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# Paradoxes of Life: Challenges, Responses, and the Meaning of Life

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From birth to death, life is filled with challenges. One is born into challenges, encounters a series of challenges, and faces death as the final enigmatic gate of no return. In order to cope with these challenges, the so-called positive thinking literature offers various tools and practical advice. We hear the popular parlance everywhere; “Whatever comes upon you, take a positive attitude. Every challenge is an opportunity for success. Think positively, you will be happy and successful!” Positive thinking often appeals to the public with its promise of personal success, leading people to wealth and happiness. Positive thinking has its own merits and values. I neither disvalue nor discredit its contributions. Because of the purpose and nature of its inquiry, the positive thinking literature does not deal with in-depth philosophical analysis. Although it is not the primary intent of this essay, this essay will supplement this literature by providing the missing philosophical elements.

Positive thinking is paradoxical. When challenges are minor, we do not need to try to think positively. We can take challenges for granted and overcome them. When, on the other hand, the challenges are too severe, positive thinking sounds too optimistic and hardly helpful, at least to this author. Do common sayings such as, “think positively; challenge is an opportunity for success!” work for those in extremely difficult circumstances? Is this thought effective, for example, for a prisoner in Auschwitz, a Nazi concentration camp? The prisoner will reply, “What chance? What do you mean by opportunity? Opportunity for what?”

Under such severe and incomprehensible conditions, even God can be put on trial. Elie Wiesel recounted his experience in Auschwitz and produced a play, *The Trial of God*.<sup>[1]</sup> Wiesel was fifteen when he was taken into Auschwitz. He witnessed three rabbis indict God behind a shack in Auschwitz: “Three rabbis—all erudite and pious men—decided one evening to indict God for allowing His children to be massacred. I remember: I was there, and I felt like crying. But there nobody cried.”<sup>[2]</sup> The verdict was guilty but the trial ended with a silent prayer joined by all at the mock trial. Matthew Fox, a professor of spirituality, noted in the Afterword of the book that the play disclosed a dimension of spirituality:

This play does not only arouse our capacity for judging God and our notions of God and judging ourselves; it also goes deeper than judgment. It touches awe and wonder, freedom and guilt, creativity and compassion, humor and paradox. It leads us into realms of the spirit more deeply than interminable rational debate about the divine nature could ever lead us. It leads us to the experience of spirit, not only to its critique. It takes us beyond words, to the domain of silence and of holy waiting.<sup>[3]</sup>

The question in the trial is known as theodicy in theological terms: If God is good, benevolent, and almighty, why does He allow evil in the world? This is one of the fundamental questions at the root of the absurdity of life and the world we live in.

Philosophers and theologians have raised this question since antiquity, yet the question remains a puzzle to this day. When one encounters extremely difficult problems, one may similarly ask God: “Why me?”

One can extend this question of theodicy to the meaning of his or her existence and ask God: “Why was I born to the world? Why do I have to keep living the life I did not choose?” When one asks his or her parents, “Why did you give birth to me?” They may equally ask, “Why were you born from us?” From the fact of birth to genetic makeup and one’s social, historical environment, one has no choice and no answer. From birth to death, one encounters a series of challenges in life and is compelled to seek the meaning of life and its challenges.

In this essay, I attempt to provide a philosophical analysis of the meaning of challenges in life. First, I examine common challenges that fall upon each person as “fate,” or challenges that are imposed on each individual without his or her choice, and I explore the mechanisms by which challenges inform a person’s life. Second, I

attempt to clarify the process of how challenges become meaningful to each person. I try to answer the question of why and how our responses to challenges are an integral part of the meaning of life. I argue that life becomes meaningful by the way each individual responds to the challenges imposed on him or her. Third, I will present how the concept of the original human nature in Unification Thought, such as love (heart), truth (logos), and creativity, sheds light on the way one copes with challenges.<sup>[4]</sup> I will illustrate how love makes life rich, truth makes it authentic, and creativity makes it joyful or bearable. Finally I will explain how the meaning of life is disclosed retrospectively to the individual only after he or she overcomes challenges and how meaning accumulates and resonates within a hermeneutic part-and-whole relationship in one's life. I will conclude the essay by pointing out how the unique authentic self emerges as the integral unity of meaning out of the processes of challenge-and-response. As a background of this analysis, I apply a perspective that the world has a built-in mechanism of indeterminacy, which in turn opens the possibility to see the events of life as a non-causal explanatory model. I adopt a perspective that sees the world and life as play in reference to the concept of Flow and attempt to clarify the elusive and paradoxical mechanism of life from the perspective of Unification Thought.

## Challenges and the Human Discourse

In this section, I will examine the challenges of life from life's bookends: death and birth. First, I will explore the challenges that humans face under the threat of death and will draw on Viktor Frankl's testimonies. Second, I will explore why and how the circumstances of one's birth have a lasting effect on one's life. I will introduce a sociological principle of accumulated effects of advantages and disadvantages called the Matthew Effect. This principle is not a direct explanation of the social effects of one's genetic makeup, but this principle implies the lasting effects of one's given conditions.

