All Extraordinary Lives
(a first principle)
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The First “First Principle”

"All extraordinary lives of joy, significance, and meaning commence with one's private commitment to never again play the roles of coward, victim, fool, ingrate, egoist, or atheist.”

The Foundation of an Extraordinary Life: A Private Commitment to Virtue

An extraordinary life stands as one of the most profound yet elusive aspirations of the human condition. While many seek such a life through external achievements, accumulated wealth, or social recognition, the foundation of true extraordinariness lies elsewhere—in a deeply personal, uncompromising commitment to virtue. The principle examined here posits that **all** extraordinary lives of joy, significance, and meaning commence with one's private commitment to never again playing the roles of coward, victim, fool, ingrate, egoist, or atheist. This is not a suggestion that **some** lives of distinction follow this path; rather, it is the assertion that **every** genuinely extraordinary life must be built upon this foundation. To understand why this is so requires examining what constitutes an extraordinary life, how these six roles undermine it, and why the commitment must remain fundamentally private.

Defining the Extraordinary Life: Aristotle's Eudaimonia and Beyond

To comprehend what makes a life extraordinary, we must first turn to Aristotle's concept of **eudaimonia**, often translated as "happiness" or "flourishing". Yet this translation inadequately captures Aristotle's meaning. Eudaimonia is not merely a feeling of pleasure or contentment, but rather "the active exercise of the mind in conformity with perfect goodness or virtue". It represents the condition of living well and doing well—a life in which one fully expresses their highest human capacities through sustained virtuous activity across a complete lifetime.[1][2][3][4][5]

Aristotle understood that human flourishing requires more than momentary satisfaction. As he observed, "one swallow does not make a summer, nor does one day; and so too one day,

or a short time, does not make a man blessed and happy". An extraordinary life, therefore, is characterized not by fleeting pleasures but by the sustained excellence that emerges from virtue practiced consistently over time. This flourishing encompasses the rational exercise of our distinctively human faculties—practical wisdom, moral virtue, and contemplative understanding—in a manner that achieves completeness and excellence.[2][3][4][6][7][1]

An extraordinary life as conceived here integrates three essential dimensions: **joy, significance, and meaning**. Joy, distinct from mere pleasure, emerges from a deeper sense of connection and fulfillment aligned with one's true values and purpose. It represents what C.S. Lewis described as "an unsatisfied desire which itself is more desirable than any other satisfaction"—not hedonic gratification but the profound contentment that comes from living authentically. Significance refers to the impact and contribution one makes beyond oneself, the way one's existence matters to others and to the broader human project. Meaning arises when subjective attraction meets objective worthiness—when one loves objects worthy of love and engages with them positively. Together, these three elements constitute the fabric of a life that truly flourishes.[8][9][10][11][12][13]

Lives to Admire, Not to Envy

A crucial distinction must be drawn between lives that are enviable and lives that are admirable. Some lives appear attractive from the outside due to their subjective pleasures—wealth, fame, sensory gratifications—yet lack the deeper qualities that make them genuinely worthy of our respect. Benjamin Franklin's life might be envied for its enjoyment and success, while Abraham Lincoln's, marked by profound suffering and struggle, is admired for its moral greatness. The extraordinary life synthesizes both qualities, but when forced to choose, it prioritizes the admirable over the enviable.[14]

This reflects the distinction between that which is praiseworthy and that which is merely prized. The praiseworthy possesses intrinsic worth and virtue; it deserves our moral respect and emulation. The prized, by contrast, may be desired or coveted but lacks inherent moral excellence. Extraordinary lives are fundamentally praiseworthy rather than merely prized—they command genuine admiration rather than superficial envy. As Kierkegaard observed, admiration without imitation is merely an evasion; true respect for excellence requires us to strive toward it ourselves.[15][16][17][18][19][14]

The Six Roles That Undermine Flourishing

The principle identifies six specific roles that, when embraced, fundamentally preclude the possibility of an extraordinary life. Each represents a vice that corrupts one or more of the essential dimensions of flourishing—joy, significance, or meaning.

