

The Good Life Debate: Pursuit of Ikigai or Life of Wonder and Adventure

25th February 2025

About the Speaker:

Prof. Lorraine Besser

Prof. Lorraine Besser earned her PhD in philosophy from the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill. She has MA degrees from UNC and the Claremont Graduate School, and a BA from Tulane University. Before joining the philosophy department at Middlebury College, she held positions at the University of Waterloo and Stanford University.

Prof. Besser's primary area of research is moral psychology. She is particularly interested in the topics of happiness and well-being and her work frequently draws on psychological and neuroscientific research on these themes. Also a scholar of David Hume, Professor Besser has broader interests in the history of ethics, and the early modern period of philosophy.

About the Moderator:

Saideep Rathnam is the Chief Operating Officer of Mizuho India Japan Study Centre, bringing a wealth of 47 years of industry and academic experience to the Centre. An alum of IIM Bangalore, from Hindustan Aeronautics Ltd. to British Aerospace, UK he has spent over 2 decades in the aeronautics industry and over 18 years in the automotive sector in various capacities including president of manufacturing excellence at Anand Automotive Ltd. He is also a Certified Chartered Management Accountant [CMA], UK. He wears many hats and has chaired Anand University, helping companies in the fields of management of change and innovation. Recently, he drove the Visionary Leaders for Manufacturing (VLFM) program as a Senior Advisory Committee Member of CII.

Webinar Context

Saideep:

For centuries, the idea of a *good life* has been built on two key pillars—happiness and meaning. The Japanese concept of **ikigai** perfectly encapsulates this, guiding individuals toward purpose and fulfillment. But what if we've been missing something crucial?

In her groundbreaking book, *The Art of the Interesting*, Professor Lorraine Besser challenges this traditional framework, arguing that the good life doesn't just stand on two legs—it stands on *three*. While happiness and meaning are vital, there is a third, often overlooked dimension—one that brings richness, depth, and adventure into our lives.

So, what is this third leg? How does it reshape our understanding of a life well-lived?

Professor Lorraine unpacks this hidden dimension of the good life—one that might just change the way you see the world.

Presentation by the Speaker:

Lorraine:

The title of my talk is *The Good Life Debate*, and I want to introduce a new perspective on what it means to live a good life. This perspective is shaped by collaborative efforts between me and Prof. Shigehiro Oishi, particularly in the realm of academia and psychology. One of the key ideas I will discuss today is *psychological richness*—a concept that offers an alternative to traditional notions of happiness and meaning in life.

Psychological Richness: A Distinct Form of the Good Life

One of the fascinating insights from our research on psychological richness is how deeply cognitive engagement affects us. When we are mentally engaged—challenged by new experiences, perspectives, and emotions—it often transforms our outlook on life. Such experiences can shift our understanding of the world, allowing us to emerge with a broader, more nuanced perspective.

Our research focused on two main objectives. First, we aimed to establish that psychological richness is distinct from happiness and meaning. While certain experiences may contribute to both happiness and psychological richness, or both meaning and psychological richness, there are also experiences that are uniquely psychologically rich, even in the absence of happiness or a sense of purpose. Psychological richness often involves a complex range of emotions and can exist independently of happiness or meaning.

The second objective was to determine whether psychological richness contributes to a good life. Our findings indicate that people do indeed value and desire psychological richness in their lives. As a philosopher, I have explored why psychological richness is good, and my argument centers on the idea that engaging deeply with new and stimulating experiences has intrinsic value—it makes life *interesting*.

The Three-Legged Stool: Happiness, Meaning, and Psychological Richness

In my recent book, *The Art of the Interesting*, I delve deeper into this concept. The book explores how we can cultivate psychological richness and how it fits into our overall conception of the good life. I argue that the good life is like a three-legged stool, supported by three essential components: happiness, meaning, and psychological richness.

Each of these elements plays a crucial role. A life focused solely on happiness can feel superficial, while a life centered only on meaning can become too rigid or burdensome. Psychological richness adds depth and dynamism to our lives. The best possible life includes all three elements in varying degrees, depending on individual preferences and circumstances.