### *Individual attitudes towards the challenge of death*

The paradoxical tension between challenge and response seems built into the mechanism of life. For carbon to become a diamond, it requires extreme heat and pressure. Similarly, the best in each person is cultivated and discovered often in difficult circumstances. For the majority of individuals, however, challenges in life appear as a harsh reality, meaningless, absurd or even cruel. Is there any way to cope with such extreme challenges in life? If a philosophy of life is not speculative imagination or wishful thinking but a solid, workable set of ideas, it has to be proven. How does one approach such extremely challenging circumstances?

At the age 39, October 1944, Viktor Frankl and his wife were transported to the Auschwitz concentration camp. In the concentration camp, one is stripped of everything and anything humanly possible. In such circumstances, we can easily imagine that anything is possible. One does not have to worry about any moral or legal consequences of his or her actions because anybody can go to the gas chamber any day. Under such circumstances where one is immune from any legal and moral punishment, how does one act? When nothing is possible, anything is possible.

Put differently, such circumstances strips people of their social roles and masks. In ordinary social life, people play various social roles and wear so-called masks<sup>[5]</sup> or socially defined self-identities according to those social roles. Although the self is constituted of multiple layers of identities, one hardly encounters the most essential element of the self, which is often concealed under socially defined identities. One often does not realize what he or she truly values, is, or even can be. Extreme situations such as a concentration camp strips off those masks, be good or bad, and lays bare something one does not normally see in the self. Frankl noted that he saw, what he called, "human qualities" in the harshest circumstances:

Life in a concentration camp tore open the human soul and exposed its depths. Is it surprising that in those depths we again found only human qualities which in their very nature were a mixture of good and evil? The rift dividing good from evil, which goes through all human beings, reaches the lowest depths and becomes apparent even on the bottom of the abyss which is laid open by the concentration camp.<sup>[6]</sup>

Among the variety of responses by fellow prisoners to the situation, Frankl points out that a simple caring action by a fellow prisoner deeply touched the heart: "It was far more than the small piece of bread which moved me to tears at that time. It was the human "something" which this man also gave to me—the word and look which accompanied the gift."<sup>[7]</sup>

In challenging circumstances, where one's own survival is at stake, no one blames someone for the lack of care or concern for others. Yet, it is a startling fact that someone in Auschwitz could still show human qualities. Such circumstances are, in a sense, a testing ground and an opportunity where the best and the worst of human natures can come out.

In Auschwitz, Frankl witnessed different attitudes. Some became active Nazi collaborators. Many lost the hope to live, became apathetic, and fell into a vegetative state. In Auschwitz, the Nazis selected prison guard assistants from the fellow prisoners. Frankl notes that those Jewish prison guard assistants were far crueler and brutal than Nazi guards. Probably partly out of fear and partly out of a desire for acceptance by the Nazi officers and to show their loyalty, they became crueler than Nazi guards. It may also be the case that the most vicious ones were selected.<sup>[8]</sup>

Frankl also notes that when people came to Auschwitz, the thought of suicide crosses their minds at least once or twice. But, the idea of suicide soon disappears because they realize that they will die anyway. Some, however, decided to die. They stopped coming out of bed and lining up in the food line.<sup>[9]</sup>

In such extreme circumstances, what thoughts crossed their minds? In the midst of despair, Frankl points out, prisoners kept wishing and hoping for the wellbeing of beloved ones: meeting again with spouses, children, parents, and other family members. An ordinary scene of a lovely family dinner table appeared again and again in their minds. He notes, it is love that dominates the deepest part of the soul:

A thought transfixed me: for the first time in my life I saw the truth as it is set into song by so many poets, proclaimed as the final wisdom by so many thinkers. The truth—that love is the ultimate and the highest goal to which man can aspire.<sup>[10]</sup>

It is notable that a human being has the freedom to care about someone else even under the harshest conditions. When challenges press hard on a person, he or she can easily become closed-minded. Frankl's account is a testimony of truth that human beings retain the possibility of opening one's heart to others even if almost all other possibilities are taken away.

### *Challenges and the Matthew Effect: The cumulative effects of advantage and disadvantage at birth*

Even at the beginning of one's life, challenges seem to usher us into the world. "Why was I born to this world which is filled with all sorts of misery and suffering?" "Why do I have to live a life I did not choose?" The fact that one begins life without choice and reason poses such difficult questions. For example, one is born with a specific genetic makeup. Just as a child cannot choose his or her parents, parents cannot choose their child. One's genetic makeup accounts for skin color, eye color, looks, height, physique, and much of an individual. Parents also receive their genetic makeup from their parents. In the same way, one's social and family environments are predetermined; some are born with a silver spoon while others are born in poverty.