The Coward fails to exercise courage, one of Aristotle's cardinal virtues essential to human excellence. Cowardice is not merely physical timidity but a broader failure to stand for what is right when circumstances demand it. The coward becomes "fearful quickly from little danger" and shrinks from the challenges that call forth our highest capacities. This role destroys joy by producing shame and self-loathing, undermines significance by preventing meaningful action in the world, and negates meaning by demonstrating that one values comfort over truth. A life characterized by cowardice cannot flourish because it systematically avoids the very situations that would call forth virtue and excellence.[20][6][21][22]

The Victim adopts a stance of powerlessness and grievance that fundamentally contradicts human agency and responsibility. While one may indeed be victimized by circumstances or others' actions, *choosing the identity* of victim as a permanent role means refusing to exercise one's capacity for rational agency and self-determination. This role destroys joy by focusing perpetually on suffering rather than possibility, eliminates significance by denying one's capacity to contribute meaningfully to the world, and erases meaning by attributing all outcomes to external forces rather than recognizing one's own power to respond. The victim mentality is incompatible with Aristotelian flourishing because eudaimonia requires active engagement and the exercise of virtue, not passive acceptance of circumstances.[7][22][2]

The Fool represents the absence of practical wisdom (phronesis), which Aristotle considered essential to moral virtue. The fool acts without proper judgment, fails to learn from experience, and pursues apparent goods that lead away from genuine flourishing. While intellectual limitation is not culpable, *willful* foolishness—the refusal to think critically, to exercise reason, or to seek truth—constitutes a moral failure. This role undermines joy by leading to predictable suffering through poor choices, negates significance by rendering one's contributions ineffectual or counterproductive, and destroys meaning by severing the connection between intention and worthwhile outcomes.[23][6][24][22][25]

The Ingrate fails to recognize and appreciate the goods received from others, from fortune, and from existence itself. Ingratitude represents a profound moral deficiency that corrodes both personal character and social bonds. Aristotle emphasized that virtuous friendship and community are essential to human flourishing. The ingrate, by failing to acknowledge these relationships properly, cuts himself off from one of the primary sources of eudaimonia. This role destroys joy by fostering resentment rather than appreciation, undermines significance by failing to honor the web of interdependence that makes meaningful contribution possible, and negates meaning by treating objective goods as if they were valueless or merely one's due.[6][26][27][15]

The Egoist (in the problematic sense) represents the person whose concern extends only to themselves, who treats others merely as means to their own ends. While self-interest properly understood can align with virtue—as Aristotle himself argued that virtue serves one's own flourishing—the vice of egoism involves a narrow self-concern that violates justice, friendship, and community. This role destroys joy by isolating one from genuine connection with others, eliminates significance by rendering one's existence merely self-referential rather than contributory, and negates meaning by treating relationships instrumentally rather than recognizing their intrinsic worth. Truly extraordinary lives require the capacity to transcend narrow self-interest in service of larger goods.[28][29][25][30][31]

The Atheist in this context represents not merely the intellectual position regarding God's existence, but rather the posture of life that denies any transcendent meaning, purpose, or order beyond the material and ephemeral. It is the stance that reduces human existence to mere biological mechanism without deeper significance, that sees no objective moral order, and that recognizes no purpose beyond subjective preference. This role fundamentally undermines meaning by denying that anything matters beyond individual preference or social convention, compromises joy by removing the ground for ultimate hope and

significance, and negates the possibility of participating in something greater than oneself. The atheist position as described here leaves one unable to answer the question of why anything truly matters—including one's own flourishing.[32][33][34][35]

Why ALL Extraordinary Lives Follow This Principle

The claim is not that some extraordinary lives avoid these six roles, but that **all** such lives do. This universality derives from the logical relationship between virtue and flourishing. Aristotle argued that virtue is not merely instrumentally valuable for achieving happiness, but rather that virtuous activity **constitutes** happiness. Virtue and eudaimonia are not separate things connected externally; virtuous living **is** the flourishing life.[36][7]

Given this constitutive relationship, the vices represented by these six roles necessarily preclude genuine flourishing. One cannot simultaneously be a coward and possess the courage necessary for excellence; one cannot be a perpetual victim and exercise the agency required for virtue; one cannot be a fool and possess the practical wisdom essential to moral action; one cannot be an ingrate and maintain the proper relationship to goods received; one cannot be purely egoistic and participate in the friendships and community Aristotle considered essential to happiness; and one cannot adopt the atheist posture described above and recognize the objective worthiness of virtue and the transcendent meaning it embodies.[37][2][6]

