

## The art of living

The Cranky Professor

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Mark Mercer

Department of Philosophy

Saint Mary's University

Halifax, NS B3H 3C3

(902) 420-5825

[mark.mercer@smu.ca](mailto:mark.mercer@smu.ca)

The life of fun, the quiet life, the life of service, the life of accomplishment: four very different positions on the art of living.

Those who advocate the life of fun hold that one should always prefer present good times to future ones. One should simply indulge one's appetites, for no one knows what tomorrow will bring. Best not let today—or even right now—get away. In any case, you exist right now and only right now. You should care for your own interests, not the interests of some future person who happens to resemble you.

The problem with this view is that we don't exist only in the moment. We exist always through at least a little chunk of time. There's no instantaneous gratification; there's always some duration through which wanting something gives way to having it (or not). Yet if we are not creatures of the moment, holding that we are creatures of some particular duration rather than some other cannot but be arbitrary. The point is that it will indeed most likely be you—the you who exists right now—who suffers the hangover tomorrow. You right now, then, are wise to care about the condition of you tomorrow.

Those who cherish the quiet life hold that what makes a life go badly is any of physical pain, anxiety, and anguish. Recall how awful you felt when you were in physical pain. Recall how wonderful you felt when that pain disappeared. Yet if you are not hurting right now, then really you feel just as wonderful as when the pain you're remembering stopped. If you're not hurting, you're laughing!

We are anxious when we want something and think we might not get it. We are anguished when we want something and believe we will not get it. Anxiety and anguish will make you even more wretched and miserable than physical pain will. After all, physical pain, if chronic, can be put up with, and if acute, won't last long (often because one soon dies). The trick to living without anxiety or anguish is to desire only those things you can be pretty sure you will get. Know your circumstances and abilities and the resources at your disposal, and want nothing more than what is easily available to you. Happily, all that you need to live, unless your circumstances are those of war or famine, is fairly easily available.

Those who cherish the life of service say that we each are here on this planet with a purpose. Our meaning in life is to discover that purpose and to live it. Now it cannot be overwhelmingly difficult for one to discover one's purpose, for the universe or whatever is behind it is providential. If you seek, you will find. Once you discover your

purpose, the task is to live in light of it. This is not always easy, but it always can be done. After all, a providential universe would not assign you a task you are unable to undertake successfully.

The great impediment to happiness and contentment, on this view, is egoism or selfishness. Your purpose as a basketball player is to play the game in light of the team's objective—to win the game fairly. At this moment you can pass to the open man who's well positioned to lay it in, or you can drive the lane yourself. If you drive the lane yourself, you have put your own interests, your interest in being celebrated, above your purpose. That way lies grief, even if you happen to sink the basket, draw a foul, and then make the free throw.

Those who cherish the life of accomplishment hold that there are certain goods internal to the difficult activities some of us sometimes undertake, goods that we can attain only by meeting the standards of excellence constitutive of those activities. These goods have both an objective component (a well-played game of hockey, for instance) and an affective component (the joy of having participated effectively in a well-played game of hockey).

A life worth living is a life organized around such activities, a life in which one consistently meets the standards of excellence within those activities. The three roadblocks between each of us and a life of accomplishment are drudgery, distraction, and the lure of external goods. Laundry, shopping, mowing the lawn—there's a lot in life that's no fun and just eats up time. Video games, meeting for coffee, reruns of *Law & Order*—there are plenty of fun little things it'd be great to do right now. Drudgery and distraction can be overcome with a bit of organization and will power, though. External goods are a different matter. Wealth, fame, and power can corrupt. What's called for here is integrity, the ability to remain steadfast in one's pursuit of the goods internal to the practices in which one participates.

The life of service and the life of accomplishment each takes seriously our social nature, the fact that our projects involve others. In the life of accomplishment, though, one is not invited to lose oneself in the hive. Another important difference between the two is that in the life of service one hopes to discover oneself, while in the life of accomplishment one hopes to create oneself.

Both the quiet life and the life of service see anxiety and anguish as rotten and debilitating. The life of accomplishment, though, takes anxiety to be a necessary element of a life well led. One must be anxious when one attempts to meet standards of excellence, for one must know that one risks failure. Anguish, then, is a permanent possibility in the life of accomplishment.

What do I think? Well, I detest the life of service both for its metaphysics and for the type of people it produces. Officially, I say that happiness, contentment, and a sense that one's life is worth living are to be found in accomplishment. And yet I have a sneaky suspicion that the quiet life is really where it's at. That pleasure is merely the absence of pain seems at least to have the evidence of experience on its side.