairs and reasons for action. So a word like “good” means “such as to fulfill the reasons for action in question.” Thus, a “good” butter knife is one that spreads butter well, because the reasons for action in question are the owner’s desires to spread butter well. And it may be “good” for a bank robber to bring a gun, if we understand that the reasons for action in question are the robber’s desires to successfully rob a bank.

That is a semantic point, about the meaning of our words. Now I want to make an empirical claim.

I claim that desires are the only reasons for action that actually exist. Many other reasons for action have been proposed – intrinsic values, divine commands, categorical imperatives, etc. – but they do not exist.

If this is correct, we can simplify our notion of “good” as “such as to fulfill the desires in question” and “bad” as “such as to thwart the desires in question.”

So that’s a brief account of value.

The purpose of life is to encourage desires that tend to fulfill other desires and discourage desires that tend to thwart other desires.

Another way to put it is to say that the purpose of life is to promote a harmony of desires”

(excerpts From Alonzo Fyfe).

Looking through all the arguments it is clear that the Atheist approach is a tussle between trying to make sure our lives are not seen as purposeless and just for nothing and at the same time keep denying God’s existence on the basis of personal preference rather than a rational argument! Making desires our sole purpose of existence actually makes us replace God by our desires, without using knowledge and objectivity but conjecture and fantasies, as is mentioned in the Quran :

(45:23) Did you ever consider the case of him who took his desire as his god, and then Allah caused him to go astray despite knowledge, and sealed his hearing and his heart, and cast a veil over his sight? Who, after Allah, can direct him to the Right Way? Will you not take heed?

The Quran points out to this issue as:

(6:116) (O Muhammad!) If you obey the majority of those who live on earth, they will lead you away from Allah's path. They only follow **idle fancies, indulging in conjecture**

(53:23) These are nothing but names that you and your forefathers have invented, for which Allah has sent down no authority. They are **merely following their conjectures and their carnal desires although guidance has come to them from their Lord.**

(12:108) Tell them plainly: "This is my way: I call you to God, on the basis of clear perception - both I and those who follow me. God - Glory be to Him - is free of every imperfection. I have nothing to do with those who associate others with God in His Divinity.

(17:36) Do not follow that of which you have no knowledge. Surely the hearing, the sight, the heart - each of these shall be called to account

[9:31] They take their rabbis and their monks for their lords apart from God, and also the Messiah, son of Mary, whereas they were commanded to worship none but the One True God. There is no god but He. Exalted be He above those whom they associate with Him in His Divinity

(34:31) The unbelievers say: “We shall never believe in this Qur’an, nor in any Scripture before it.” If you could only see the wrong-doers arrayed before their Lord, each bandying charges against the other. Those who were suppressed will say to those who waxed arrogant: “Had it not been for you, we would have been believers.”

Some important points from the above verses:

Fancies, desires, wishes, personal preferences, conjectures and mere presumptions are not the way to arrive at truth.

Islam does not call towards blind following but a rational and thoughtful understanding of our creator

Blindly following the religious clergy is against the teachings of the Quran and those who do that are actually taking the clergy as Gods

Those in power and with authority do not automatically get the right to make decisions for the rest of the population and that blind following of the religious or political powers will not bring any good to the commoners in this life or the next.

The purpose of our lives is very succinctly and clearly simplified by the verse of the Quran as stated at the beginning of this booklet.

(67:2) God, Who, created death and life that He might try you as to which of you performs the best deeds [Surah Mulk verse 2]

Our societies, comprising of humans of varied colours, ethnicities and nationalities may all differ but what binds us all is the nature of us as humans. We have been endowed with an intrinsic sense of good and evil and we recognise it; if we do not go about murdering the inner true nature that God explains in the Quran:

(91:7) and by the soul and by Him Who perfectly proportioned it

(91:8) and imbued it with (the consciousness of) its evil and its piety

The word ilham (used in verse 8 for endowing or imbuing) is derived from lahm which means to swallow. According to this very basic meaning, the word ilham is used terminologically for Allah's inspiring a man with a concept or idea unconsciously. Inspiring the human self with its wickedness and its piety and virtue has two meanings:

(1) That the Creator has placed in it tendencies to both good and evil, and this is the thing that every man feels in himself.

(2) That Allah has endowed every man's unconscious mind with the concept that there is a moral good and there is a moral evil, that good morals and acts and evil morals and acts are not equal and alike.

Fujur (immorality) is an evil thing and taqwa (abstention from evils) a good thing. These concepts are not new to man; he is conscious of these by nature, and the Creator has endowed him with the ability to distinguish between good and evil naturally. This same thing has been said in Surah Al-Balad: And We showed him both the highways of good and evil. (verse 10); and in Surah Ad-Dahr, thus: We showed him the way, whether to be grateful or disbelieving (verse 3); and the same has been expressed in Surah Al-Qiyamah, saying: In man there is the reproaching self (conscience) which reproaches him when he commits evil (verse 2), and man knows his own self best, even though he may offer many excuses. (verses 14-15).

