

Four Visions of the Good Life

Our world is a complicated place. It is composed of a complex group of forces mixed with each other. One set of problems combines with another, and before we know it, we have lost track of how we can help ourselves or those we love to live a better life. Problems come to define us and to define the way we live. This essay is an effort to help us to see a way to sort out our problems and to find joy in the midst of all the problems life brings our way.

To do this we will try to sort our vision of life into four categories. Categories are ways we have of organizing things into ordered patterns. Ordered patterns are a way we have of helping ourselves to make meaning out of our experiences. The way to think about ordered patterns is to think about things like textiles and texts. We weave textiles out of different sorts of threads. We weave patterns out of texts as well. Any writer knows that we make texts out of letters, words, sentences, paragraphs, chapters, and books. All of these things are categories. In this essay, we will construct four categories in order to try to understand the patterns that loop, or weave through everything we experience in our lives. When we experience

problems that reduce the joy of living, seeing the patterns running through our situations can help us to work things out and to seek improvement.

The four categories we will present here are our world, our bodies, the decisions we make, and our faith, or the beliefs we hold regarding these things. The largest and most inclusive of these categories is our world. Here we are looking at both our larger universe and at the smaller world of our daily experience. (See the second basic truth below.) Our second category, the body, comprises a smaller set of issues that are uniquely our own. The decisions we make every day form another set of issues within our personal experience. Then, the smallest set of considerations belongs to the deeply held beliefs, or attitudes we each hold toward the world, our bodies, and our decisions.

Before we begin this discussion, we will set forth a few first principles, or basic truths on which we will build our categories. The first basic truth is the observation that everything in our world is constantly changing. The ancient Greek philosopher Heraclitus stated this truth as “*All is in flux*,” or, “*Everything flows*.” To illustrate this principle, I like to use a rock. This rock is likely to be around three quarters of a billion years old at its core. We might think that it does not change, but to see that it also is in flux all we need to do is to look at a smaller rock. Rocks change over time. They

change very slowly relative to us, and our ability to perceive change. On another level, we can look at any other aspect of the world around us. We can look at the streets, buildings, people, or whatever, and we can see that these also are flowing along in a continual process of change. The world is changing, our bodies are changing, the decisions we make are changing, and our faith is changing as well.

We might think that our faith does not change, but any historian can show us clearly that the way we read our scriptures and the way we hold, and apply our deeply held beliefs is changing as society itself changes over time. Some organized religions change faster than other religions. Some change more slowly. Conservative, traditional religions resist change for a time, but they all change in various ways.

This is an important principle to realize because we love it when we feel as if things do not change. Most of us enjoy stability, but we do not often enjoy change. Stability is actually one of the conditions necessary for human beings to thrive. We do not do so well as individuals or as civilizations if the conditions of our lives are unstable. Stability is a prerequisite for success in most aspects of life. A problem arises when we see that stability is never permanent. Even the rocks change over time. The impermanence of the stability we need causes us to get upset. We

worry constantly that things are going to change in some way we will not like.

We can get so upset over the unpleasant changes that come upon us that we see such changes as being evil. Many of the popular evils people complain about in their religious lives are nothing more than unpopular changes woven into the fabric of society.

Our second basic truth is a simple observation that we are all unable to grasp the full complexity of the larger universe. Our minds are not big enough to get a grip on the depths of time and space that have shaped our larger universe. Instead, we tend to want to stay in a smaller world made up of the concepts, experiences, and ideas we are able to grasp comfortably. While we exist within a macro-universe of near infinite complexity, we choose to form our worldview from the perspective of a much smaller and much simpler set of observations. Much of the time, we shape our worldview according to our cultural conditioning. We filter what we know and what we accept through the cultural norms of our common experience. Another way of saying this is that we all live in our “box.” Outside our box is a larger, more complex society and a larger, more complex world, which we often fail to understand.

The third truth upon which we will construct our four categories of the good life comes from a set of theories known as dynamic chaos, deterministic chaos, or simply as complexity, or “chaos theory.” Chaos theory describes a broad set of observations of the material universe that pertain to natural nonlinear systems. We use the word “nonlinear” as the opposite of “linear” to describe natural as opposed to mechanical systems. We are not using this term as in mathematics. For our purposes here, linear systems are fixed, mechanical systems where things work more or less exactly as predicted provided certain required conditions are present. These mechanical systems include the machines that make things work in our lives today. As long as the required conditions are present, these machines will work as we expect them to.

