
My Little Book on the Philosophy of Life

**Reaching One's True Why by Ascending the
Pyramid of Needs and Desires**

(and Finding Happiness Along the Way)

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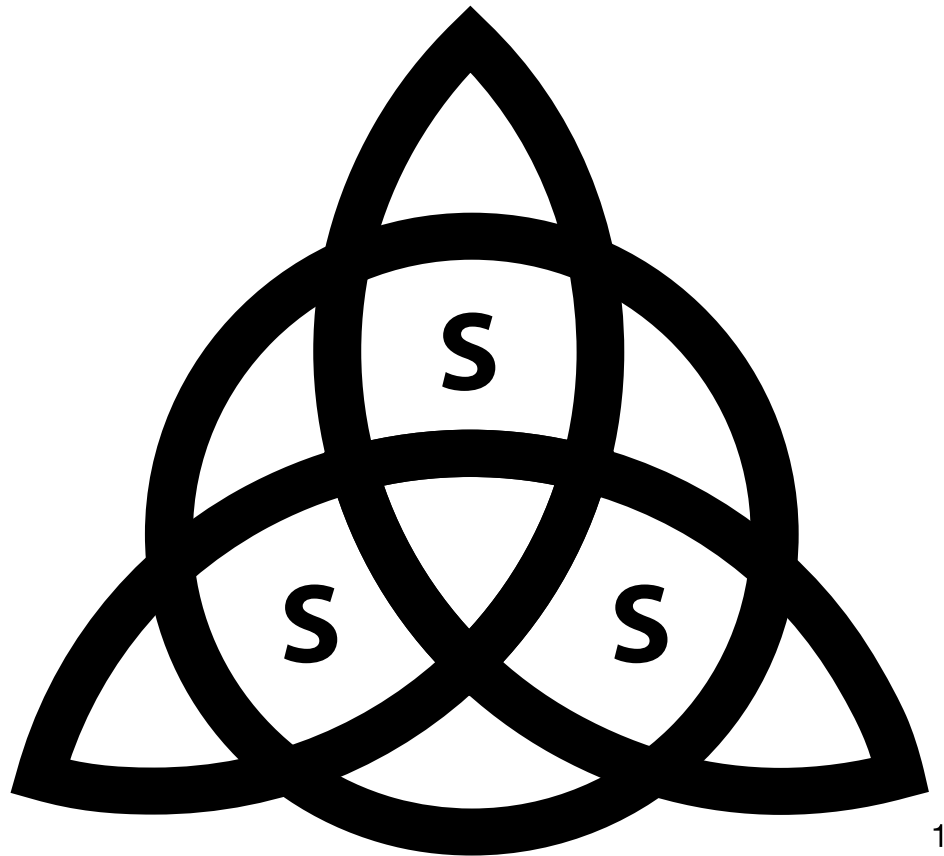
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1 The Trinity sign with a circle symbolizing life.

A coincidence is a wink from the universe.ⁱ

There are three kinds of truths: your truth, my truth, and the bloody truth.ⁱⁱ

We all understand something in accordance with the depth of our insights.ⁱⁱⁱ

This book is a Stoic Adventure.²

² The modern Stoic William Irvine describes a Stoic Adventure as an adventure in which we step outside our usual paths or comfort zones, consciously seeking challenging circumstances. On the one hand, to better appreciate what we already have, on the other, to gain new skills (source: *The Stoic Challenge. A Philosopher's Guide to Becoming Tougher, Calmer and More Resilient*, 2019). In writing this book, I step out of my comfort zones in four different ways. First, by writing on philosophical subjects outside my normal competence as an economist. Second, by writing the book directly in English, which is not my native language. Third, by describing topics that are generally perceived as personal, such as love and sex. Fourth, by posing new, quite often innovative and socially relevant (philosophical) ideas and theories.

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Preface

There are many theories on how humanity functions. Some deal with the way we interact with other people, others on how we should live a virtuous life or achieve happiness. Some of those theories deal with us on a personal level, others on a professional or societal level. The longer you live, the more theories, models, life recipes, psychological thinking techniques, interpersonal and company strategies, et cetera, you come across. A couple of years ago I had a revelation: all these theories are interconnected. Moreover, all living things are interconnected, and not only at this moment in time, but also through time. This is probably another interpretation of Leonardo da Vinci's well-known phrase: "Realize that everything connects to everything else." What was missing for me for many years was a structure, a framework on which all of these theories could be hanged. Suddenly, I found this structure, like a light bulb being switched on: it was Maslow's pyramid of needs.