The requirement is universal because virtue itself is universal in this sense—not that everyone achieves it, but that it represents the **only** path to genuine human flourishing. Just as health requires avoiding certain specific pathological conditions, extraordinary life requires avoiding these specific vices. There is no alternative route to eudaimonia that somehow accommodates cowardice, victim mentality, foolishness, ingratitude, egoism, or existential nihilism.[38][2][6]

The Three Dimensions: Joy, Significance, and Meaning

Each of these three essential dimensions of the extraordinary life is profoundly affected by compliance or noncompliance with the principle.

Joy in its deepest sense emerges from living in accordance with one's highest nature and engaging authentically with what is truly worthwhile. When one plays the role of coward, victim, fool, ingrate, egoist, or atheist, genuine joy becomes impossible because these stances fundamentally misalign one with reality and with one's own capacity for excellence. The coward experiences shame; the victim, perpetual grievance; the fool, the consequences of poor judgment; the ingrate, resentment; the egoist, isolation; the atheist, existential emptiness. None of these mental states is compatible with the deep, abiding joy that characterizes human flourishing.[39][9][40][12][8]

Significance—the sense that one's existence matters and contributes meaningfully to the world—requires the exercise of virtue in ways that genuinely benefit others and advance worthwhile ends. The six roles all undermine this dimension. The coward fails to act when action is needed; the victim denies their own agency to affect outcomes; the fool's contributions are ineffectual or harmful; the ingrate fails to build on what others have

contributed; the egoist's actions serve only themselves; the atheist recognizes no objective standard by which significance could be measured. Without rejecting these roles, one cannot achieve the kind of meaningful impact that makes a life truly significant.[10][11][25]

Meaning—the quality of a life oriented toward and achieving worthwhile ends—depends on recognizing and pursuing what is objectively valuable. As Susan Wolf argues, meaning arises when subjective attraction meets objective attractiveness, when we love what is worthy of love and engage with it positively. The six roles systematically prevent this. They either blind us to what is genuinely valuable (the fool, the atheist), orient us away from it (the coward, the egoist), prevent us from properly relating to it (the victim, the ingrate), or deny its objective existence altogether (the atheist). A life lived in any of these roles cannot achieve the kind of meaning that makes it extraordinary.[11][13]

The Necessity of Private Commitment

Perhaps the most subtle yet crucial aspect of this principle is that the commitment must be **private**. This requirement reflects profound insights about virtue, motivation, and human psychology.

Public declarations of moral commitment create several pernicious problems. First, they enable **virtue signaling**—the conspicuous display of moral virtue primarily to garner social approval rather than from genuine commitment to principle. When we publicize our commitments, we risk that the public display becomes the primary goal rather than the moral excellence itself. Research confirms that observers discount the virtue of those who perform moral acts publicly, inferring mixed or self-serving motives rather than genuine principle. The public actor is perceived as less virtuous than the private actor precisely because observability suggests reputation-management rather than authentic commitment.[41][42][43][44]

Second, public moral commitments can lead to **moral licensing**—the phenomenon where having publicly proclaimed virtue, one then feels entitled to act with less virtue in private. The public display provides a psychological satisfaction that undermines the motivation for actual moral effort. One becomes more concerned with maintaining the appearance of virtue than with actually being virtuous.[44]

Third, publicizing moral commitments invites external judgment, social pressure, and the distorting effects of peer influence. Rather than being grounded in one's own rational recognition of what virtue requires, the commitment becomes subject to the approval or disapproval of others. This makes it fundamentally unstable and dependent on social context rather than on principle.[45][46][47][48]

A **private** commitment, by contrast, is made to oneself and (if one is religious) to God, but not to the social audience. It is grounded in one's own recognition of what virtue requires and what kind of person one aspires to be. Because it is not public, it cannot serve as a source of social approval or reputation enhancement. One must pursue the commitment for its own sake, because one has decided never again to play these roles regardless of whether anyone else knows about it. This privacy ensures the purity of motivation essential to genuine virtue.[43][49][50][45][44]

Moreover, Hegel recognized that while we are social and communicative beings, and excessive privacy can lead to isolation from the common realm of humanity, there remains an essential space for private moral commitment that precedes and grounds public moral discourse. The private commitment is the foundation; if that foundation is sound, appropriate public engagement can follow. But reversing the order—making public proclamation before private commitment—corrupts the entire enterprise.[48][50][43][44]

Why So Few Pay the Price

If this path to an extraordinary life is so clear and so rewarding, why do so few pursue it? The answer lies in the **high price** that virtue demands.

