



SUCCESS-DRIVEN PHILOSOPHY: FINDING *CLARITY OF PURPOSE*
AND ACHIEVING *ARETE* THROUGH PHILOSOPHICAL EXAMINATION | JOSHUA GOLDMAN & JASON SHEN

1 THE PURPOSE OF THIS MANIFESTO

Producing a guide to definitively answering questions that have been argued for millennia is an ambitious undertaking. The endeavor was born of several observations:

Observation 1:

Deep philosophical arguments are as commonplace in college as discussions concerning introductory classes, the turbulent political atmosphere, or the hottest girl in the dorm. After engaging in lengthy debates, we were left with the impression that religion has lost steam among future academics and soon-to-be professionals. Simply put, our generation is palpably dissatisfied by faith-based dogmatic “facts” asserted by religion. In true scientific fashion, we decided to take investigative measures (read, “opened up google and started searching”) in an effort to better understand this changing zeitgeist and its repercussions.

Observation 2:

The “mid-life crisis” is a refashioning of one’s ideals and priorities upon realizing that half your life has passed. People quickly become overwhelmed by questions like “am I the person I want to be?” “have I wasted half my life?” “*should* I buy that new Porsche?” Having a strong set of core values provides a sense of self that will help one avoid such a spiritual collapse. Moreover, the “quarter-life crisis” has become an increasingly common occurrence. Professional success has become extremely competitive, and as such, reaching professional goals requires significant future planning. For example, to take part in activities that will ensure a spot in the best residency programs, I have to go into medical school knowing my future specialty. Effectively, I have to decide what type of physician I want to be a decade from now. Overwhelming, to say the least.

Observation 3:

Faith is the question. Philosophy is the answer. We found that it was not religious morality that people disagree upon. In fact, most major moral quandaries are agreed upon (i.e. don't kill people, don't steal, love/respect one another, etc). It is, instead, *faith* required by the metaphysical attestations of religion that comes into question. As two guys who dabble in philosophy we quickly found a new inlet for metaphysical understanding that appeals to the intelligentsia (and really anybody who wants something more substantial to have faith in). The aforementioned debates often rebuked the illogical nature of many religious beliefs and their ensuing obligations. What better to fill in these cracks than a study based mainly on logic and reason?

Observation 4:

Academic philosophy is NOT for everyone. Academic philosophy, in our experience relies mainly on semantic arguments, and rarely helps one form strong, steadfast, and productive beliefs. It does, however, expose you to ideas and teach you to make strong arguments, and it serves as a starting point for such beliefs. This manifesto helps bridge the gap between academic philosophy and your philosophy.

Lofty as the thought-exercise encouraged here may seem, be assured, it will be equally as enterprising

Ultimately, and this will become evident in the following sections, the most important thing is to find a balance between your own happiness and your effect on the world (other people's happiness), as these two things are inevitably intertwined. When you realize this, forming your own ideas about your personal identity and your place in the universe becomes paramount.

2 *HOW WILL THIS MANIFESTO HELP YOU?*

This manifesto will facilitate your philosophical examination as you iron out what you believe and why you believe it. We do this by providing a philosophical toolkit, as well as a framework for considering the principal areas of philosophy. Ancient Greek philosophers had a concept they called “arete”. It is often translated as “excellence” or “virtue”, but Brian Johnson of ThinkArete says it’s better defined as “constantly striving to reach your highest potential”. This manifesto will bring you closer to arete.

Consider these benefits:

1 **Define your own success.**

Whether you choose to focus on goal-driven success or being-driven success, philosophical examination can help you achieve it. By understanding what you truly believe, you will choose the right S.M.A.R.T* goals and the methods of living and being your highest self.

*(Specific, Measurable, Action-oriented, Relevant and Time-Bound)

2 **Develop conviction in yourself.**

Consider that the great leaders of every field display a great deal of conviction in their thoughts and actions. To become a leader you must develop conviction in yourself and your beliefs, which can only be accomplished through intellectual struggle.

3 **Make better decisions about your life.**

Life often throws hard choices at you and provides no clear solution. When you figure out what you value most and what you know is true, you are better equipped to make the right call.

4 **Enrich your intellect.**

Thinking about philosophy is a great way to keep your mind sharp, develop your critical-thinking, analysis and communication skills. No great philosopher was ever accused of being an idiot.

“Virtue (arete) then is a settled disposition of the mind determining the choice of actions and emotions, consisting essentially in the observance of the mean relative to us, this being determined by principle, that is, as the prudent man would determine it.”

Aristotle's Nicomachean Ethics, II vi 15, translated H. Rackham (1934: Cambridge, Mass., Harvard University Press)

5 **Find Meaning.**

Finally, finding your own philosophy gives you a better grasp of an age-old question. What is the meaning of life? Why are we here? We can't answer that question for you, but we can help you figure it out.