Here, one should also understand well that Allah has blessed every creature with natural inspiration according to its position and nature, as has been pointed out in Surah TaHa:

Who has given a distinctive form to everything and then guided it aright. (verse 50). For example, every species of animals has been given inspirational knowledge according to its needs by virtue of which the fish learns to swim, the bird to fly, the bee to make the beehive and the weaver-bird to build the nest instinctively.

Man also in view of his different capacities has been granted separate kinds of inspirational knowledge. His one capacity is that he is an animal being; as such the most significant instance of the inspirational knowledge that he has been given is that the human child starts sucking the mother's milk soon on birth, which no one could teach it, had it, not been taught of it instinctively by God.

Another position of man is that he is a rational being. As such God has been blessing him with inspirational guidance continuously since the time of his creation, by virtue of which he has been discovering things and making inventions to develop his civilization. Anyone who studies the history of these discoveries and inventions will realize that there was hardly any which might be the result of man's own effort or thought, but mostly it so happened that suddenly an idea struck a person and he discovered or invented something.

Besides these two, another position of man is that he is a moral being. In this position too, Allah has blessed him by inspiration with discrimination between good and evil and of the realization of the good to be good and of the evil to be evil. This sense of discrimination and realization is a universal truth on account of which no human society in the world has ever been without the concepts of good and evil; there has never been in history, nor is there now, a society which may not be having some kind of a

system of rewarding the good and punishing the evil. This fact being prevalent in every age, at every place, and at every stage of civilization is a clear proof of its being natural and innate. Furthermore, this is also proof that a Wise Creator possessed of knowledge has imbued man's nature with it, for in the elements of which man is made up and the laws which govern the material system of the world, no human origin of morals can be traced out.

So what is the purpose then?

The level of confusion and inability to answer this fundamental question by trying to do so in the absence of a divine knowledge is like the poem written by an arab atheist

An Arab Poet, Elya Abu Madhi (a born-Christian), not long ago expressed his uncertainty about the purpose of life in his Arabic poem Al-Talasim, meaning "puzzles," which I have translated into English. He says in his poem:

I came not knowing from where, but I came.

And I saw a pathway in front of me, so I walked.

And I will remain walking, whether I want this or not.

How did I come? How did I see my pathway? I do not know!

Am I new or am I old in this existence? Am I free and unrestrained, or do I walk in chains?

Do I lead myself in my life, or am I being led?

I wish I know, but... I do not know!

And my path, oh what is my path? Is it long or is it short?

Am I ascending in it, or am I going down and sinking?

Am I the one who is walking on the road, or is it the road that is moving?

Or are we both standing, but it is the time that is running?

I do not know!

Before I became a full human, do you see if I were nothing, impossible? Or do you see that I was something?

Is there an answer to this puzzle, or will it remain eternal?

I do not know ... and why do I not know??

I do not know!

Not knowing is not an option nor a solution therefore we need to look at the answer offered to us by the Quran in a rational and objective manner just like any fact is analysed objectively.

Well, why are we here? The atheist answer would have us believe

To amass fame and fortune? To make music and babies? To be the richest man or woman in the graveyard for, as we are jokingly told, 'He who dies with the most toys wins?'

Could the acquisition of wealth guarantee happiness?

Of course not.

When we hear of millionaires or members of their families committing suicide, how could we consider the purpose of life would be to gain great wealth?

A child of 5 years would obviously prefer a new toy to a deposit slip for a million dollars.

A teenager does not consider millions of dollars in the bank a substitute for movies, videos, pizza and hanging out with his friends.

A person in their 80s or 90s would never consider holding on to their wealth in place of spending it to hold on to or regain their health.

So wealth is not really the main purpose at all the stages of one's life.

Islam gives us the answer to this troubling question by making us understand our relationship with our creator and the creation or the environment around us.

The following two verses of the Quran clarify this for us

And I did not create the jinn and humankind except to Ibadah Me'¹
[Quran 51:56-58]

[He] who created death and life to test you [as to] which of you is best in deed - and He is the Exalted in Might, the Forgiving. [Quran, 67:2]

God states in the Quran that He created the human to be His trustee on earth. Mankind's basic trust, our responsibility, is to believe in and do Ibadah of God:

The Islamic understanding of Ibadah (which means obedience or worship) allows the whole of one's life to be an act of worship, as long as the objective of that life is to fulfil the purpose of our creation, which is achieved by doing good and refraining from evil. A person can turn everyday activities into acts of worship by purifying his or her intention and sincerely seeking God's pleasure through these activities.

Prophet Muhammed (peace be upon him) said: Greeting a person is charity. Acting justly is charity. Helping a man with his steed is charity. A good word is charity. Every step taken on the way to performing prayers is charity. Removing an obstacle from the road is charity.

