

Challenges of Life: Why and How?

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Human life is enigmatic. A variety of challenges falls unexpectedly on an individual and life can seem absurd. There are religious and scientific explanations, but we still wonder: Why? How do we make sense of the challenges we face in life?

This article attempts to shed light on this extremely complex problem by answering the questions of why we have challenges and how we can cope with them.

The most common approach to challenges in Unificationism is based on the concept of “indemnity.” The underlying thesis of this model is that challenges

are “caused” by sins, evils, and problems from the past. Other religions also use this sin-redemption approach to challenge. This model is one that looks backwards in time, but is this retrospective approach the only model that Unificationism offers?

I suggest that a model based on the Unificationist concept of the “original human nature” sets out a forward-looking model. I argue that human life is “originally” designed as challenge-and-response. In other words, some challenges (not all) are an intrinsic part of life.



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In this view, life includes an element of chance, and human beings were “originally” designed with the potential to cope with challenges. This view reflects a hermeneutic (meaning-based) approach to challenges. Although this topic raises other philosophical and theological problems, including theodicy, fairness, fate, and others, I do not explore them here.

Challenges: A Look to the Past and to the Future

Human life is a series of challenges-and-responses. There is a near endless list of challenges: accidents, illnesses, natural disasters, social turmoil, and others. For some, one’s DNA makeup from a particular set of parents, which determines one’s mental and physical profile, becomes a burden. For some, the fact of birth itself is taken as a challenge. While one is born with a silver spoon, another is born into a broken family. One might ask his or her parents, “Why did you give birth to me?” The parents may reply, “Why were you born?”

Challenges often have an aspect that is unique to each person. When an unexpected challenge befalls an individual, he or she may ask, “Why me?” At times, life can seem simply absurd.

How do we make sense of these challenges? Some religions offer a sin-redemption model to understanding challenges. Problems or challenges in the present are interpreted as the “results” of some specified or unspecified “cause” in the past or in a community. In Unificationism, a standard approach is the concept of “indemnity,” which entails redeeming past “causes” or “sins” through action in the present. Likewise, some scientific theories also incorporate causal explanations; Freudian theory, for example, is a typical causal model that looks to the past.

Unificationism also has a forward-looking model of life’s challenges in the concept of the “original human nature.” Even in the world of the Unificationist utopia called the “original world of creation,” all kinds of challenges (excluding avoidable atrocities and evils) necessarily exist in human life. Unlike some theologians, I do not argue that evil is necessary to human life. I argue that non-moral accidents, the ups and downs of life, and natural challenges exist even in the “ideal world of creation.” Life in the “ideal world of creation” depends on the dynamic tension between challenges and responses. In this model, life is “originally” a process of challenge-and-response; challenges are an intrinsic part of human life.

In this view, the world includes an element of chance, or indeterminacy. The world certainly has an element of certainty governed by causal relations and explanations. There is, however, a realm that God does not interfere with and for this reason, unexpected things can happen. These unexpected occurrences can seem like difficulties requiring forgiveness or redemption; the element of chance can also encourage us to look towards our future and explore all options.

Balancing Challenges and One's Coping Capabilities

If we are to interpret life's challenges as an intrinsic part of human life, one critical issue when we make sense of this indeterminacy is the balance between challenge and our ability to cope with difficulty.

A look at this balance shows that life exists between two extremes: boredom and apathy. If life has no challenge, one falls into boredom. Young people often do even wild things in order to make life exciting and challenging. On the other hand, if challenges far exceed one's coping capabilities, one becomes apathetic.

If challenges are moderately higher than one's coping capabilities, a person can experience joy when he or she can overcome them. In the process of overcoming, one experiences the joy of self-discovery. You can discover the hidden, original potential of loving capability, creative ability, and becoming an authentic (truthful) self. The joy of self-discovery is further enhanced when it contributes to others.

Because these capacities are hidden in the self as potential, one does not realize what he or she can be capable of. When a person encounters challenges, one tends to look at only the current reality of the self, not the self in the future. The best of the self can often emerge by a big challenge. Some challenges may demand the person to work on the task for months or years. The harder the task, however, the greater the reward. Some accomplishments positively affect many others and joy is likewise enhanced.



The meaning of life is disclosed to the person in unique ways through the process of self-discovery and contributing to others. When this challenge-and-response mechanism is broken, paralyzed, or ignored, one cannot cultivate one's original human nature; hence, life becomes meaningless to him or her. For this reason, the process of loving, exercising creativity, and being authentic is critical to experience joy and meaning. When one falls into the "Existential Vacuum," meaninglessness, one can mistakenly take the pleasure principle as a substitute for genuine joy. The Existential Vacuum is a term coined

by Viktor Frankl, a Holocaust survivor psychiatrist. He lists pathological symptoms as examples of this state of mind: addiction, compulsory behavior, aggressive violence, sexual promiscuity, and others.

In real life, challenges often exceed one's coping capabilities. Are we then destined to become apathetic?

In Nazi concentration camps, Frankl witnessed the extreme challenges and how human beings can respond them. Many fell into a vegetative state and lost the hope and power to keep living. Yet, he says, some took a different attitude to challenges:

They may have been few in number, but they offer sufficient proof that everything can be taken from a man but one thing: the last of the human freedoms—to choose one's attitude in any given set of circumstances, to choose one's own way.

Inner freedom or spiritual freedom is an inviolable realm in every individual. Even in hopeless circumstances, each individual can "choose" what kind of person one becomes: "Fundamentally, therefore, any man can, even under such circumstances, decide what shall become of him—mentally and spiritually."

The Meaning of Life Unfolds Differently for Each Person

The meaning of life is elusive, and yet it reveals itself through a process of challenges-and-responses that is unique to each individual. Everyone experiences different challenges, and each person experiences those challenges differently. The meaning of life is "created" by one's response to those challenges and through exercising one's potential. In this way, challenges do not solely force us to face our past, but encourage us to create value and look to our future.

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