Final note: A lot of people think that philosophy is something done by “philosophers”, with nothing better to do than sit around and ask a lot of strange and useless questions like “What is reality?” and “What is ethical?” But the fact is, you do have a worldview and a concept of morality. You believe that certain things are right and wrong, or good and bad. You have a way of figuring out what is true or false, and what is real or illusion, but better understanding and systematizing those methods will further allow you to fully and clearly articulate your beliefs and ease the road to success.

Don't you owe it to yourself to find out what you really think?

The most important thing is to find a balance between your own happiness and your effect on the world (other people's happiness).

3 *THE 7-STEP PHILOSOPHICAL METHOD*

Many people are intimidated by philosophy, but you don't need exceptional intellect or a philosophy degree to think about it. To make some headway in it, you do need to approach questions and ideas in slightly different ways than you might be used to. While we will help you think through each topic as we come to it, here is our 7-step System for philosophical analysis.

Note: Philosophical discussion is best done with partners, and ideally your thought process has been assessed by many people to provide some insight towards your own philosophy. We hope to create an online forum where this healthy discussion can go on. If you don't have anyone to discuss with, then at MINIMUM you should write down your thoughts as you consider them. Capturing your thoughts on paper is essential to understanding your own beliefs. Define, Find, Intuit, Test, Progress, Investigate, Revise.

1 **Define your question.**

Finding your philosophy is supposed to bring you clarity, but you can't find clarity if you don't ask clear questions. Make sure you understand the questions you are asking before trying to look for an answer. Sometimes if you are at a dead end with a question, try broadening or narrowing the scope. For instance, if you are stuck on "Is there a God?" you might try a question like "Is there a God who cares about me personally?"

2 **Find a Starting Point.**

To make some headway, it's usually best if you have a starting point. You can find this either through your gut, immediate response, what you have been taught, what society traditionally believes, or an idea from other philosophers. You can even initially disagree with a starting point; in fact, it is often helpful if you do because it makes the next steps easier.

3 **Does your Starting Point seem right intuitively?**

When philosophers try to approach an idea, they ask if it makes sense intuitively. You're doing it already and you didn't spend 5 years getting a PhD. See, philosophy is easier than you thought! However, the important thing is to figure out why the starting point makes sense (or doesn't). Having a feeling that something "seems right" or "seems weird" isn't enough. You must be able to explain why it doesn't make sense.

4 **Test the Starting Point in many different situations.**

To figure out whether something does or doesn't make sense, it's helpful to test the idea in various situations. Say you ask the question "Is killing people wrong?" and your starting point is "Killing people is always wrong." Perhaps your gut-check reaction is "it makes sense". But test the answer in various situations. Is killing a death row prisoner wrong? Is killing a soldier in a battle wrong? Is a victim of rape getting an abortion wrong? Perhaps you might say yes to all of these scenarios and many others that you think of—then perhaps the statement is really part of your philosophy. But if there is a hiccup, then you need to figure out why you disagree with a certain scenario.

5 **Use Logical Progression.**

This is another way of figuring out why something makes sense or doesn't and that is by using logical progression. What you do is make a series of "if this, then this. If that, then that..." and so on. For example, if your question is "How do I know if something is true?" and your starting point is "If I really believe it" then you want to ask "If something is true because I really believe it, then if the reverse must also be true - If I really believe something, then it must be true." Does that sound right? Did your first boyfriend really love you forever? Did you really fail that tough test? By following ideas logically, we can find other sorts of inconsistencies that need to be corrected.

6 **Investigate inconsistencies.**

The worst insult a philosopher can level at another is that he or she is inconsistent. When you find an inconsistency in your starting point, either through a certain situation or through a logical progression, you need to figure out what is wrong with the inconsistency. What makes this situation or this conclusion disagree with your starting point? For example if you say that God exists and is all-powerful, all-knowing, and completely benevolent, then you must consider (and explain) the inconsistency of why He (or She) allows evil to exist in the world.

7 **Revise your Starting Point.**

Once you have some ideas about what is wrong or right with your starting point, you'll want to revise it and return to step one.

This might sound like a lot to take in all at once, but don't worry. In our next section we'll cover the big topics in philosophy and guide you through every step of the thinking process. It's been scientifically proven that your brain will explode if you try to go through the whole book in one sitting, so give yourself a breather! Philosophy was not created in a day, and many philosophers spent years refining and elucidating their beliefs. When you're ready, we'll head over to our next section to start tackling some big questions.

