

Egoism/Self-Purpose

First say to yourself what you would be; and then do what you have to do.

-Epictetus

To fulfill one's purpose is the most considerable of human pursuits; for it is indeed *the* pursuit, the only pursuit, the quest of which all other pursuits are but a part. Unfortunately, the natures of what we are here for and how we are to do it are widely uncertain, leaving many persons errant without either means or object, confounding them even at the outset of their quest.

Many have thought long and hard on the issue, conjuring up often contradicting ideals: Philosopher Oswald Spengler said with confidence, "This is our purpose: to make as meaningful as possible this life that has been bestowed upon us; to live in such a way that we may be proud of ourselves; to act in such a way that some part of us lives on." But missionary Wilfred Grenfell replied with equal certainty, "The service we render to others is really the rent we pay for our room on this earth... the purpose of this world is not 'to have and to hold' but 'to give and serve.'" Other voices bring this discourse to a clamor: Rationalists harp on perpetuation of individuals, genes, and races. Theologians proclaim devotion to religion. Capitalists claim wealth and status. Hippies cite love and peace—and the list goes on. Yet, a hippie has no use for wealth, a rationalist finds nothing worthwhile in gods, *et cetera*. If a position is agreeable only to the narrow bloc of its school, how can it possibly pass as the human purpose?

It seems that people are capable of producing a satisfactory and elegant definition of their own purpose, but to apply it to others is narrow-minded and vain.

Consider the question in context of frying pans. What is the purpose of a frying pan? Aunt Jemima would say it is definitely for making pancakes, a toddler might find it a fine

addition to his percussion ensemble, and Chuck Norris, after a moment's consideration, may declare it a marvelous combination of close combat and bullet-trajectory reversal technology. How can any one be determined to be a pan's true purpose?

The clear answer is that the purpose of skillets is dependent on the discretion of the pan's master. Phrased differently, the purpose of a pan is to be used as its master sees best. The purpose of Aunt Jemima's frying pan is indisputably the manufacture of pancakes; the pan is hers, and it is up to her to decide its purpose. Yet, if Jemima should take to the soapbox and try to impress upon Chuck Norris and the toddler that all frying pans are purposed for flapjackery—then problems would arise. Because not all pans exist for Jemima, to dictate their purpose is not her place.

The purpose of anything is to be decided by whom it is here for, its master. To bring pertinence to the analogy, the frying pan is to its owner as people are to... what? What is to dictate the role of people? What are we here for?

Return to the pans. What gave Aunt Jemima the right to decide what her pan was for? A number of ways of saying the same thing: It was her pan. She owned the pan. She controlled it. Who are we here for? Indignation now makes the question an easy one to answer. We certainly aren't at the beck and call of Oswald Spengler, nor do we owe service to capitalism, theism, or any other cult. We have free will, with nobody to report to but ourselves. We are our own masters. We are here for us, and our purpose is thus ours to decide.

Which brings us to fulfillment: The purpose of Aunt Jemima's skillet, as decided by Aunt Jemima, is to make good pancakes. The better the pancakes that the pan produces, the better that pan has served its purpose. The pan that flops out fluffy, golden-brown flapjacks without fail fulfills its purpose perfectly; it is an ideal pan. The purpose of Chuck Norris's

skillet, as decided by Chuck Norris, is to reflect bullets and bash heads. The pan that consistently returns bullets to their point of issue and bursts skulls asunder fulfills its purpose perfectly. The better a pan resembles its master's ideal pan, the better the pan fulfills its purpose. So are people. The better a person resembles their master's (their own) ideal of their selves, the better they realize their purpose.

The self is that which acts. A self becomes the ideal self by acting as the ideal self.

That which takes the ideal action is the ideal self; the ideal self takes the ideal action. When striving to act as the ideal self, the quality of an action is gauged by how closely it resembles the ideal action in that situation. For Aunt Jemima's pan, the ideal action to strive for is always to produce a perfect pancake; a person must invent and evaluate actions for each situation they encounter.

Think of life as a road trip, not to a point, but in a direction. The destination, unattainable, always a speck on the horizon, is the full realization of one's purpose. Each intersection and divide in the road represents a situation, and each road branching out represents a possible action to deal with it. Aunt Jemima's pan has an easy trip: every intersection it encounters will have a "make a perfect pancake" route, which if it elects every time will lead it towards its destination of being the ideal pan. Human travelers have it tougher: each intersection is unique, presenting new choices of roads that a person must consider in terms of direction and connections. The more clear-minded and capable the navigator, the truer their route choices to the ideal, the closer they approach their ideal self, the further they fulfill their purpose.

