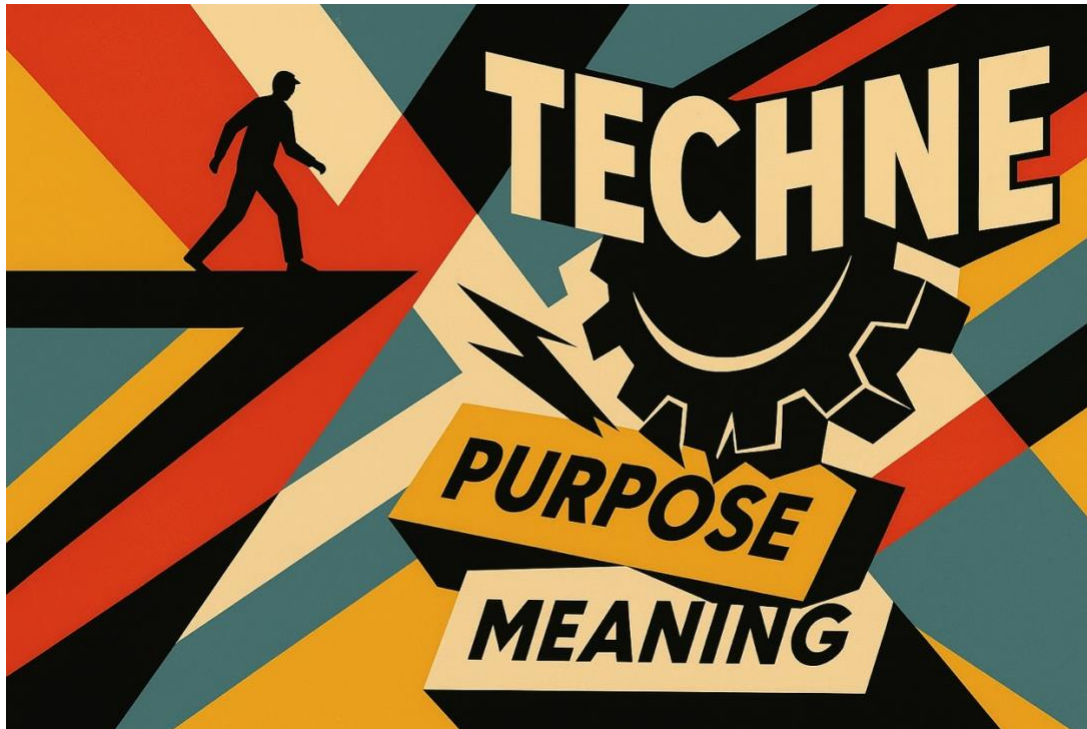


The Happiness Shortcut

When helping others feels good - and why that feeling isn't the whole story.

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1. A New Happiness Study.

In an article published yesterday on [The Washington Post](#), Dana Milbank argued that the road to happiness might be “surprisingly simple.” He describes a six-year Cornell study in which students were each given four hundred dollars to create a project benefiting themselves or their communities. Those who used the funds to plant trees, donate books, or organize local efforts reported higher levels of happiness, belonging, and what researchers called purpose.

It's an irresistible headline for a weary age: **stop chasing happiness and start making other people happy**. But, as it is often the case, the very simplicity that makes it appealing also makes it suspect, and it connects with what we highlighted only a few days ago in a separate [essay](#).

2. The Seduction of Clean Purpose

The Cornell study matters. It shows that when the self turns outward, the psyche steadies. Contribution softens anxiety. Yet the enthusiasm with which the results were received reveals something larger about our time: **we keep confusing purpose with meaning.**

Purpose is directional. It is the vector our actions take once we have decided what matters. Meaning, by contrast, is interpretive, the slow work of understanding why anything should matter at all. Meaning asks; purpose answers.

Milbank's framing collapses the two. The students found a temporary "why", but the deeper what for - the story into which that purpose fits - remains unexamined. We cheer the act of doing good because it feels like proof of meaning, when in fact it is often merely a **placeholder** for it.

3. The Empire of *Techné*

We live in an age governed by *techné*,^[7] the logic of making, managing, and optimizing. Technique, once a servant of thought, has become its substitute.

The medium is the message. We no longer ask what a good life demands of us; we ask which method will produce it fastest. The inner life has been absorbed into the culture of performance: if it can be tracked, it must be true. Gone are the questions "*is what I am doing ethical?*", "*is it moral?*", "*what am I trying to achieve?*", replaced by the more menial "*am I being efficient here?*", "*is this a good bang for the buck?*".