First, developing genuine virtue requires sustained effort over a lifetime. Aristotle emphasized that excellence is achieved through habitual practice, through repeatedly choosing rightly until virtuous action becomes one's character. This demands discipline, self-reflection, and the willingness to struggle against one's own lesser impulses. Most people, as one philosopher observed, "lack the will to excellence" because "it is much easier to float through life doing as others do and thinking as others think, than to risk ridicule and disapproval in the pursuit of excellence".[51][52][53][54][2][6]

Second, virtue often requires sacrifice of immediate pleasures and apparent goods for the sake of long-term flourishing. The coward's role is comfortable; standing up for what is right often brings conflict. The victim's role absolves one of responsibility; accepting agency means accepting accountability. The fool's role requires no thought; wisdom demands constant mental effort. The ingrate's role preserves resentment and self-pity; gratitude requires humility. The egoist's role prioritizes one's own interests; virtue often requires their subordination. The atheist's role eliminates uncomfortable transcendent demands; recognizing objective meaning creates obligations.[26][53][55][54][56][35][6][37]

Third, contemporary society actively discourages the pursuit of excellence in several ways. Democratic egalitarianism can foster the belief that claiming some ways of life are better than others is elitist or judgmental. Consumer capitalism promotes hedonic satisfaction over virtuous character. Social media rewards virtue signaling over genuine virtue. The result is a culture that pays lip service to excellence while systematically undermining the conditions necessary to achieve it.[57][52][53][58][59][44]

Fourth, the path of virtue can itself involve what Lisa Tessman calls "burdened virtues"—situations where doing the right thing actually undermines one's own flourishing or brings suffering. Not every circumstance allows virtue to result in happiness; sometimes the virtuous person suffers while the vicious prosper. This stark reality makes many hesitate to commit fully to the demanding path of virtue.[37]

Finally, fear holds many back—fear of failure, fear of standing out, fear of losing the approval of one's peer group, fear of discovering that one is not capable of excellence. The commitment required by this principle is absolute; it allows no retreat, no excuses, no exceptions. "Never again" is a daunting standard. Many prefer to leave themselves the option of playing these roles when convenient rather than closing that door permanently.[47][55]

Conclusion: The Only Foundation

The principle that all extraordinary lives of joy, significance, and meaning commence with one's private commitment to never again playing the roles of coward, victim, fool, ingrate, egoist, or atheist is not arbitrary or merely aspirational. It reflects the deep structure of human flourishing as Aristotle understood it and as experience confirms. These six roles represent fundamental vices that systematically prevent the development and exercise of virtue, which is itself constitutive of the excellent life. Their rejection is not optional for those who would flourish; it is the necessary foundation.

That this commitment must be private rather than public reflects the corrupting influence of social approval on moral motivation. That so few pursue this path despite its clear rewards reflects the genuine difficulty of sustained virtue and the many forces in human psychology and contemporary culture that work against it.

Yet for those who do make this private commitment and pursue it faithfully over a lifetime—who refuse to be cowards when courage is required, victims when agency is possible, fools when wisdom is available, ingrates when gratitude is due, egoists when community calls, or atheists when meaning beckons—the reward is nothing less than an extraordinary life. Not a life merely to be envied for its pleasures, but a life truly to be admired for its excellence. Not a life merely to be prized like a possession, but a life genuinely praiseworthy in its virtue. Such lives achieve the complete and sustained flourishing that Aristotle called eudaimonia—lives characterized by deep joy, authentic significance, and profound meaning. This is the life worth living, and it begins with a private commitment, made today, to never again play these six roles that undermine human excellence.

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