As with pans, what constitutes the ideal action in a situation is peculiar to the individual. Consider two figures, Mother Teresa and Attila the Hun, simplified for rhetorical purposes. The two are having lunch in the same roadside café when a messenger bursts in: a nearby village has

been struck by the plague! Mother Teresa leaps to her feat, gathers her medical bag, and hurries down the road to treat the sick villagers. Attila pauses only to drain his flask of beer, collect his spear and shield from the hat rack, and cut the throat of the messenger before charging off in the same direction to loot and lay waste to the weakened village. Two people, moving across the situation-action network, have come across the same intersection and, both pursuing their purposes, set off in different directions entirely. The evident paradox is non-existent; the ideal selves of the two are so different that to pursue their purpose is to move in different directions. This disparity exists, to some degree, between all people. Between genetic, social, and environmental influences, each mind is shaped uniquely and thus creates a unique ideal for its self. If the café had had ten people in it, there would have been ten different ideas of what constituted the ideal response to the village's misfortune.

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To be very successful, the pursuit of purpose must not be a passive process. Even as people will take the action that at the time seems best to them in a situation without consciously striving towards their ideal self, doing so will not take them far towards fulfilling their purpose. If, through pure chance, batter fell onto Aunt Jemima's skillet and a heating element appeared underneath it, the pan would fulfill its purpose by making pancakes. Yet, the fry pan will rarely manufacture a flapjack serendipitously: in order for the pan to move far towards fulfilling its purpose, Aunt Jemima will have to actively manipulate it, introducing it into situations conducive to pancake-making. The more splits in the road encountered where the pan can elect the "make a perfect pancake" route, the further it can move toward realizing its purpose. Likewise, people should seek out situations that allow them to act as their ideal selves. Purpose

is fulfilled not by merely traveling in a direction, but by traveling far. It took more than waiting around in restaurants to make the legend of Attila the Hun.

An aimless approach to purpose can also confuse one's bearing to it. As an idle ship is swept about by its environment, foreign influences can cause a person to move in directions other than towards their purpose. The mind is receptive to external ideals, which it compares with and possibly incorporates into its ideal of its self. When a person lacks a strong sense of purpose such that acting as the ideal self is not the major focus of their attentions, an imported ideal may enjoy disproportionate attention. When a foreign ideal looms larger in the conscious than the person's real ideal self, it becomes the measure for the quality of actions, and the person alters their actions accordingly. As well as a person might fulfill an imported ideal, the shallowness of such an effort will leave them unfulfilled. Imagine if Attila's early thoughts of plunder and conquest had been overshadowed by a need to keep up with social scene of the other teenyboppers in his tribe.

The obvious means of avoiding a passive approach to purpose is taking an active one, by recognizing one's ideal self, and then acting to achieve it. This is ambition, the conscious manifestation of a person's ideal self. By showing a person how to be who they want to be, ambition is the first link of a chain: ambition inspires action, action fulfills purpose.

Consider a young Attila the Hun:

One day the pubescent Mongol stumbles across a village. Perhaps out of boredom, perhaps out of a dim recognition of his ideal self, he pillages it and burns it to the ground. Afterward, he contemplates his action: *Gee, that felt good*. Curious, he razes a few more hamlets, affirming that terrorizing peasants is indeed something he enjoys and would like to see himself do more of. He ponders: barbarian warlord was never mentioned to him as a possible

career pathway; perhaps he should be more attuned to the tribal conscious, and worry instead about how impressed the girls were with Kublai's new yak skin cape. In a defining moment, Attila drifts into a daydream. Images: smoldering ruins of buildings; countless acres of crops blackened to ash; screaming voices, clouds of arrows, thundering hooves and bellowing horsemen—and at their front, brandishing his axe and adorned in a crown of bones, he, Attila the Hun! Realizing in a flash who he wants to be, Attila goes about constructing some more concrete life plans.

A simple daydream was all it took for our idealized Hun to reject a foreign ideal of self and incite him to action on his own ideal, and sometimes such shallow means are really sufficient for the ideal self to be recognized. Many states mandate waiting periods before gun purchases in the hopes that a brief amount of time is sufficient for impassioned would-be criminals to have the clichéd “this isn't me” moment as their true ideals reassert themselves.

Oftentimes though, the complexity of a real person's ideal self requires considerable introspection to be realized. By evaluating the quality of past, current, and hypothetical actions, a person can recognize the ideal actions that they are measured against, and from that can recognize something of their ideal self, like constructing a scale based on known weights. Once a person has that self-knowledge, the chain is started: with further introspection, ambition naturally follows, which inspires action, which fulfills purpose. Of the chain's elements, introspection is the only that is not the natural result of another. It is at this point that people fail, not for lack of ability, but for lack of initiative. In order to travel the journey of fulfillment, it is necessary to have gas in the tank; a person must develop and maintain a thought-filled mind.

Once set on the road, though, the traveler will find that they have the tools to fulfill their purpose at their fingertips: they have but to think and continue to think, to act and continue to

act. Recall that the road leading to the full realization of purpose is endless—and that the potential of the determined traveler is infinite.