The Limits of a Purpose-Driven Life

One common approach to the good life is the pursuit of purpose. While having a meaningful goal is undoubtedly valuable, I argue that an overly rigid focus on purpose has its drawbacks. Psychological research suggests that achieving a significant goal often results in a sense of flatness rather than lasting fulfillment. People frequently expect that attaining their goals will bring profound satisfaction, but many report feeling underwhelmed once they have reached them.

Another issue with an excessively purpose-driven life is that it can narrow our focus too much. When we concentrate solely on achieving a particular goal, we may overlook other enriching experiences that contribute to psychological richness. Novelty, spontaneity, and adventure are often pushed aside in the pursuit of purpose, yet these are precisely the experiences that can bring unexpected joy and insight.

Furthermore, wander and adventure enhance our lives. Engaging with new environments, ideas, and cultures fosters a sense of wonder and stimulates cognitive engagement, making life richer and more fulfilling.

Balancing the Three Elements

Ultimately, I believe that all three aspects—happiness, meaning, and psychological richness—are essential to living well. However, the way each person integrates these elements will differ. Some may prioritize meaning more, while others may seek psychological richness or happiness more actively. The key is to ensure that none of these elements is neglected.

Our best possible lives are ones in which we make space for all three. At different points in our lives, we may lean more towards one aspect than another, and that's perfectly natural. However, allowing any one element to dominate entirely is not an optimal strategy. Instead, the best approach is to create a balanced life that accommodates happiness, meaning, and psychological richness in a way that suits our individual needs and aspirations.

That is the vision of the good life that emerges from this research, and I hope it provides valuable insights for our discussion today.

Question and Answers

On Finding the Grand Purpose vs. Short-term Goals

Saideep:

Thank you, Lorraine. I think you've provided a broad overview of your research and book. One question that naturally comes to mind is about purpose. You discussed the potential downsides of focusing too much on purpose and gave three reasons for your concerns. I agree with your points, particularly about how a narrow vision can lead to disappointment after achieving a major goal. Even if there is an initial high, it may not last.

However, some researchers on a panel in *Ikigai and Happiness* previously have suggested that rather than setting narrow, specific goals—such as wanting to buy a Mercedes-Benz—one should adopt a *superordinate goal*. A broader, overarching purpose could provide long-term fulfillment, reducing the risk of feeling empty after achieving a milestone. How would you respond to this argument?

Lorraine:

I think that's a great way of looking at overarching purpose, and it aligns well with my perspective. Recognizing the potential downsides and thinking about how to mitigate them is crucial. I do support the idea of superordinate goals, as they can provide direction without leading to that feeling of "I have it now, but what's next?" It helps maintain motivation and engagement over time.

Additionally, I believe that finding fulfillment in the *pursuit* itself is key. Enjoying the journey rather than just the destination is an important strategy. This idea resonates with the Japanese concept of *ikigai*—finding joy in everyday activities and processes rather than being solely outcome-driven.

That said, the skeptic in me still worries about certain challenges. While some people successfully find overarching goals that guide them, others may struggle with the pressure to identify a singular, grand purpose. In some cultures, particularly in the U.S., there is a significant societal push to "find your purpose," and for those who struggle to do so, this can lead to self-doubt or feelings of inadequacy.

Ultimately, while having a sense of purpose is valuable, I don't believe it should be seen as *the* most important or *only* factor in a good life. Instead, we should embrace a more holistic approach that includes happiness, meaning, and psychological richness. Each plays a unique and essential role in shaping a fulfilling life.

Key Components of Psychological Richness

Saideep: When you talk about psychological richness, you provide many examples in your book. Could you take us through some of the key components of psychological richness and how one can pursue or cultivate these aspects?

Lorraine: One thing we know about psychological richness is that it is strongly correlated with experiences that are complex, challenging, and novel. To give you a sense of what a psychologically rich experience might look like, I'll share a brief story.

Early in my research, a journalist invited me to discuss psychological richness and thought it would be fun to go out and intentionally have a psychologically rich experience. I was skeptical because I don't believe this is something you can simply plan. But we decided to try—we made a plan, mapped out a route, and drove around an island searching for fairy houses that someone had built.