The fact of those determinants does not raise any issues insofar as they appear as assets. We often ascribe social success, whatever it means, to individuals' efforts and virtues, and success stories are basically built on the praises of those who turned difficulties into success. It is true that nothing happens without one's efforts and virtues. Yet, it is equally true that both advantages and disadvantages have cumulative effects. In other words, so-called success cannot be ascribed solely to an individual's efforts and virtues, and the social reasons for "success" should not be overlooked.

Sociologist Robert Merton conducted classic sociological studies on the reward mechanism in the sciences and coined the term for such cumulative effects of social advantages and disadvantages "Matthew Effects," in reference to Matthew 25:29 of Bible, which reads: "For to all those who have, more will be given, and they will have an abundance; but from those who have nothing, even what they have will be taken away."<sup>[11]</sup> Although the Biblical narrative means something else, Merton adopted the passage to symbolize what he found in the reward mechanism in the sciences: "The Matthew effect may serve to heighten the visibility of contributions to sciences by scientists of acknowledged standing and to reduce the visibility of contributions by authors who are less well known."<sup>[12][13]</sup>

When an eminent scientist and a lesser known scientist collaborated and published findings in scientific journals as co-authors, the eminent one received the credit. In some cases, Merton found that even when the prominent scientist acknowledged the lesser one's contribution, the eminent scientist received the credit. Similarly, Merton pointed out, when a prominent scientist and a lesser known scientist made the same discovery around the same time, the prominent one received the credit: "As originally identified, the Matthew Effect was construed in terms of enhancement of the position of already eminent scientists who are given disproportionate credit in cases of collaboration or of independent multiple discoveries."<sup>[14]</sup>

The same is true for institutions. Prominent institutions tend to receive more funds, which also attract prominent scientists. The elite institutions and eminent scientists create a spiraling effect and generate more sociological

advantages. Scientists who are successful early in their career tend to receive generous grants and find employment at elite institutions.

After Merton, researchers examined the principle of self-amplification in diverse areas including science, technology, economy, politics, public policy, education, and culture. Daniel Rigney, a sociologist at St. Mary's University in San Antonio, compiled those findings and gave a coherent account in *The Matthew Effect: How Advantage Begets Further Advantage*.<sup>[15]</sup> Rigney uses the analogy of a "social escalator": "Opportunity structures are like social escalators, providing upward momentum to those who, whether through earned or unearned advantage, manage to reach the lower steps. Presumably, others must use the stairs."<sup>[16]</sup>

The Matthew Effect is a sociological conceptualization of a common saying: "The rich get richer and the poor get poorer." In real life situations, whether right or wrong, those who are already in advantageous positions tend to protect and maintain the mechanism: "Those who benefit from Matthew Effect strive to protect not only their golden eggs, but also the goose that laid them."<sup>[17]</sup> This reality allowed for the prevalence of this principle.

When we consider the success or achievement of individual, we cannot ignore such social effects that are like the tide or a wave that propels or drowns an individual: "the privileged are riding the crest of an impersonal wave, not of their own making, but from which they benefit nonetheless, while others less fortunate are dragged beneath the wave in its undertow."<sup>[18]</sup>

As almost all researchers acknowledge, this principle is not a transcendent principle beyond human response and action. As Rigney notes, one must consider social policies and mechanisms in order to counter-balance this principle:

What we do argue is that Matthew effects are real, found in many different spheres of social life, and potentially powerful determinants of social outcomes in the absence of countervailing factors. By becoming more conscious of these effects in our social systems, we may find more effective ways to counterbalance them when necessary and to neutralize their more pernicious consequences—or, when they are beneficial, to harness them in the service of a common good.<sup>[19]</sup>

In cybernetics and system theory, counterbalancing mechanisms are called "negative feedback loops" which control and stabilize system imbalance. The Matthew Effect has the opposite effect, perpetuating "positive feedback loops" which "typically amplify deviations from set points and thereby destabilize systems."<sup>[20]</sup> In social contexts, it describes the phenomena of widening the gap between the advantaged and the disadvantaged.

### *Implications of the Matthew Effect*

The Matthew Effect implies that life's beginning, including genetic makeup and external conditions, has lasting effects on the rest of life. Needless to say, social conditions change over time and it is possible for individuals to turn disadvantages into advantages, and vice-versa. So-called success stories describe exceptional individuals who reversed the odds and made successes out of dire conditions. But, it is a mistake to over-exaggerate such exceptional stories and ignore the reality of the Matthew Effect. We cannot conceal the fact that there are far more individuals who are suppressed under social constraints than the lucky few or protectors of vested interests. The Matthew Effect suggests a lack of fairness and the social consequence of burying talented individuals.

The Matthew Effect, however, seems to have positive effects as well, especially for cases in which an individual made noticeable accomplishments early on. When society recognizes talented individuals, this mechanism can help them to develop their potential and maximize their possible contribution to society. Their work in turn can benefit other members of society by their overall contribution to a society. Although society needs some counterbalancing mechanism to provide fair and open access to all, this counterbalancing mechanism should not hinder the development of talented individuals. Therefore, while a counterbalancing mechanism is necessary to achieve fairness, it requires a subtle and thoughtful approach so as to nurture and promote talented individuals.