4 PHILOSOPHICAL TOPICS

“I’ve got my philosophy...it keeps my feet on the ground.”—BEN FOLDS FIVE

1 Knowledge (a Look at Skepticism) and Reality.

“He said ‘It’s all in your head,’ and I said, ‘So’s everything,’ but he didn’t get it.”—FIONA APPLE

- “How do you know that you know?” “Well, how do you know that you know that you know?” This exploration could easily be pursued ad infinitum. With that in mind, the question arises as to whether or not you believe we can ever have any true, fully substantiated knowledge. As humans, we yearn to know more about the world in which we exist, so knowledge indisputably becomes intertwined with our views of reality.
- Basic Questions to Ask: Can I truly know anything? What kinds of things can I know? For example, it seems apparent that knowing that $2+2=4$ is different from knowing that a building is brown (sensual knowledge requires experience while mathematical knowledge does not). What implication does knowledge have on my reality? Do I exist? Am I the only one who exists (solipsism)? What makes a reality real (Experience? What about dreams and other altered states?)?
- Knowledge is a broad and extremely controversial topic. Whether or not you believe we can ever fully know anything or not (skepticism), you must interact with the fact that knowledge of our world (including understanding of self) is highly important to achieving a happy and successful life. You can easily pursue the question “how do you know?” ad nauseum, but it’s far more important to ask yourself “how much can I learn?” Knowing that skepticism is a possibility will keep you flexible in your explorations, but learning more about the world in which you exist, whether its real or not, will ensure your success in it.

2 **Personal Identity.**

“I want someone to know me, maybe tell me who I am.”—THIRD EYE BLIND

- Basic Questions to Ask: Who am I? What makes me an individual? What makes me the specific individual I am?
- These questions hold a lot of bearing on the way you live your life. Am I simply defined by the decisions I make, my actions, how others see me, or am I simply a random assembly of molecules? Questioning who exactly you are, understanding the core of your being or what you take to be you, is of extreme importance. Knowing how to live the best life possible is meaningless if you don't have this knowledge specifically tailored to who you are as a person. Descartes' infamous quote, “I think therefore I am,” provides only for existence of something I can call I. This provides a starting point, but it's up to you to define this “I” and then understand yourself such that you can fashion the most productive and successful “I” possible.

3 **God. Yes, no, maybe?**

“I believe in God, only I spell it Nature.”—FRANK LLOYD WRIGHT

- Perhaps, for most, belief in God requires the largest leap of faith. You cannot see Him, He “works in mysterious ways,” and only circumstantial evidence (like existence) is offered as proof by texts written thousands of years ago. There is a plethora of ways to look at God, and it does not require a stretch to reconcile your daily life with how you view God.
- Basic Questions to Ask: Can God be omnipotent, omnibenevolent, and omniscient? On a faith level, how is monotheism any different from polytheism? Do you believe in God? If no, what if you are wrong? If yes, why? Is atheism as fanatic as fundamentalist faith in God (after all, it is impossible to prove something's non-existence)? Is it possible that God is not a “daddy-figure”

in heaven looking down on your actions (maybe He is something so infinitesimal that He makes up everything)?

- You may be asking yourself how belief or disbelief in God would affect how you live your life. How you feel about God is central to how you feel about personal identity, knowledge, free will, and morality. If you do not subscribe to a belief in God, or subscribe to a more secular view, then you will be free to explore a much less rigid philosophy. If you subscribe to a strict view of God, it will surely affect your philosophy, and the way it guides your endeavors. Additionally, belief in a God absolutely changes who you live for. Are you doing things because God wants you to or because ultimately it's good for you in this life? Maybe you are doing it for the next life, but how will you feel if there is no next life? Is that a risk worth taking? Maybe you can fashion a God and tenets that will allow you to live a life so successful that it fulfills both your personal desires in this world and will grant you passage into a higher one.
- Example of a very secular view of God: There is definitely something that connects us all, not only to each other, but also to the universe. Some unifying characteristic. If you want to call it G-d, feel free. One could even say that this entity is infinite, omnipotent (because it comprises all things from which actions occur), and omniscient, but omnibenevolence is irrelevant because good and evil have no bearing on, or presence in, the infinite. Further, this "God" is no thinking being. It just is.

4 Free Will and Determinism.

“If you want to make God laugh, tell him about your plans.”—WOODY ALLEN

- Determinism, for those unfamiliar, is the idea that all the events in the universe are caused outside of human will. The concept of free will falls squarely inside the concept of determinism. The bible states that God gave human beings the ability to choose to worship Him or not. For nonbelievers, the idea of free will is still very much tied to the meaning of life.
- Basic questions to ask: Are we actually in control of our actions? How can you tell? Do robots/machines/computers have free will? What if everyone was a highly sophisticated robot that acted exactly like human beings do now? The laws of physics describe how an object will behave if the other forces acting on it are known. Given this, can we extrapolate to say that we can know how the universe will turn out if we knew the forces acting on every atom that currently exists? What does moral responsibility mean if free will did not exist? Is the future “unwritten” or have we just not read the pages? Can our lives have meaning if the fate of the universe has been predetermined by physics? What if God has predetermined it?
- Example of how a modified version of determinism could be socially applied: While decisions can have general trends depending on the background, genetic information and environmental factors of the person making the decision, there is still some room for individual preferences to take over. Criminals should still be punished as this will both prevent them from harming society further, and discouraging others to commit crimes, but there should not be as much moral reprehensibility placed on their shoulders.