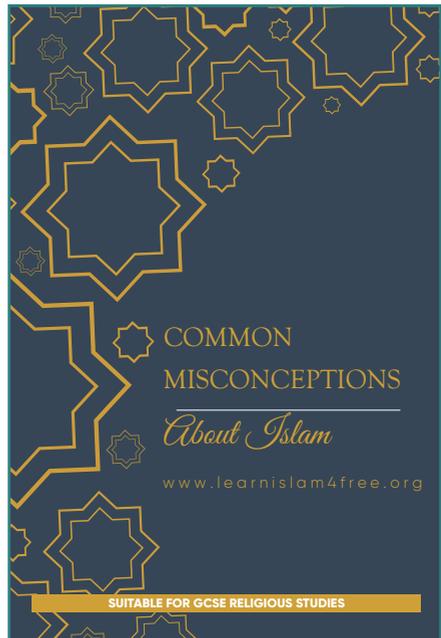
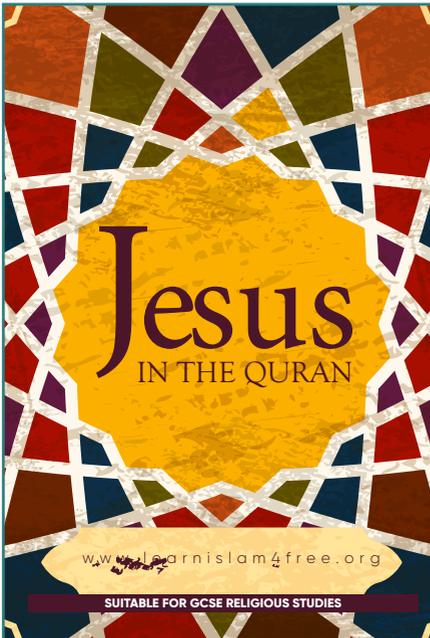
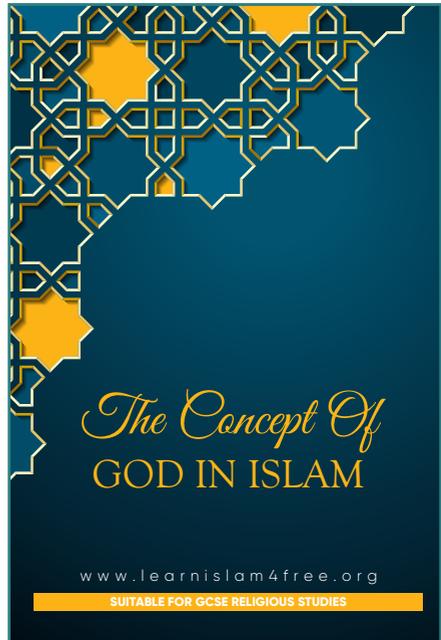
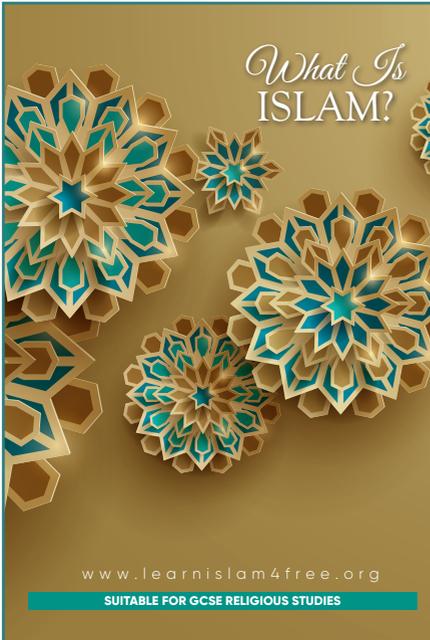
The purpose therefore is to try and race with one another towards doing good deeds and creating a better world all around us. The temporary nature of this life lets us try our best with a view to achieving an everlasting reward in the next life. This can however, only happen when we connect ourselves with the same source that provides direction to all the cosmos.

The very same laws that govern and balance the universe must be adopted in order for that balance to transpire into our lives. Human beings on their own are incapable of achieving such balanced views as no two humans can agree on all laws or opinions! Nor can they ever claim to know the humans and their environment in its entirety.

Quranic description of the purpose of life is therefore very easy to comprehend- its all about our behaviour and attitude in this world towards ourselves, our families and all fellow humans plus our environment.

Understanding our relation with our creator, all of His creation and the preparation for an afterlife based on what we do in this life is what provided both a purpose and direction to our lives. This instils in us a passionate desire to do the best acts in order to get the best results both in this world and in the hereafter. A meaningful, purposeful and a fruitful life awaits us if we open our hearts and minds up to the message of our creator- The last of His message and the only unaltered one The Quran. Why not try it and see for yourself.

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