Most management theories, organizational theories, and personal development theories – certainly those with a philosophical and psychological background – can be structured in Maslow's hierarchy, as a mosaic of theories, as I will abundantly show throughout this book. As a secondary goal, I try to describe the meaning of life. A philosophy of life is – at least in my opinion – not complete without a plausible answer to the all-encompassing question: 'why are we here on this earth'? To find an answer to this question, I perused some of the 'great minds' from the past. In doing so I found the theories of the Stoics and Arthur Schopenhauer particularly intriguing.

There is also a third goal. With this book I can finally categorize, connect, and comment on the interesting theories I have assembled or made up myself throughout my life. This goal is almost therapeutic: if your thoughts are overflowing, you need to catch them on paper. However, this book was not created through remedial writing alone. Above all, the process was serendipitous writing. After I first 'found' the structure of the book, I wrote the chapters, and more or less all subchapters and paragraphs separately and in a random order – like a jigsaw puzzle where the pieces slowly fall into place. Sometimes it took months before the inspiration I needed to finish a paragraph came around, in the form of a (chance) encounter, interesting discussion, quote from a film, or intriguing article.

Acknowledgement

I would like to thank everybody with whom I have had fruitful debates on the theories and topics discussed in this book. I have chosen not to mention names because, first, in this book I present interpretations of these talks that are completely personal, and second, by mentioning names I run the risk of forgetting

to include anyone who deserves credit for playing their part in my endeavor. (And there have been many who did so, including the ChatGPT chatbot.) To everyone concerned, I would like to say, I retain many fond and often lifelong memories of the insightful and sometimes even emotional and thought-provoking conversations. I hope many more discussions will follow, hopefully some based on the contents of this book.

Target audience

I wrote this book primarily for myself, as a kind of recipe book for life. A manual to shape my thought processes; a structure to hang theories on. An impetus to understand life and its purpose. An almanac of interesting theories that can be lubricant in conversations with others who also like to philosophize on life. However, when more and more people showed interest in what I was writing, I slowly made it a less secretive experience. When an increasing number of people encouraged me to publish my ideas, I decided to do so.

And during the writing process, something else happened. Gradually the urgency to publish the book grew in me. Especially in the afterthoughts, at the end of each chapter, it proved that I was able to address many of today's societal problems. On the one hand, the choice to base the structure of this book on the pyramid of needs turned out to yield the revelation that Maslow's ideas have a profound political meaning, namely that of individual personal development based on liberal thought. On the other hand, many social problems, such as environmental degradation caused by excessive consumption and the ever-increasing emphasis on outward appearance, can be traced to our unbridled gratification of needs and desires. This book ultimately turned out to be a platform to touch on the many societal issues I am genuinely concerned about and, better yet, provide a start to solutions for them, some of which involve different mindsets.

In general, I hope others who like to philosophize about the meaning of life and to psychologize human interactions, especially those between the different genders and the meaning of love and sex, find it of benefit.

