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The Good Life Method

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Book Review

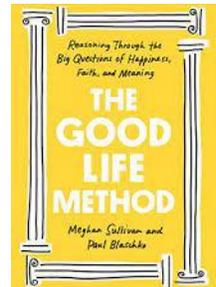
The Good Life Method: Reasoning Through the Big Questions of Happiness, Faith, and Meaning

Meghan Sullivan and Paul Blaschko

New York: Penguin Press, 2022

And I went to see the doctor of philosophy
With a poster of Rasputin and a beard down to his knee
He never did marry or see a B-grade movie
He graded my performance, he said he could see through me
I spent four years prostrate to the higher mind
Got my paper and I was free¹

It has been over 30 years since the Indigo Girls sang these lyrics as part of *Closer to Fine*, their hit song about the search for life’s meaning. I was a graduate student at the time and can still remember this particular verse’s stark message – the answers to life’s most important questions were not to be found in a university classroom. Higher education was about “getting your paper” so that you could be “free.”



Three decades later and that sentiment seems just as strong within our university system. With students focused on how their courses can help them attain employment, few appear to see the classroom as a place to explore questions about life’s meaning and purpose.

What a shame. Of course, universities need to prepare students for the workforce, but shouldn’t the experience also prepare them to live what philosophers call a “good life.”

Martin Luther University College, where I teach, recognized this responsibility several years ago. In 2018 it introduced a second-year course entitled *Why am I here? Worldview, Meaning-making and Authenticity*, which focused specifically on the questions: “Who am I? and What is my purpose?”. Although primarily an elective course, it has become increasingly popular, with a cross-section of students from all academic disciplines filling our classrooms.

The American Catholic University Notre Dame also came to the same realization in 2015 when it introduced the course *God and the Good Life*, which uses philosophy to help students determine what living a “good life” means for them. The course, taught by Notre Dame philosophy professors Meghan Sullivan and Paul Blaschko has been wildly successful, becoming the most popular undergraduate course at the university.

Inspired by their success, Sullivan and Blaschko recently published *The Good Life Method: Reasoning Through the Big Questions of Happiness, Faith, and Meaning*. The book provides an overview of the course and shares some of the authors’ experiences in encouraging undergraduates to tackle tough questions about the direction of their life; questions that are just as relevant for those of us who graduated many years ago.

¹ Indigo Girls, “Closer to Fine,” *Indigo Girls*, Epic Records, 1989

Sullivan and Blaschko use virtue ethics to address the question of how to live “a good life.” As they explain, the “core idea” of virtue ethics is that “there are goals for a good life and achieving them requires certain habits and traits” including the ability to: pose the right kind of questions; develop “your intentions” and tell “true stories about what you are doing and why;” pay “the right kind of attention” to the stories of others; and be able to understand “how the episodes of your life fit together” – all major themes of the book (p. 6).

The book is divided into two sections. The first is devoted to practical questions around wealth, career, and relationships while the second section looks at belief in God, faith, suffering and even death. The authors explore the themes in a thoughtful way, explaining concepts, posing relevant questions, and inviting the reader to ponder some very foundational issues. They introduce several key philosophical concepts and use case studies to explore them, including personal narratives or “apologies” about how the authors themselves have used philosophy to deal with their own troubles.

Although the authors rely heavily on the work of ancient Greek philosophers, notably Aristotle and Plato, they also look at a wide range of other thinkers as well as contemporary figures like Stephen Colbert. Although both Sullivan and Blaschko are up front about their Catholic faith, they speak candidly about their struggles with Catholicism and there is no effort to indoctrinate readers into their religion. Instead, the authors challenge us to think through our attitudes towards God and religion – including God in a suffering world.

Each chapter ends with a series of exercises designed to help the reader delve deeper into a different theme and further develop their virtues. Often based on exercises undertaken in their own course, it helps make this book a useful undergraduate text as well as a practical guide for those wanting to make sense of their own lives.

Sullivan and Blaschko don’t pull their punches. A chapter on moral obligation, for example, explains that as part of their course they calculate the tuition cost for each student. They point out that if students had instead directed those funds toward a charity fighting malaria, they could have potentially saved two lives. Have students made the right choice to study rather than save two lives?

They use this question as an entry point into an exploration of “effective altruism” made famous by the Australian philosopher Peter Singer, which calls on all of us to maximize our wealth and direct much of it to causes that support the greatest number of people. The authors juxtapose this utilitarian approach against virtue ethics to provide a more nuanced picture of our responsibility when it comes to generating wealth and helping others. However, the chapter raises important questions that we all struggle with – how can many of us live with so much while many are literally dying because they lack the necessities of life? Not many university courses would have the courage to address a question like this in such a direct way.

Sullivan and Blaschko also tackle the current polarization within the United States, outlining how the debut of the course coincided with the election of Donald Trump. Using Plato’s attack on sophistry, they challenge us to seek the truth but caution that it must be in a way that is respectful and open to other viewpoints. Using imagery from Plato’s Republic, they challenge us to “escape our cave(s)” (p. 46) and start to see the world from other people’s perspectives – particularly the marginalized. It can’t end there, however, as they further challenge us to return to our “caves” and engage others around us. A philosophical approach, they argue, uses questions to help with this engagement but they advise students to use what they term “dinner party questions” (p. 55) – open ended questions that lead to

conversations whose goal is a greater understanding of others and their perspective, not to silence them.

Despite their depiction of their American campus during the divisive 2015 election, the book is light on political issues. Although the focus is much more on personal as opposed to social ethics, political questions around a variety of hot button issues that are tearing the US apart are presumably on the minds of most American students. The book would have benefited from more discussion of how students can bring their deepest convictions to a loud and divided political system.

This is a relatively minor critique of a very timely book. As both authors point out in its introduction, an alarming number of college students in the US feel that their situation is “hopeless.” They are lonely, anxious and in some cases suicidal. Our current world can be loud, frightening, and overwhelming and its time that our post-secondary system gave students the tools to be fully human. This is particularly true for those institutions that serve as a faith-based hosts like Notre Dame or Martin Luther University College.

There is a wonderful moment in the Hebrew scriptures when the prophet Elijah, hiding in a cave on Mount Horeb is confronted by God who asks: “Why are you here, Elijah?”² “Why are you here” might be the most important question that a student will ever face. Higher education has a responsibility to help students address it before “they get their paper and are free.” *The Good Life Method* makes an important contribution to achieving this goal.

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² 1 Kings 19:13 (CEB)