### *The challenge of evil*

Evil is another challenge to human endeavor. I, however, do not pursue the question of good and evil in this essay. I simply wish to point out that evil or negative forces are a part of the challenges of everyday life. For this essay, I will focus on broadly ontological and hermeneutical rather than ethical questions. In "Tipping Point of Good and Evil,"<sup>[21]</sup> I elaborated on two forces that can turn one to evil: one internal and another external. In that article, I presented how power and immunity from legal and moral punishment can tip one's

orientation to evil. For example, Plato in Book II of *the Republic*(2.359a–2.360d) presented the legend of the Magic Ring of Gyges to illustrate how an ordinary individual can easily turn into a murderer.[22] The story was used by J. R. R. Tolkien in *The Hobbit* (1937) and *The Lord of the Rings* (1954–55).

## Life as Challenge-and-Response: Indeterminacy, Chance, and Game

### *Anticipation, hope, and indeterminacy*

When we face challenges, we wonder and naturally seek some explanation. Some seek a causal explanation. Magicians, shamans, fortunetellers, and astrologers from antiquity supplied various versions of speculative explanations to satisfy the needs of those who seek “causal” explanations. This type of explanation is quasi-scientific in nature. The assumption is that every event in life has a cause. The simplicity of a linear causal explanation is especially appealing to those who enjoy speculation. Others seek the intervention of God and attempt to gain control over the cause of misfortune or bad events. This approach still raises the question, is there a cause for all phenomena? If so, what about freedom? Can God intervene in everything? If so, why didn’t, or wouldn’t, God prevent horrific evils?

From human action to natural phenomena, however, there always is an element of indeterminacy. We can talk about probability and a degree of likelihood of particular outcome, but not with absolute certainty. Each individual, for example, lives with a sense of indeterminacy. Expectation, anticipation, hope, and belief are necessary elements of life, if life is to be joyful. Life becomes joyful through the process in which those anticipatory elements become realized. Joy is basically a process, not a static thing or property. At the same time, each individual lives with a sense of anticipation, hoping at times, and expecting certain events to occur based on probabilities.

Just as the mind and the individual self exist with indeterminacy, the mechanism of reality likewise appears to have room for indeterminacy. If the world is constructed by rigid causal mechanism without any space of indeterminacy, such anticipatory factors of mind do not make sense. By contrast, if the world is completely random, the anticipatory facet of the mind does not make sense either. The anticipatory aspect of the mind that hopes, expects and believes is meaningful only when the world is built upon the principle of indeterminacy which operates under the principle of probability.

Life is neither a chain of events dominated by a rigid mechanistic causality nor a collection of chaotic random occurrences. In between these two extreme views, life appears manageable while having its unexpected turns. As a result of this indeterminacy, life is interesting.

### *Life as a game: between boredom and apathy*

Similarly, life lies in between boredom and apathy. If the challenges far exceed one’s ability to cope with them, one falls into apathy; one becomes indifferent to challenges, probably out of a self-defense mechanism. On the other hand, if there are no challenges in life, one feels boredom. Youth feel thirsty for challenges and tend to make even dangerous attempts.

If tasks are overwhelmingly difficult, one may become indifferent to them. An individual feels the meaning of his or her efforts only when those efforts contribute, even in the smallest degree or even only within his or her imagination, to overcoming the difficulties. When one feels absolutely defenseless and impotent in coping with challenges, life itself loses meaning. Despair is the state of mind when one feels that his or her efforts are meaningless. In despair, one may even find hope in death, and suicide becomes a possibility when death, ironically, appears to be the only hope.

At the same time, for a challenge to be meaningful to an individual, there must be a proper balance between capability and a degree of difficulty. When one overcomes one challenge and becomes skillful, the same work may not appear as challenging. What was once demanding becomes a routine task once a person develops the necessary skills and his or her capabilities far exceed the task at hand. Once the work becomes routine, what was once a challenge may not provide the same level of excitement that it provided before.

One way to see life, then, is as a process of challenges-and-responses; to see life as a game.[23] A game has three basic characteristics. First, a game consists of certain rules or determinants and an undetermined element of chance. Because of this indeterminacy, the game is fun. Second, players can develop their skills. Every step in a game is a unique test which challenges each player, allowing players to experience the development of

their skills. Third, games are essentially fun. Games are self-sufficient in that the goal is not external to the activity, but the object (to have fun) exists in the activity itself. Although winning is a reward that is part of the game, the joy of the game lies in its pursuit. Forgetfulness of ego-consciousness, a symptom of the total psycho-somatic involvement, otherwise called “mind-body unity,” is realized in the activity of gaming.[24] This analogy of life as a game is consistent with the Unificationist concept that Rev. Moon described as the “Hobby life.”[25]

## Hermeneutical Inquiry: The Meaning of Challenges— Creativity, Truth, and Love

If life is a series of challenges and responses, what is the point of responding to challenges? Is it simply an instinctual behavior for the sake of survival? In this section, I explore and attempt to clarify the complex mechanism of challenge-and-response in life. The primary approach is a hermeneutical one in the sense that the primary goal is to elucidate the meaning of the mechanism. In order to answer the question of how challenges in life are meant to cultivate individual potential, I adopt three aspects of the human being: creativity, truth, and love, deriving inspiration from Theory of Original Human Nature in Unification Thought.[26] I examine how challenges are meant to cultivate those natures, thereby establishing the thesis that challenge is a necessary built-in mechanism of life.