Reading guide

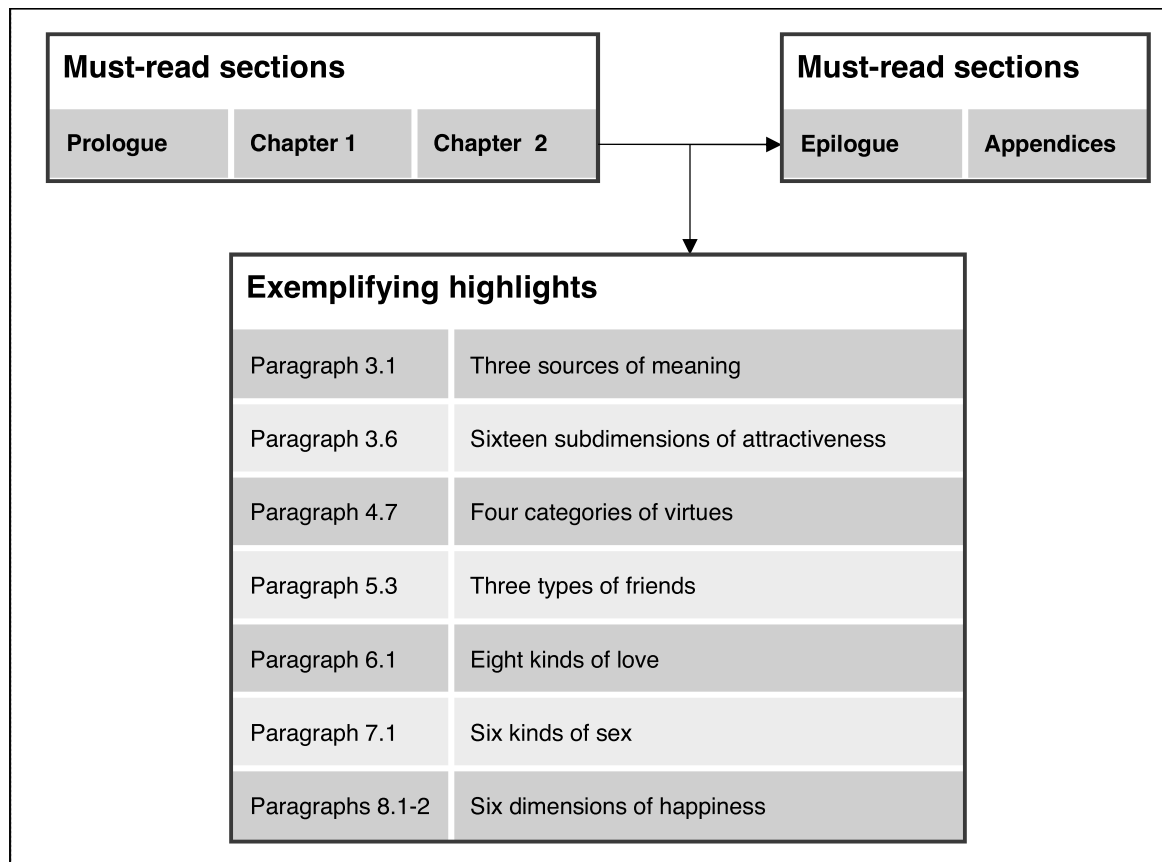
This book is a mosaic of theories, ideas, and discussion points. Each paragraph can be read on its own, like a piece of a puzzle. Together, the paragraphs make up a whole. The idea that everything stands alone, yet is connected, is a central part of my philosophy of life. Chapter 1 describes the stage on which the story of this book is written, specifically Maslow's theory on the Hierarchy of needs and the three areas where this theory needs to be adapted. Next, Chapter 2 outlines my philosophy of life, building on the amended Maslow hierarchy and supplemented with another model from the management organization theory. Subsequently,

Chapters 3 through 8 describe the building blocks of the philosophy of life model and all consist of two parts: relevant theories and afterthoughts. These chapters, especially, as well as their paragraphs, can be read separately. After reading the prologue and the first two chapters, the reader can follow any order, depending on one's interests.

One of the beta-readers developed a recommended reading journey, which is visualized below and which consists of must-read chapters and recommended paragraphs (mostly one per chapter), that really exemplify my philosophy of life. The reader can indulge in cherry-picking when it comes to the rest of the paragraphs (using the introductory paragraph of each chapter as a navigation guide for that particular chapter).

Reading this book can thus be compared to taking a road trip: not all side roads need to be taken, but they can be taken when the reader feels like it. Another suitable simile is viewing the book like a box of wrapped presents. It is up to the reader which ones he picks out and unwraps.

A recommended reading map



There are five afterthoughts in the Chapters 3 through 8. These are written in a more informal, personal style and they should be read as think pieces, or thought-provoking columns. Some of them, especially those on love and sex, might not be suited for the faint-hearted.

Chapter 8 deals with happiness. During the writing process of this book, it proved that after love and sex, happiness needed its own separate space in the book. It proved to be too multi-dimensional a concept to fit in the building blocks of the philosophy of life model outlined in Chapters 3 through 7.

The main text of the book is preceded by a prologue and concluded with an epilogue. The prologue and epilogue are essential parts of the reading journey, each containing five important pre- and afterthoughts.

