

PART ONE

**THE SPECTACULAR
LIFE OF SPIDER-MAN?**

COPYRIGHTED MATERIAL



DOES PETER PARKER HAVE A GOOD LIFE?

Neil Mussett

Spider-Man is a geek. Don't get me wrong—I call him that with affection. I myself am quite a geek: computer programmer by day, secret philosopher by night. I'm just saying that if Batman weren't a superhero, he'd spend his days on yachts with supermodels; Superman would work as a pro-bono lawyer; and Wonder Woman would start an animal preserve in Kenya. (Can you tell I'm more of a D.C. guy?) Peter Parker would work at a lab in a university, design Web pages, or teach high school science. We care about Spider-Man because he's just like us but with special powers. Peter Parker has all sorts of problems: he's an orphan. He was raised by his older, old-fashioned aunt and uncle. He grew up poor and stays poor in many of the story lines. Even when he does find love, he doesn't seem to be any good at it. He's interesting because he doesn't have it together. Even his superpowers cause problems for him—he has to lie to the people he loves to protect them, and that keeps him from getting close. Other superheroes have their secrets, but for some reason, Peter always feels the consequences more than they do.

The question is, then, would you like to be Spider-Man? Does Peter Parker have a good life? What is a good life, anyway? It seems like a simple enough question. Some answers seem *too* simple: If I play *The Sims* video game, I learn that the good life consists of color-coordinated furniture, successful parties, career advancement, and regular trips to the bathroom. Other answers sound good (or at least complicated) but don't stick with you: when I see an author on this week's talk show promoting his *Secret to Happiness*, I can't help wondering what happened to last week's secret on the same show.

If philosophy is good for anything, it has to be for the Big Question, the Meaning of Life. There have been a lot of philosophers since Thales of Miletus (ca. 624 BCE) first put in his big plug for water—designating it to be the first principle of everything, by which he seems to have meant that all things really are at bottom water or at least came to be from water. In this paper, I'm going to discuss only five: a Roman slave, a begging friar, a novelist, a psychiatrist, and an academic. Two atheists, and three followers of three different religions. Three of these were imprisoned, two were tortured. Two spent time in concentration camps. One lived under an assumed name to protect the innocent, and we don't even know the name of another. One never wrote a book, and one wrote more than forty-five. Three have appeared in comic books. Each of these philosophers has given us a complete, and completely different, way to understand ourselves and our lives and a way to find a place for pain and pleasure, other people, morality, and God in the good life.

Paul Kurtz—A Life of Pleasure and Care for Others

I'll start with the contemporary philosopher Paul Kurtz, partly because he lives near me in Buffalo, New York, but also because I suspect that his answer to the Great Question will most resemble yours. You may not have heard of him, but he's

the author or the editor of more than forty-five books and more than eight hundred published articles. He has popularized the term *secular humanism* to describe an approach to life that focuses on joyful, creative living, a rejection of all religious claims, and a rational consequence-based ethics.

The good life, Kurtz tells us, has two components: First, the good life is the happy life. What is happiness? Historically, philosophers have described happiness either as pleasure (the hedonists) or as self-actualization (the eudaemonists). Kurtz argues that both are essential to the good life:

If an individual is to achieve a state of happiness, he needs to develop a number of excellences. I will only list these, without explication: the capacity for autonomous choice and freedom, creativity, intelligence, self-discipline, self-respect, high motivation, good will, an affirmative outlook, good health, the capacity to enjoy pleasure, and aesthetic appreciation.¹

Does this describe Spider-Man? Peter has certainly determined his own destiny. We know that he's smart; he actually invents his own web shooters in the comic book. In general, he keeps his cool, but we have seen Spider-Man lose control at times. In *Spider-Man 3*, we see him go to some strange lengths to embarrass Mary Jane at a jazz club after she breaks up with him. He is young, however, and at the time he was under the influence of an evil spider suit from another planet, so we can forgive him.

Does he enjoy pleasure? His parents are dead. His uncle is dead, and it's his fault. His aunt is poor, alone, and constantly in danger. In the comic, Peter accidentally kills his first love, Gwen Stacy, when he pulls too hard on his web while saving her from a fall. It does not seem that Peter has enjoyed the "multiplicities of sexuality," which Kurtz sees as "so essential to happiness."² He never seems to have any money. He's a brilliant scientist, but he doesn't have the reputation he deserves.

J. Jonas uses the newspaper to turn the public against Spider-Man, so Peter can't even enjoy popular acclaim. I submit to you that it is part of the very essence of Spider-Man that he has a pointedly painful life.

For Kurtz, happiness is important, but we can't live the truly good life alone. Kurtz insists that each of us needs to develop in ourselves the ethical principles of integrity, trustworthiness, benevolence, and fairness. We also need to "develop love and friendship for their own sakes, as goods in themselves."³ Finally, we need to "consider all members of the human family to be equal in dignity and value."⁴ Not only does Peter Parker place himself in danger to save innocent lives, he's also a good friend, a loving nephew, and a kind boyfriend. They don't call him "friendly" for nothing.