As an initial point, hermeneutics is a general theory of interpretation, which has its origin in the interpretation of religious texts and laws.[27] Among all hermeneutic principles, the most basic one is the part-whole relationship. In interpreting an event, for example, the whole can be the framework of interpretation. The meaning of an event is determined by its relationship within the framework of interpretation. For example, in linguistics, the meaning of a word is determined by how it is used in the whole syntactical and semantic totality of a given language. If the part-whole rule is applied to the question of the meaning of the challenge-and-response mechanism, the inquiry requires a clarification of what the totality of human life amounts to, which raises the difficulty of hermeneutic circularity.

Hermeneutic circularity means a circular relationship between a part and the whole. In the context of this essay, this circular relationship exists between a particular challenge in life and the totality of life as a whole. The meaning of each challenge in life can be clarified in its role within the context of overall meaning of life. The overall meaning of life, however, can be clarified along with the clarification of each challenge. If we presuppose and impose a pre-set “meaning of life” based on some speculation, we have no methodological difficulty. But this linear reasoning does not explain the mechanism of human understanding. Human understanding is essentially circular rather than linear. Linear reasoning in the sense of the dogmatic application of pre-set ideas and beliefs is a type of discourse that seeks to classify, categorize, and typify things. It is a type of mechanical or functional reasoning. It however cannot explain the dynamic open process of human discourse, a type of discourse necessary for interpretation. For this reason, I do not use a linear mechanical discourse but use hermeneutical circular discourse.

As I will explain in this section, the meaning of life is disclosed to the individual along with the process of discovering the meanings of each challenge. I hold that the whole meaning of life is a dynamic totality of interpretation and re-interpretation of a series of life events. The meaning of a particular life event changes and evolves along with the changes of one’s horizon or context of interpretation. The discovery of the meaning in each challenge broadens one’s horizon of interpretation, and each new horizon gives new meaning to previous challenges. This description of the dynamic movement of interpretation between part and whole, that is, between a particular challenge and the whole context of interpretation, is a proper method to disclose the meaning of life and its challenges. In this section, I will use creativity, truth, and love as guiding threads to describe the hermeneutic circularity.

### *Be Creative: Creativity and optimal experience*

Creativity is the capacity to play with reality by generating innovative ideas, perspectives, visions, and approaches. It includes the capability to change one’s perspective to interpret a challenge, and change one’s attitude and stance towards challenge. It is also the ability to re-contextualize, cope with, and play with a given challenge. Because of its playful, flexible characteristic, creativity is distinguished from the rigid calculative function of the mind or the rule-following of theoretical reasoning.

Creativity seems to be a key aspect of play. When one is creative, he or she experiences the process of life as joy. One may call this optimal experience of life as “flow,” following Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi who coined the

term. Csikszentmihalyi defined “flow” as “joy, creativity, the process of total involvement with life.” It is “autotelic,” a self-sufficient experience “rewarding in and of itself.”<sup>[28]</sup> The structure of challenge-and-response is a mechanism of life which is meant to generate such an optimal, joyful experience.

Material wealth, free time, and freedom from duties and obligation do not make life joyful and meaningful by themselves. Without challenges, one rather feels boredom. Csikszentmihalyi notes that it is challenge that makes life exciting and meaningful: “Optimal experience requires increasing challenges and the development of skills apace. Life is meaningful only when people feel that the psychic energy they expend in the course of daily life strengthens their life. Growth must be factored into the equation for a good life.”<sup>[29]</sup>

How can we understand the challenge-and-response when the challenge seems to be far exceeding one’s coping ability? Under such extreme circumstances, life no longer appears as a game but presents itself as a harsh reality or even a brutal force. One can be pushed to the edge of life and death.

I still argue that life is essentially a game-like being. Challenges are rarely minor; if they are manageable one would likely approach it as a routine task. A task becomes a challenge only when it is large enough to overwhelm the person. The problem occurs when one loses sight of the fact that one can always step back from the challenge and find a way to cope with it. There are a number of ways one can take: finding a small step toward the task; finding a different route; bracketing the whole issue, observing the situation, and seeing the situation from different perspective; getting help from others. There is always buffer space between the self and reality, and the biggest problem occurs when one loses sight of this fact and life appears as rigid, inflexible, and impossible. It is illuminating to discover that even in the severest circumstances, one has a room to play with reality. The loss of this buffer space in life is an invitation to despair.