Prologue

- **Summing it all up**
- **Eight branches of philosophy**
- **Two kinds of theories**
- **Synchronicity**
- **Being an economist**

- **Summing it all up:** This book is about sharing a personal philosophy of life. It does so in a unique structure, using one of the most cited psychological models: the pyramid of Abraham H. Maslow. In this model, Maslow defines six accumulating categories of needs and desires. The first level, the bottom layer, consists of our most basic needs, such as food, water, clean air, sleep, and clothing. Maslow argues that only when these needs are satisfied, we can move up to a higher level of needs, such as shelter and safety, and be part of a social environment. The significant philosophical implication behind this model is that man – as the common denominator for all genders – is primarily a need-satisfying mammal. On the other hand, man differs from other mammals in the sense that he can strive for higher desires, such as self-actualization and self-transcendence.

Maslow's model does not only appear in psychological handbooks. Those who have studied philosophy, medicine, sociology, and (business) economics have probably seen and perhaps applied it. I dare, however, to deviate from the model. I identify two needs that are so all-encompassing that they cannot be captured in one layer of the pyramid: love and sex. Most applicators or interpreters of Maslow's pyramid put sex in the lowest layer (basic needs) or in the third layer (social needs), where love is usually also tucked away. But love and sex are so fundamental that without them, most individuals have no reason to live, and the human species will not survive. A case will be made in this book that they permeate all levels or layers of Maslow's pyramid. Because of this, they deserve separate chapters.

The second reason why the structure of this book is unique is that it describes approximately fifty individual theories, in the form of summations, such as the eight categories of love or the three forms of friendships. We have just briefly gone through one summation, namely the six needs or desires in Maslow's pyramid (which will be elaborated on in the next two chapters). All summations are theories in and of themselves. They can be read separately - so that the reader can go through the book diagonally. Together the theories form a whole, like a mosaic on the philosophy of life. Another example of a theory in the form of a summation would be the eight different forms or branches of philosophy, which will be discussed next.

Before we dive deeper into the science of philosophy, a few final remarks on the idea of breaking up theories in summations of categories, forms, types, and the

like. Some might criticize this method as overly simplistic. However, any model and any description thereof will, by definition, be a simplification of reality. Furthermore, most of the models in this book have quite an extensive summation, sufficiently accommodating the usual gray areas. Moreover, a claim of completeness is never made. I hope this book will become a growing tree of wisdom, gaining strength through time (perhaps in new editions) with new insights. Lastly, breaking down theories in summations facilitates easier memorization and discussion of them.

- **Eight branches of philosophy:** Philosophy is the search for answers to fundamental questions, predominately through introspective and extrospective reasoning, in eight different branches.^{iv}

- i. *Metaphysics* (general questions on our physical existence, e.g. ‘What is the universe made of?’; ‘What is the nature or whatever it is that exists?’; ‘Why is there something rather than nothing?’).
- ii. *Ontology* (mostly seen as part of Metaphysics, but more specifically concerned with the questions of life and human existence, e.g. ‘How do we perceive the world around us?’, ‘Do things exist independently from perception?’, ‘What is the meaning of life?’ and ‘What is the relationship between the mind, soul and the body?’).
- iii. *Epistemology* (questions on the ways in which knowledge is attained and on the limits of knowledge, e.g. ‘How do we know?’; ‘How can we acquire knowledge?’; ‘How do we come to know what we know?’; ‘Can we learn from experience or only from reasoning?’; ‘Can we be tricked by our senses?’).
- iv. *Logic* (questions on how to ensure that ideas have validity, e.g. ‘What is a logical argument’ or ‘What are the fallacies in an argument?’; This branch of philosophy is closely connected to mathematics).
- v. *The meaning of words and language* (questions on terms or ideas, not only to elicit the exact meaning of something but also to explore the concepts behind them, e.g., ‘What is justice?’; ‘What is friendship?’; ‘What is art’; ‘What is attractiveness?’).
- vi. *Ethics, or moral philosophy* (questions on the meaning of a good life, and how to live, e.g. ‘How should we behave?’ or ‘How can we live a good life?’).
- vii. *Aesthetics* (questions on what constitutes beauty and art, e.g. ‘What is a beautiful picture?’ and ‘Do we need art, and if yes, why do we need it?’).