While following this planned route, I happened to glance out the window and saw something unexpected—a field full of colorful wooden birdhouses scattered across the forest. Among them, there were life-sized statues of dinosaurs. It was completely surreal. I hadn't expected to see anything unusual, but suddenly, I was confronted with something that sparked curiosity and questions. Why were they there? Who put them there? What was their purpose? Beyond that, I simply appreciated how the bright colors of the birdhouses stood out against the barren winter trees.

This, I think, is a great illustration of a psychologically rich experience. Had I been too focused on our planned route, I might never have noticed it. This highlights an important point: we need to keep our eyes open and remain in touch with our surroundings to notice things that can stimulate our minds.

Novelty is powerful because it forces the brain to shift out of its automatic patterns and actively engage in processing new information. The same thing happens when we encounter a challenging or complex situation—our minds are forced to engage deeply.

One of the best strategies for cultivating psychological richness is to seek out novelty. Notice new things in your environment. Don't shy away from challenges—allow yourself to sit with them. Often, our instinct is to retreat from difficult situations, but engaging with them can provide the same benefits as novel experiences.

While we cannot always control when interesting experiences happen, we can train ourselves to be more open to them. We can learn to recognize and embrace them when they arise, even if they don't always bring immediate comfort. Psychological richness comes from allowing ourselves to experience life fully, in all its unpredictability.

On Novelty vs. Depth

Saideep: You summarized the three key characteristics of psychological richness—complexity, novelty, and challenge.

I want to ask a slightly different but important question. If we constantly chase novelty, could we end up missing out on depth or stability? How does one strike a balance between these? Stability is also necessary for feeling grounded and happy.

Lorraine: That's such an important question because, just as we don't want purpose to dominate our lives, we also don't want psychological richness to take over completely. You're absolutely right that the circumstances that foster psychological richness—novel, complex, and challenging experiences—aren't always the best for cultivating happiness or a sense of purpose.

As individuals, we need to be mindful of how we respond to different situations. When pursuing psychological richness, there's a point where we might cross into discomfort or even danger. We don't want that. In my book, I discuss how crucial it is to tune into ourselves—recognizing when we've gone too far and need to step back, and also understanding when it's time to seek comfort and stability.

Each of us needs to develop the skill of self-awareness—checking in with ourselves to understand what we need at any given moment. This takes practice, but over time, we become better at recognizing when we feel fulfilled and when we feel drained.

I've personally experienced this in my own life. I find my work deeply meaningful, and I can immerse myself in it for long periods. But at times, I notice that I start to feel emotionally or mentally depleted. That's my cue to shift gears, step back, and engage in something different—something that restores my sense of balance.

Ultimately, the key is staying in touch with ourselves and being intentional about the types of experiences we seek.

On Meaningful Experience and Superficial Curiosity

Saideep: My next question builds on the example you gave—about looking out of the window while driving and noticing something unexpected. That was a very physical example of staying open to experiences.

For younger people growing up in a digital world, where they are constantly bombarded with notifications and distractions, how can they stay open to meaningful experiences? How can they avoid superficial curiosity—jumping from one thing to another—since that doesn't lead to true richness? What would you recommend for them?

Lorraine: That's a real challenge today. With so much access to information, it's easy to fall into a cycle of constant distraction—where we skim through things without actually engaging with them.

When we mindlessly scroll through our phones or jump from one piece of content to another, we are stimulating our brains, but we're not truly engaging with anything deeply.

The key difference is between being distracted by information and actively engaging with it.

It's possible to engage meaningfully with digital content, but it requires an intentional approach. You have to pause, reflect, and allow your mind to fully process what you're consuming. Psychological richness comes from deep engagement, not from fleeting distractions.

One strategy is to slow down and be mindful of your consumption. Ask yourself: *Am I just occupying my mind, or am I actually engaging with something?* If you realize that you're simply being distracted, take a step back and find something that truly captures your interest—something that makes you think, question, or feel something deeply.

I often say, *you have to know what you're after*. Once you experience the difference between passive distraction and active engagement, you'll start to recognize what real engagement feels like. Then, you can make more intentional choices about what you give your attention to.

The goal is to create space for deeper cognitive and emotional engagement. Instead of letting distractions dictate your attention, pause, notice what truly resonates with you, and give yourself the time to explore it fully.