Nonlinear systems include the natural systems in which we live. Nonlinear systems never exactly repeat themselves in the same way, but they follow a general pattern by which they almost repeat themselves. Snowflakes provide a good example here. They are not exactly the same but they are generally the same. Nonlinear systems make up all the systems of the natural world in which we live. These include the weather, the earth beneath our feet, all the plants and animals and microbes living around us, and our bodies among many other natural systems. Scientists

who have studied chaos theory have observed several common characteristics shared by non-linear systems. First, these systems function in connection with one another. Each system functions in relationship with all the other systems it contacts. Second, non-linear systems are self-organizing. These systems possess within themselves the ability to keep recreating themselves according to the same general pattern. This is why tropical storms may all be slightly different from one another, but they also conform to the same general dynamic pattern.

One common example of the patterns of chaotic self-organization is the Fibonacci sequence, also known as the Fibonacci spiral. (See the video at <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=cEaFQadg8rY>) The Fibonacci sequence is a pattern of proportionality that is evident in an astounding range of natural systems. These include our bodies, plants, seashells, the weather, and even galaxies. The common appearance of the Fibonacci spiral connects with the idea that everything flows because Fibonacci sequences are present because nature seeks to optimize flow. Thus, natural systems will tend to self-organize so that they flow as well as they can. The idea of optimized flow connects with the Second Law of Thermodynamics, which states that entropy will tend to increase within natural systems. Thus, our third basic truth states that natural systems

exist to flow and to increase complexity over time. Over time, chaos and complexity will tend to increase. We should bear in mind that, though we may see the chaos and complexity of a changing world as threatening, our world continues to consist of the same basic patterns that are evident within nonlinear systems theory.

This is why chaos theory has come to be applied within a range of disciplines, including geography, political science, economics, sociology, management science, population studies, and others. We should point out here that, broadly speaking, our social, political, economic, and other human systems are also natural systems. If we human beings are highly evolved products of nature, it follows that even the technological products of our species are, in some way the byproducts of nature. People who work with mechanical systems know that, while these systems are linear and quite predictable within themselves. Nonlinear, chaotic systems are always intruding into these linear systems. Nothing we build is permanently immune from the chaos of natural systems.

The first and most broad category into which we will sort our problems is our world. Various sorts of global issues intrude upon our consciousness in various ways. Our world is a matrix of complex systems in which we “*live and move, and have our being.*” (Acts 17:28) Many of the

problems we face come from our inability to understand the complexity and interdependence of these worldly systems. We make a big mistake if we try to deny or hide from the complexity of global systems. Two complex geographic system issues provide us with a good example here. These are climate and immigration. In both of these issues, we have witnessed popular desires to resort to both denial and oversimplification. If we study these issues, we can see that they are both connected, and we can see that our western societies have created these problems over the years through social/economic tendencies toward over-consumption and corporate neo-colonialism. While we do not have time here to discuss and explain these specific concepts, our point is that we make our problems worse if we fail to understand the complexity of the global issues that influence our lives. If we fail to understand the weather, we might well decide to live in a flood zone. A severe precipitation event such as Hurricane Matthew in October of 2016 devastated the lives of millions of people living in its path, including many of the students at the school where the author was teaching at that time. It is helpful for us to understand that the losses suffered in Matthew were the result of the chaotic, shifting patterns of climate as well as the patterns of economic and population dynamics. As was the case in Haiti, many of our students did not choose

to live in the path of this devastating storm. While we do not all have a choice as to where we live, our students do have the opportunity to learn about what a tropical storm is, how it may affect them, and how they may prepare to mitigate these effects. We can hope that the next storm might be a different matter if our students have developed the skills of self-determination with which to adapt to a changing climate. Any world issue has the same characteristics. The better we understand it the better we can deal with it. This is the case with our political decisions, our economic lives, our work, our homes, our families, and everything else. We must not try to hide in our ignorance. Instead, we should work to learn as much as we can about the world in which we live. Living the good life will be easier if we have done our homework, studied and prepared for the changes global issues might bring to our doorstep. At the very least, study and preparation can reduce our losses and speed up our recovery time when such issues come to call in our personal lives.

We may witness many sorts of storms in life. They may be meteorological, personal, vocational, or personal. It is important for us to realize as we witness them that we do not belong to the storms. In order to function properly in the context of any storm, we need shelter, and we need to know what is happening around us.