When one keeps in mind the space between the self and reality, one can discover new ways to approach challenges. In fact, the greatest discovery is often made under the most difficult challenges. For example, in Auschwitz, finding humanity in the most inhumane circumstances must be a surprise not only for those who received kindness but also for the one who “could” be kind to others. One’s hidden potential or possibilities are unveiled or discovered often under improbable or impossible circumstances.

If one loses sight of the space between the self and reality, one loses the ability to transform or discover. In that sense, the prospect of facing a severe challenge is a gamble, making life a dangerous game. If one lost a buffer between the self and the reality, one loses a space of transformation or discovery. Severe challenge is, in this sense, a gamble or a dangerous game of life or death.

### *Be Truthful: Becoming the authentic unique self*

One of the essential characteristics of human life is that it is always one’s own. No one can live another person’s life. One can have empathy toward another person, but cannot experience something on behalf of someone else. In *Being and Time*, Heidegger presented the concept of a “being-toward-death” as one of the essential characteristics of one’s existence. He pointed out that death makes one be aware of the self as a unique irreplaceable being.<sup>[30]</sup> No matter how others are present at one’s death, one dies “one’s own death.”

In Unificationism, each individual is conceptualized as an “Individual Embodiment of Truth.”<sup>[31]</sup> This concept points to a perspective that truth has an element of individuation and each person is the substantial embodiment of truth in its unique way.<sup>[32][33]</sup> To become authentic, one has to try to be truthful to oneself. This, however, presupposes that truth is pre-existing within the self and it guides and leads one. It is truth which guides one who is trying to be truthful to the self.

Thus, what distinguishes one’s life from the lives of all others is the identity of the self. All events in life are individuated as part of a particular individual’s life. What is consistent in one’s life, which has all kinds of changes and influences, comprises one’s identity and the life of a particular individual.

Similarly, challenges are also unique to an individual; further, the way a challenge presents itself to an individual, and the way that individual processes that challenge, is unique to that individual. For example, an ordinary romantic relationship with a girl became a major issue for Kierkegaard. After one year from the date of engagement, Kierkegaard sent a letter to break the engagement because he “loved” her. He revisited and reinterpreted this event throughout his philosophical life and it became an important source of inspiration.<sup>[34]</sup> This illustrates how even a simple, ordinary event can turn into the key to decode philosophical and personal issues that are unique to each individual.

Ultimately, these challenges seem to lead each individual to becoming an authentic unique self. This uniqueness is an important aspect of value as well. In other words, the meaning of one's life is tied to the question of an individual's intrinsic value. It is important to note that uniqueness seems to be an achievement rather than a commonplace matter of fact. When one is trying to be true to oneself, one is led to become a unique self through the process of self-discovery.

Responding to challenges, in turn, cultivates an individual's unique potential. What is the best in each individual is yet to be discovered and cultivated. The effort to respond to internal challenges from the outside, and to explore various solutions for life's challenges and issues, cultivates the internal potential of the individual. Thus, the process of overcoming challenges leads to the discovery of the self; external exploration and internal exploration are thus parallel phenomena.

This discovery of the self is a personal process of individuation. Only the individual who is facing challenge can find the self, and the keys to solving that challenge, such as insights, ideas, and inspirations, are unique to that person. Originality is born out of one's attempts to decode the issue at hand. To become the original unique self is not so much an artificial construct as a natural process.

### *Retrospective discovery of the meaning of challenge*

There is no answer to the question of why particular challenges befall a certain individual. Furthermore, one does not start questioning about one's life until one reaches certain age. Nevertheless, if the meaning of challenge is understood as within the part-whole relationship, the meaning of a challenge can be understood in retrospect; further, the meaning of a certain challenge may change, depending on the changes in one's context and one's horizons of interpretation.

In addition, challenges often open up a new horizon of interpretation by transforming the individual. When one overcomes a challenge, one sees the self and the world differently. One finds the self with new eyes, redefines the self, and gains a new horizon of interpretation. The new interpretive framework allows one to re-interpret his or her experiences differently or add additional layers of meaning. Those layers of meanings are built up like a dynamic elastic buffer, within which the meaning of each experience resonates.

### *Be Caring: Enrichment of meaning of life by love and shared life*

Each individual is an autonomous, self-governing being. Each has an inviolable, sacred realm of freedom with which nobody else, not even God, can intervene. The concept of the autonomy of individual is primarily discussed within ethical contexts. For Kant, a major thinker on the issue of moral autonomy, it means one's capacity to respect and impose the moral law upon oneself. This self-regulating mechanism of human beings is distinguished from heteronomous material things which are regulated by laws external to themselves. In the current context, I use autonomy in a broader sense of self-governance. Precisely because one is free to choose one's life, one seems to be ultimately responsible for one's life.

Because one has an inviolable realm of freedom, some may argue that one is ultimately and entirely responsible for his or her life because it is the product of his or her choice. We hear common phrases such as "Your life is the result of your thought, belief, and wish" or "Your life is the result of your choice. Wish and believe strongly, and you will get the life you want." This is, however, only partly true.