5 **Morality.**

“While the sinners sin, the children play. Oh Lord, how they play and play.”—CAT STEVENS

- Morality is one area where people have very different concepts, and disagree vehemently on them. Think about issues like abortion, homosexuality, incest, the death penalty, and much more. The most important thing to get out of your examination of morality is to understand why different people have different moral viewpoints, even if you disagree with them.
- Basic questions: Who or what determines what is right or wrong? Possible candidates include your Holy Book, your rabbi, your parents, moral philosophers and yourself? Is it possible to get better at making moral decisions? How much of our morality is determined by our natural selection and what has been evolutionarily advantageous? Is pain inherently bad? Is pleasure inherently good? Is telling the truth always right? Are there times when lying is justified? What about torture? Why? Why should someone act morally? Is the golden rule really the most moral thing to do in all situations? Is morality only about how we treat other people? What does it mean to act morally towards yourself?
- Example of a utilitarian/Kantian mix: In general, the right thing to do is to do what makes you happy, while telling the truth and upholding promises and contracts, unless there is an inordinate amount of good that could result from breaking these first two rules. Morality is based on having integrity and maximizing pleasure for yourself and those around you.

Knowing how to live the best life possible is meaningless if you don't have this knowledge specifically tailored to who you are as a person.

6 Life.

“Get busy livin’ or get busy dyin’.”—SHAWSHANK REDEMPTION

- We promised that all this philosophizing would not turn us into empty academics squabbling over semantic differences in obscure theories. Instead, the goal is to develop an understanding of our own beliefs in order to better lives and achieve arete. The final concept/question then becomes “what should we do with our lives?” Knowing now all that we know, we must decide to act. But in what way?
- Basic questions to ask: What is the meaning of life? What are the essential aspects of a meaningful life? Happiness? Professional achievement? Raising a family that you love and that loves you? Making a positive difference in the life of someone else? Fame? Fortune? A lot of people attending your funeral? Living without regrets? Living according to the principles you personally believe in, regardless of the consequences?
- Our life philosophy: After sifting through multiple existential, epistemological, and ontological arguments, we have emerged with a simple life philosophy. The reason for our existence, the reason for life itself, is simply to live as best we can. Living so that your life has the greatest positive impact possible—for others and for yourself. Generally living within the boundaries of social and legal conventions, but spurning them when they are exceptionally unreasonable, or wrong in your mind. In the end, we both believe that a meaningful life requires a balance between doing things for yourself, contributing to others well being, and knowing how to do these things to maximize your own fulfillment.

5 *FINAL THOUGHTS*

At the end of this journey you should find your self with an organized and elucidated version of your personal philosophy. It includes your stances on the most important topics in philosophy, and your definition of success based on what you believe and value. This personal platform will be your guide as you progress through life, be your bedrock when making hard choices, and is something to fall back on when you are troubled, confused or unsure. You can have the confidence in knowing that your framework of beliefs is not made with straw but carved from granite.

However, this does not mean you can become dogmatic. The purpose of this exercise is to realize how varied different people's ideas are and how your own beliefs can and will change through time. That is fine. As you slowly capture your beliefs in physical form, you will have a historical progression of your own thought process throughout your life. It's okay to change your mind, but it's important to have good reasons for doing so. Prepare yourself with flexibility, leave room for growth and change, and you will find that transitioning and overcoming adversity becomes easier.

So now it's your turn. Take the plunge. Read books, talk to friends, family, enemies, and take stock in the world and in your life. All the things you need to begin are right beside you. Just remember that philosophizing is not necessarily the purpose of life, the purpose of life is to live. So start living. 📖

ABOUT THE AUTHORS

Joshua Goldman and Jason Shen both studied biology at Stanford University. Josh graduated with a minor in philosophy and will attend medical school in the fall of 2008. Jason graduated with interdisciplinary honors in Ethics in Society and is the executive director of Gumball Capital, a nonprofit. They have published in *Stanford Scientific*, *Neuroscience*, the *Ivy Journal of Ethics* and the *Princeton Journal of Bioethics*. If you'd like to read more, they are blogging at [The Success-Driven Philosophy Blog](#) while they work on a book of the same name.

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