There are various ways to view the problems affecting our bodies. First, there is the distinction between our own bodies and those of the people we love. Then there are issues related to illness and injury. Our perspective here will focus only on issues related to the genetic makeup of our bodies. For the purposes of this discussion, injury relates to the chaotic cycles of accidents belonging to the physical world. Infectious disease also belongs to our interactions with outside organisms. Thus, infection is a part of the larger dynamically chaotic world. Other forms of illness or injury result from decisions we make such as what we eat or how we travel.

If we examine the body in and of itself, free from the influences of the external world or the decisions we make, we will see that our body continually recreates itself according to the pattern determined by our genomic code. When we are young, our genomic code creates us according to a program by which we grow and develop. In later life, this code, or program keeps us the same for a period of years. As we age, this program begins to break down, and we stop reproducing ourselves as well as we did when we were younger. Finally, in advanced old age, our body breaks down and whole organ systems begin to fail. Our genomic code determines our abilities and our disabilities. It shapes our strengths and weaknesses. It makes us look the way we look, and it even influences the

ways we act. There have been a number of interesting studies of the amazing similarities shared by identical twins separated at birth. Though these twins did not grow up in the same environment, they still show many similarities in their lives.

The reason we have chosen to focus on the genomic code as a deterministic factor shaping the condition of our lives is that the genome writes the script for our physical being. The lesson is that we must learn to be comfortable within our own bodies. Much pain has resulted from various social trends of expectation and shaming which lead people to hate their bodies. Another set of unfortunate behaviors result from people disliking and disrespecting their own bodies. These result in people failing to take care of themselves. To live the good life we should be comfortable within our own skin.

We should take care of ourselves and avoid situations where we will be required to do things that our bodies will not endure. To illustrate this, think of a man who died while climbing Mount Everest. At his funeral his friends said; “*He died doing what he loved.*” If we could read his thoughts though, near his death he might have thought something like this; “*Well, perhaps this climb was not such a good idea after all!*”

To live the good life, we must try not to put ourselves in places where we do not belong, or to subject ourselves to unreasonable demands. By virtue of our genomic code, we have certain skills and strengths. We will do better if we follow a path that utilizes those strengths and abilities. In other words, we need to do what we can do. We need to offer ourselves the grace of not trying to do what we cannot do. This does not mean we should not challenge ourselves or test our limits. It means we should be gracious enough toward ourselves to respect our practical limitations and love the bodies we have. This is about acceptance and loving ourselves. These ingredients help us to live the good life. Learning and education are key components here as well. We need to learn about things like nutrition, exercise, self-care, and stress management. These areas can help us to avoid the vulnerabilities our genomic code may offer. We all cannot endure the insults of poor nutrition, lack of exercise, lack of rest, and stress in the same way. Our unique genomic code will determine which of us may do well and which of us may suffer under different circumstances.

Decisions comprise the third category for our organization of life issues. How often do we hit some hardship because of a decision we made? Chaos theory offers us a wonderful perspective on the importance of decision making in the form of the butterfly effect. In 1962, a

meteorologist named Edward Lorenz was working with computers that could model storm systems by running a set of calculations and then printing the results. These calculations required Dr. Lorenz to enter numbers into his computer. He discovered that a very small change in the initial number put into the computer would result in a completely different storm system developing as the calculations ran. For example, the difference in initial input might have been between the numbers 1.17846 and 1.1785. While the difference may have been only four hundred thousandths of a percent, the result of the program was completely different. The official name for this discovery is “*sensitive dependence on initial input.*”

This observation from chaos theory is significant for our decision making because our small decisions can result in dramatic changes in the quality of our lives. Another example of the same observations is the 1946 film “*It’s a Wonderful Life.*” The film came from a 1939 short story by Philip Van Doren Stern. In this story, a depressed man wishes that he had never been born. An angel grants his wish but shows him what the world would look like if he had never existed. That world is completely different and much worse than the world in which he lives. The differences are due to the seemingly small decisions he made along the way.

We do not need to be obsessive about the decisions we make, but we do need to understand that they can have many unintended consequences as the forces of deterministic complexity unfold into the future. A good scriptural version of this concept is in Romans where the Apostle Paul says; “*All things work together for good for those who love God, who are called according to God’s purpose.*” (Rom. 8:28, author’s translation)

Decisions form a key category in determining the nature and quality of our lives. If our decisions have led to poor consequences and suffering has resulted, we need to take responsibility and to practice forgiveness. If we are making important decisions today, we must trust that our good intentions will bring about good results. As we live and make small decisions every day, we should seek a level of mindfulness so that these decisions will unfold fruitfully into the future.