Neurodiversity vs. the "Healthy Mind" in the Good Life

Saideep: Digital media operates in nanoseconds, but the human mind takes much longer to truly absorb an experience. That's why you emphasize that it's not enough to simply occupy our minds—we need to engage them. That seems to be the key takeaway you're offering the audience.

On a related note, Lorraine, I'd like to ask you something about neurotypical versus neurodiverse minds. The traditional model of a good life has often been shaped around a neurotypical perspective—one that seeks happiness and meaning in a fairly conventional way. However, with growing awareness of mental health, we now recognize that many individuals are neurodivergent, including those with ADHD, autism, and other cognitive differences.

Whether this is a new phenomenon or simply better recognition of something that has always existed is up for debate. But given this shift in awareness, do you think the philosophical model of a good life that you describe needs to be re-evaluated or expanded to embrace a broader spectrum of cognitive diversity?

Lorraine: That's an important question.

I don't think neurodivergence changes what is fundamentally good for us as human beings. Happiness, meaning, and psychological richness are valuable for everyone. However, what does change is how we *experience* these things. Since we each process

the world differently, we need to pay close attention to how we, as individuals, engage with happiness and psychological richness.

So much of living a good life is about understanding ourselves—how we personally experience happiness and meaning. There's plenty of advice out there about what *should* make us happy or give us purpose, but the truth is, those things might not work the same way for everyone. That's why I advocate for self-awareness rather than just following a prescribed list of "do this, do that."

Instead, I encourage people to ask: *How does happiness feel for me? Under what conditions do I truly experience it?* The same goes for psychological richness.

Since psychological richness involves unstructured cognitive engagement, the way we focus—whether we tend toward hyperfocus, scattered attention, or something in between—will shape how we experience it. For example, I personally tend to hyperfocus, which means I need to be mindful of when I get too absorbed in something. Recognizing this allows me to manage my attention and make sure I'm getting the right balance of experiences.

At the core of it all, the key is self-awareness. Whether we're neurodivergent or neurotypical, the best approach is to understand how these experiences feel *for us personally* and use that understanding to shape a fulfilling life.

Saideep:

You've captured a key insight—whether one is neurodivergent or neurotypical, recognizing where we get stuck and adopting a more holistic approach is essential. That's what you're advocating, and I think it's a very helpful perspective. Thank you, Lorraine.

On Trauma and Complex Emotions

Audience Question 1:

We all go through psychologically distressing experiences, such as the loss of a loved one. How does your approach—embracing happiness, meaning, and psychological richness—help people cope with such painful experiences?

Lorraine:

That's a great question. One of the most valuable insights from research on psychological richness is that experiencing complex emotions, including painful ones, is not inherently bad.

Of course, positive emotions contribute to happiness, but we often assume that difficult emotions should be avoided, buried, or eliminated. Psychological richness teaches us that life includes a full spectrum of emotions—some joyful, some painful—and that engaging with all of them can lead to a deeper, more meaningful experience.

When we face grief or trauma, we inevitably encounter difficult emotions. But instead of seeing them as obstacles to a good life, we can learn to sit with them, acknowledge them, and understand that experiencing pain does not mean life is not worth living.

I'm not suggesting that grief should be turned into some kind of "rewarding" experience—that's not the goal. Rather, the idea is to recognize that experiencing complex emotions is a natural part of life, even a good life. Developing the ability to sit with those emotions, rather than running from them, can be incredibly helpful in coping with loss.

Saideep:

That's a profound insight. So your message is that we shouldn't run from grief or suppress it, but rather allow ourselves to surface it and feel it. That's a powerful perspective.

How do we know if we have made it?

Audience Question 2:

How do we know when we've "made it" in terms of living a good life? If the answer is subjective, doesn't that risk making it too vague, leading to uncertainty or even misery?

Lorraine:

That's a really important question, and my answer might be a little unsatisfying: I believe we *feel* it.

A good life is not a final destination—it's an ongoing process. Life is full of ups and downs, challenges and rewards. The goal is not to reach a fixed point where we say, "Now I have made it." Instead, it's about recognizing whether we're consistently experiencing valuable, fulfilling moments across different aspects of life.

If we allow room for happiness, meaning, and psychological richness, we can infuse all parts of our lives with a sense of value. When we do that, we'll *know* we're living a good life because we'll feel it.