First, while one has an inviolable realm of freedom, the range of choices is determined in considerable degree, if not absolutely, by one's socio-historical environment and genetic makeup. In short, an individual's choice is not a selection in a socially and historically value-free space. The social space is more like a social, historical magnetic field where various powers, forces, and interests are at work. Some social mechanisms literally limit the possibility of one's choices. For example, events such as wars, financial crises, natural disasters, and other social, historical, and natural events can considerably limit the range of individual choice. In some cases, these external forces entirely take away freedom in the ordinary meaning of the term. For example, if a person happened to be a Jew during World War II in Europe, or if he or she was a young German, social circumstances would affect the range of choices available for that person.

Second, the life of an individual is not made up by that individual alone. If one examines one's life, one can easily find how other people's lives constitute his or her life. Human lives intersect as one's life becomes a part of someone's life, and another person's life becomes a part of his or her life. If one tries to eradicate all others, life will become empty. While physical bodies are separated, minds intersect, resonate, and co-exist. Metaphorically speaking, "My body lives in the physical house but "I" as a human being lives in the heart of someone who loves or cares for me."



Thus, love is a critical part of one's life, and we co-exist by sharing lives. An individual's life is thus a product of not only individual decisions, but life is comprised of layers of other people's lives. For example, the love relationship of father and mother underlie an individual's existence. For this reason, Viktor Frankl observed that one would reflect upon such relationships in life-and-death situations; as love is found at the root of human life, love may be found in the life beyond death.

By caring for others, an individual can invite others to become part of his or her life and also offer his or her life for the betterment of others' lives. The act of opening up one's heart also liberates the self from the bondage of hatred and prejudice, and allows one to help others by dedicating one's services and life for the wellbeing of others. In these shared relationships, one's joy adds to the joy of others, and others' joy contributes to one's joy. Love and care thus enhance and amplify one's experience, making life rich. In loving relationships, one's sadness and suffering are also enhanced. Nevertheless, the sharing of burdens is a part of an enriched life.

## Conclusion: Paradoxes of Life

In this essay, I attempt to view life as a game-like process of challenge-and-response. Faced with challenging circumstances, one can take three approaches: to be creative, to be truthful, and to be caring. One can make life exciting, interesting, and joyful, or at least bearable, by being creative. By being truthful, one can become an authentic, unique self. By having an open heart and following a caring and loving way of life, one can have a rich life. Love, truth, and creativity ideally can work not in isolation but in concert with one another.

The meaning of life, I believe, is not some kind of fixed object one tries to reach and find. It is rather a kind of being that emerges out of the process of challenge-and-response. Its discovery is parallel to one's self-discovery and the discovery of solutions for the tasks at hand. Through the process of overcoming challenges from outside of the self, one cultivates one's inner potentialities. Overcoming internal obstacles inside of the self empowers one to cope with challenges from the outside. The process of challenge-and-response adds a dynamic element to both the internal and external mechanisms of an individual's development.

This essay discusses primarily how individuals can respond to challenges. As I discussed in the section on the Matthew Effect and elsewhere, it is important to create a positive and fair social environment. The idea of creativity, truth, and love, I believe, can be applied to institutions, organizations, and communities as well. To be creative, to be truthful, and to be caring can be applied to those collective entities. Just as individuals can better cope with challenges by developing these three aspects, collective entities can also cope with challenges by creating institutional or organizational cultures with these characteristics.<sup>[35]</sup> Social environments that embody love, truth, and creativity can be innovative, exciting, joyful, and ethical. The efforts of individuals to cultivate these characteristics within themselves and the efforts of collective entities to do the same can generate a synergy to enhance efforts by both.

Life is paradoxical. It is hard to live when one cannot handle challenges. The harshest challenges can lead one to despair, suicidal thoughts, and insanity. We often wish that we did not have to face challenges. But, it is also true that one cannot bear a life without any challenge. For life to be exciting and joyful, life needs challenge. It is ironic that one can bring out the best under the most difficult circumstances, yet, those circumstances may threaten one's life altogether. Under any circumstance, life has an indeterminate buffer that allows for play. The essay is intended to clarify these enigmatic mechanisms of life to help us become better players of the game of life.

## Notes

[1] Elie Wiesel, *The Trial of God (As It Was Held on February 25, 1649, in Shamgorod): A Play in Three Acts* (New York: Random House, 1979). The play was aired on PBS and a DVD is available: Jemma Rodgers, Frank Cottrell Boyce, Andy De Emmony, Josef Altin, Ashley Artus, Dominic Cooper, Lorcan Cranitch, David De Keyser, Stephen Dillane, and Rupert Graves, *God on Trial*, WGBH Boston Video, 2009.

[2] *Ibid.*, cover notes.

[3] *Ibid.*, p. 165.