Faith is much more than the doctrines of any organized religion. Faith includes those beliefs where we place our trust. Faith describes what we think about our world, our bodies, and our decisions. Faith describes the attitude we hold toward the other people who fill our lives and the decisions they have made. Our use of the word faith here applies to both religious and non-religious worldviews. Even atheists have faith in that

they too hold beliefs about themselves and their world that are not provable.

We need to understand that faith can be either positive or negative. Negative faith is judgmental and separating. Popular rapture or apocalyptic teachings offer a good example here. Based on Christian eschatological teachings, and apocalyptic scriptures, these teachings lead people to believe that the world will soon end in a way where God separates the good people from the bad people, drawing the good ones up into heaven while leaving all the bad ones to torment and death in tribulation. These beliefs are extremely popular in various forms of fundamental Christianity. Interestingly, they are also present in some forms of Islam. Our point is not to condemn these popular religious teachings, but to suggest that they may not always be constructive for long-term problem solving in the real world. Holding these beliefs may not incline us toward seeking practical solutions to problems in the here and now world of dynamic chaos in which we live.

Other examples of negative faith include those that teach separation from those who are different from the predominant culture, including condemnations of LGBTQ communities, condemnations of secular civil society, and various forms of racial/ethnic or other prejudices. All of these

are popular in different global movements, but they do not lead people in the direction of living the good life in the world.

Positive faith is faith that seeks to embrace those who are different in some way from us. This is faith that seeks understanding. Positive faith is self-critical in that it will ask questions more than making declarations. Positive faith allows for uncertainty, allowing wiggle room within which we may embrace the deeper mysteries of life. Most of all, positive faith places people first and it seeks to love our enemies and our neighbors as we love ourselves.

One of the problems with all forms of faith is that we have a tendency to reinforce the faith we already have. We want to prove that the faith we hold is the right one. As we form our beliefs, we seek feedback that will strengthen those principles that we already hold to be true. In popular culture, we use memes to state and restate the truths we hold by faith. Uncertainty makes us uncomfortable and we have trouble with the possibility that we may be wrong, or that there may be another way. The result is that we end up holding a strong worldview that separates us from everyone else. It is not enough for us to be human. We have to belong to a denomination, or a definitive sub-culture that reinforces the truths we hold. This is a formula for separation. Separation does not lead us in the

direction of the good life. It may be that the most important lesson we need to learn about faith is not to take our faith so seriously. Faith that leads us to the good life is faith that connects us to others.

Our personal concept of truth is often such that we build our truth by condemning the perceived falsehoods of others. Our beliefs stand firm on the foundation of what we believe the truth to be, but others are ill informed, or simply wrong. In reading through the first edition of the Encyclopedia Britannica from 1771, I discovered a blatant example of this tendency recently in the article on the word “Caaba.” The modern spelling for this word is Kaaba. This is the most holy site within all Islam. In the 1771 Britannica, we read the following: “*this word is applied by the Mahometans to the temple of Mecca, built, as they pretend, by Abraham and Ishmael his son.*” (1771 ed. Vol.2, p.3) What jumped out in reading this was the words, “as they pretend.” When we struggle over perceptions of truth, we have a tendency to suppose that we have it figured out, but the others are only pretending. In popular arguments, my truth is the truth, but yours is pretend truth. We all suffer from a common error whenever we suppose that we know, but they pretend. The obvious fallacy and arrogance of this perspective will only separate us from each other, and, as stated above, separation will not lead any of us to the good life.

In conclusion, the greatest lesson any of us can learn is how to live with joy. Joy comes with not allowing the negative experiences life brings our way to hold too much power over us. The way to do this is by understanding the nature of these experiences. These negative experiences come in all sorts of shapes and sizes. Our purpose here has been to organize them into issues pertaining to the larger world of dynamic chaos, the internal chaos of our body's genomic code, the decisions we make as we exercise free will, and the faith we hold regarding all of the above. We need to learn about the forces that shape our world. We need to understand the inner program that shapes our physical existence. We need to know how to make both large and small decisions well. We need to learn why we believe what we believe so that our faith can grow as we grow in living the good life.

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