This technical mindset flattens purpose into a function. It treats the human will like an operating system that can be patched toward virtue. The tragedy may appear subtle, but it is ultimately devastating: **we end up producing goodness instead of becoming good.**

When Milbank reports that four hundred dollars and a kind deed can make you happier, **he is not wrong**; he is merely reporting from within the empire of technique. The question he doesn't ask is what happens when the money runs out and the task is complete. Without meaning - the interpretive field that tells us why this purpose matters - *techné* will simply demand the next procedure, the next optimization, the next protocol.

4. Purpose as Direction, not Deliverable

Purpose, detached from meaning, quickly turns performative. We start doing good the way we do cardio: to manage stress, not to reshape the self.

But purpose, at its best, is an **ethical orientation**, a way of moving through the world once one has faced the interior question of value. It is not what we

do; it is the direction our doing takes after we have wrestled with **why** it should exist at all.

That distinction matters because **direction without interpretation becomes ideology**. The Cornell students experienced a burst of well-being because their actions briefly aligned with value. But the durability of that alignment depends on whether they integrate it into a **broader narrative of meaning**. To act purposefully is easy; to live in accordance with meaning is slow, recursive work. It requires interpretation, failure, and a willingness to revise the story that once justified our success.

5. The Midlife Trap

The limits of this shortcut become clearest in midlife. For younger people, purpose is a construction project: they are still building identity, still discovering which directions are even possible. A self-directed contribution can shape them profoundly.

For those in the second half, the terrain shifts. The scaffolding is built, the story told too many times. The problem is no longer direction but **revision: how to steer a life already in motion** toward what still feels alive rather than what merely repeats itself.

Here, the cult of purpose becomes a **trap**. It tells the exhausted professional to “*find a new why*,” as if changing the slogan could heal the fatigue of over-definition. But midlife purpose is not about finding another project to execute; it is about **recovering the meaning** that can redeem the projects already done.

Contribution, at this stage, is not measured by scale but by **sincerity**, by the ability to act without performance, to be useful without control. That is what makes experiences of authentic relation so transformative: they break the feedback loop of mastery. Whether it happens in a conversation, a classroom, or a round pen with a horse, the lesson is the same. Purpose finds its truth only when it stops being self-referential.

6. Acting on Meaning

Milbank's optimism is understandable. After decades of self-help narcissism, a return to community and contribution feels like moral progress. Yet the underlying error remains: believing that a “hack” can do, that purpose itself is the cure.

Happiness is not a mood to acquire, and purpose is not a product to activate. Both depend on meaning, the interpretive framework that grants

continuity to action. Without it, purpose becomes a stimulant: it elevates us briefly, then fades, demanding another dose of usefulness.

To live well, irrespective of context, is to resist the reflex of acting before understanding. Interpretation should come first, not as a quest for perfect clarity – which is an impossible quest - but as a pause, a way of asking what truly stirs beneath our choices. Only then can purpose take shape as something more than performance.

When action follows that kind of inner reckoning, it carries a different charge. It is no longer an effort to fix or prove, but a gesture aligned with the deeper current of one's desire, the quiet, persistent pull toward what feels true rather than merely useful. And when **service flows from that place**, it stops being another strategy for control. It becomes an act of **presence**, an offering rather than an assertion.

7. The Art of a Mature Life

The Cornell study is right in its observation: helping others helps us. But the kind of help that transforms is rarely efficient, and the kind of happiness that endures is never simple.

The challenge of our time is not to find more purposes but to inhabit them meaningfully, to slow down the reflex to fix ourselves through productivity and rediscover the capacity to understand what our actions are for. Purpose without meaning is noise. Meaning without purpose is paralysis. The art of a mature life is to let the two speak to each other, action finding its orientation in understanding, understanding renewing itself through action. That is not a shortcut to happiness. **It is the longer way home**, to the quiet, insistent shape of one's own desire.

[\[1\]](#) *Technē* (τέχνη): originally the Greek word for craft or artful making, *technē* joined knowledge with purpose: the act of creating in harmony with an end. In modernity, and particularly with the interpretation of German philosopher Günther Anders, it detached from that end. No longer a means toward meaning, it became self-referential, a system that perfects execution while forgetting why. Technique now produces faster than we can feel, know, or judge. The tool no longer serves the world; it defines it.