[4] In the "theory of the original human nature" of Unification Thought, heart, logos, and creativity constitute Divine Character. See Unification Thought Institute, *New Essentials of Unification Thought: Head-wing Thought* (Tokyo: Kogensya, 2006), pp. 164-172.

[5] Carl Jung called social identity “persona,” which is like a mask an actor and actress wears in a play. The self is constituted of multiple personas as well as ego-consciousness and other elements of unconsciousness such as complex and libido.

[6] Viktor E. Frankl, *Man’s Search for Meaning* (Boston: Beacon Press, 2006), p. 87.

[7] *Ibid.*, p. 86.

[8] *Ibid.*, p. 4.

[9] *Ibid.*, p. 74.

[10] *Ibid.*, p. 37.

[11] Matthew 25:29, New Revised Standard Version.

[12] Robert K. Merton, “The Matthew Effect of Science: The reward and communication systems of science are considered,” *Science*, 159 (January 5, 1968): 62.

[13] Some journals have introduced “blind peer review” as a selection procedure for their academic journals. Under this method, the author’s name was sealed to reviewers so that reviewers can select by the merit of article alone. This is one attempt to prevent a biased selection.

[14] Merton, “The Matthew Effect.”

[15] Daniel Rigney, *The Matthew Effect: How Advantage Begets Further Advantage* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2010).

[16] *Ibid.*, p. 19.

[17] *Ibid.*, p. 105.

[18] *Ibid.*, p. 104.

[19] *Ibid.*, p. 24.

[20] *Ibid.*, p. 5.

[21] Keisuke Noda, “Tipping Point of Good and Evil: The Power of Authentic Love in Moral Discourse,” *Journal of Unification Studies* 13 (2012).

[22] Edith Hamilton and Huntington Cairns, eds. *The Collected Dialogues of Plato, Including the Letters* (New York: Pantheon Books, 1961), pp. 607-08

[23] The game analogy raises the idea of viewing life as “risk management.” Peter Bernstein, an investment analyst and financial historian, gives a comprehensive analysis of the origin, history, and effects of the concept of risk in Peter L. Bernstein, *Against the Gods: The Remarkable Story of Risk* (New York: John Wiley & Sons, 1996).

[24] There are a number of notable studies on the playful nature of human life and culture. The three best known works are: Johan Huizinga, *Homo Ludens: A Study of the Play Element in Culture* (London: Maurice Temple Smith Ltd, 1970); Roger Caillois, *Man, Play, and Games* (New York: Schocken Books, 1979); and Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi, *Flow: The Psychology of Optimal Experience* (New York: Harper & Row, 1990).

[25] On Rev. Moon’s vision for the ocean leisure industry and hobby industry, see *Cheon Seong Gyeong* (Family Federation of World Peace and Unification, 2006), pp. 1908-1914.

[26] *New Essentials of Unification Thought*, pp. 164-172.

[27] In the twentieth century, Heidegger developed hermeneutic phenomenology and applied it to the question of the meaning of being. Hans-Georg Gadamer, a student of Heidegger, expanded the hermetical component of Heidegger’s philosophy and established hermeneutics as the philosophical methodology. Both Heidegger’s and Gadamer’s hermeneutics are called “philosophical hermeneutics.” See Hans-Georg Gadamer, *Truth and Method* (New York: Crossroad, 1989).

[28] Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi and Isabella Selega Csikszentmihalyi, *Optimal Experience: Psychological Studies of Flow in Consciousness* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1988), p. 8.

[29] *Ibid.* p. 377.

[30] See “Division Two: Dasein and Temporality, I. Dasein’s Possibility of Being-a-whole, and Being-toward-death,” in Martin Heidegger, *Being and Time*, trans. John Macquarrie (New York: Harper, 1962), or the more recent translation, Martin Heidegger and Joan Stambaugh, *Being and Time: A Translation of Sein Und Zeit*. (Albany, NY: State University of New York Press, 1996).

[31] *Exposition of the Divine Principle* (New York: HSA-UWC, 1996), p. 28.

[32] For the notion of truth as embodiment, see: Keisuke Noda, “Understanding the Word as the Process of Embodiment,” *Journal of Unification Studies* 1 (1997): 55-70. [journals.uts.edu/volume-i-1997/71-understanding-the-word-as-the-process-of-embodiment.html](http://journals.uts.edu/volume-i-1997/71-understanding-the-word-as-the-process-of-embodiment.html) (Accessed February 28, 2013).

[33] Truth is mediated by linguistic representations including the mathematical, which are inter-subjectively or objectively constructed. Linguistic representation or mediation of truth allows us to see universal aspect of truth. Human understanding is, however, uniquely individuated as his or her own experience.

[34] Søren Kierkegaard, David F. Swenson, Lillian Marvin Swenson, and Walter Lowrie, *Either/or; A Fragment of Life* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1944).

[35] Arnold Toynbee, *A Study of History* (London: Oxford University Press; Thames and Hudson, 1972) adopted the concept of challenge-and-response to explain the birth and decline of civilizations.