Rather than looking for a single defining metric, it's more useful to ask: *Do I feel that my life is rewarding?* If the answer is yes—if we feel fulfilled more often than not—then we are on the right path.

Saideep:

So, there's no fixed checklist for a good life. It's an ongoing process, and if we continue to feel fulfilled, we're on the right track.

Lorraine:

Exactly. A good life isn't about a single measure of success—it's about experiencing fulfillment in *all* areas of life. Whether it's our career, relationships, personal growth, or creative pursuits, each aspect can be rewarding in different ways.

One of the most exciting things about this approach is that it helps us see potential for fulfillment in places we might overlook. Even aspects of life that seem mundane or routine can become deeply meaningful when approached with the right mindset.

Audience Question 3:

How do you personally navigate the choice between pursuing deep purpose and embracing a life of adventure and spontaneity? You've mentioned balance, but could you share a personal example?

Lorraine:

That's a great question! I think there's a sense of *resonance* that happens when we're engaged in something truly meaningful or fulfilling. I try to follow that feeling.

For example, I find my work—whether research, teaching, or writing—deeply meaningful. At times, I become completely absorbed in it. When that happens, I allow myself to fully invest in it, because I find it incredibly rewarding.

But I also know from experience that if I focus *only* on one area—like my career—I risk looking back and realizing I've neglected other important parts of my life. I've had phases where I became overly focused on meaningful work, only to later feel like my life had become too narrow or imbalanced.

That's why I make a conscious effort to nurture *all* aspects of my life—seeking happiness, meaning, and psychological richness. Even when one area feels particularly compelling in the moment, I remind myself to step back and ensure I'm making space for everything that matters.

For me, it's about being aware of what's pulling me in a given moment while also keeping sight of the bigger picture. That's what helps me live my most fulfilling life.

Saideep:

So your approach is to follow what resonates with you at any given time, but always stay mindful of the need for balance. That's a great takeaway!

Saideep:

That's an interesting perspective. Across different philosophies, life is often divided into distinct phases. In Indian philosophy, for example, we have four stages of life. Similarly, in the Western framework, we recognize childhood, adulthood, and old age.

So, do the proportions of happiness, meaning, and psychological richness shift across different life stages? Or should all three always be present in each phase? Does your research suggest that this framework is age-dependent or age-independent?

Lorraine:

I believe it is largely *age-independent*, though our ability to experience and prioritize these aspects may shift over time.

For example, in childhood, the dominant form of a "good life" is often happiness—children naturally seek joy and playful experiences. At the same time, they also engage in a lot of psychological richness. They are inherently curious, imaginative, and open to exploring new perspectives. In fact, I often look to children for inspiration on how adults can cultivate more psychological richness in their own lives.

However, the pursuit of *meaning* and *purpose* requires a more developed mind. Children may not yet be searching for deep meaning in the way that adults do, simply because their cognitive capacities for structured reflection are still developing. As we grow, our ability to engage with purpose deepens, and it becomes a more significant part of our well-being.

That being said, *all three elements*—happiness, meaning, and psychological richness—are essential throughout life. They reflect different cognitive and emotional capacities:

- **Happiness** is tied to physiological pleasure and emotional well-being.
- **Psychological richness** represents our ability for unstructured cognitive engagement, curiosity, and novelty-seeking.
- **Meaning and purpose** rely on structured cognitive engagement, reflection, and goal-setting.

Rather than being strictly age-based, I think the balance of these elements depends on *our capacities at different stages*. Some people may naturally lean more toward one aspect than another, but we all have the ability to cultivate all three throughout our lives.

One area I've reflected on a lot is the end of life. Even when cognitive capacities decline, people can still have psychologically rich experiences. For example, even if someone's rational abilities diminish, they can still engage in meaningful conversations, enjoy music, or find beauty in small moments. That's why I view this framework less in terms of rigid age categories and more in terms of *what capacities we have available to us at a given time*—and how we can best use them to live a fulfilling life.

Saideep:

That's a fascinating insight. So while the balance of happiness, meaning, and psychological richness may shift, all three remain essential at every stage of life. Thank

you—this webinar makes us not only psychologically enriched but also intellectually enriched!