It wouldn't be a discussion of Kurtz's philosophy without mentioning religion. Kurtz believes strongly that God is a postulation without sufficient evidence.⁵ Does Pete believe in God? It's hard to say. God and religion aren't central to Spider-Man's story, but some have argued that Peter may be a mild Protestant Christian.⁶

I think for Kurtz, the jury is out on Peter Parker's life. On the plus side, he has realized his extraordinary talents and displayed goodwill toward man. On the minus side, his difficult life and obsession with monogamy have robbed Peter of some of the best parts of living. Kurtz might say that Peter is happy; he does have an "active life of enterprise and endeavor," but Kurtz also believes that life should be fun, and fun seems hard to come by for Peter.⁷

Ayn Rand—Life and Integrity

Although Paul Kurtz and Ayn Rand (1908–1982) are both atheists, they give incompatible answers to the Big Question. Kurtz wants you to realize that you can be altruistic without religion; Rand wants you to stop being altruistic. Kurtz asks

you to develop a “deep appreciation for the needs of other human beings,”⁸ Rand asks you to “learn to treat as the mark of a cannibal any man’s *demand* for your help.”⁹

You may know her through the video game *Bioshock*, which was inspired by her writings. You may have seen the 1999 movie *The Passion of Ayn Rand*, based on her life. You may also know her as the star of the comic book *Action Philosophers #2* (2005). Steve Ditko, the original artist for *The Amazing Spider-Man*, had what one author calls a “cultish devotion” to her philosophy of Objectivism.¹⁰

Alisa Zinov’yevna Rosenbaum was born in St. Petersburg, Russia, in 1905, and her family suffered at the hands of the Communist Revolution of 1917. After completing a degree in history, she moved to Hollywood to become a screenwriter. Fearing for her family’s safety in Russia, she changed her name to Ayn Rand when she began to write anti-Soviet stories. She’s most famous for her 1957 novel *Atlas Shrugged*, about a future in which the producers, the artists, and the entrepreneurs of the world go on strike. (I just checked Amazon.com, and it’s still number one in political philosophy.)

In a lifeless world, she said, there are no choices and no alternatives. With life comes the most fundamental alternative: existence or nonexistence. Matter is indestructible, life is not. A living organism can succeed or fail to sustain itself. If it fails, it dies. Life creates *value*, that which a living organism acts to attain. Things are *good* or *evil* to the extent that they sustain or destroy life. Happiness is achieving one’s values, and “pain is an agent of death.”¹¹

Man has the unique power of *rationality*. Just as nonrational animals use whatever faculties they possess to survive, man’s rational nature demands a rational means of survival. He has no *instinct* of self-preservation, no “automatic code of survival.”¹² The lower animals have no choice but to act for their own good; man must choose his own actions by thought. “What are the values his survival requires?” she asked. “That is

the question to be answered by the science of *ethics*.¹³ Rand's model for an ethical act was the *trade*. In a trade, each man must "give value for value."¹⁴ The opposite of the trade would be force, violence, or theft, which would be unethical because it requires the sacrifice of one rational agent for the benefit of another.¹⁵

I'm afraid Ayn Rand wouldn't have had good things to say about Spider-Man. Think about it: Peter Parker has super-human strength, scientific genius, and the ability to climb walls and see the near future. How does he use it? At first, he uses it to make money as a pro-wrestler (in the comic, he has quite a successful career). When he decides not to intervene in a robbery that has nothing to do with him, his uncle is murdered. This event moves him to dedicate his life to saving a public that hates him. He hides his identity and lives in squalor, all for the sake of his uncle's advice about power and responsibility. In other words, Peter becomes Rand's "prostitute whose standard is the greatest good for the greatest number."¹⁶

In many ways, Spider-Man is an allegory, a fairy tale, of what Rand called the "morality of sacrifice," which she believed was the opposite of true ethics.¹⁷ For the morality of sacrifice, the good is always the *good of others*. The morality of sacrifice praises any act motivated by the welfare of another person and criticizes any act motivated by one's own welfare. Rand summarized the morality of sacrifice this way: "If *you* wish it, it's evil; if others wish it, it's good; if the motive of your action is *your* welfare, don't do it; if the motive is the welfare of others, then anything goes."¹⁸ According to Rand, this self-destructive theory demands that we *love* those whom we do not value and tells us that "To love a man for his virtues is paltry and human . . . to love him for his flaws is divine."¹⁹ This is the sort of love Spider-Man has for his public, and it's the reason why Rand would have said that he is not living the good life.

Epictetus—Self-Control, Duty, and Knowledge of the World

Ayn Rand believed that (traditional) morality is destructive to happiness, but there was a philosopher who believed that morality is *sufficient* for happiness. Unlike Rand, who lived under an assumed name, we don't even know the name of this philosopher. All we know of him is that he was a slave in Rome, so we call him "Acquired" (*epiktetos* in Greek). He was born about 55 AD, and if our five philosophers were to fight, I would put my money on him. Origen gave us a snapshot of a man who is tough as nails:

[T]ake Epictetus, who, when his master was twisting his leg, said, smiling and unmoved, "You will break my leg;" and when it was broken, he added, "Did I not tell you that you would break it?"²⁰

While he was still a slave, Epictetus attended the lectures of a Stoic philosopher, Musonius Rufus. He became a philosopher himself, and when he was given his freedom sometime before the year 89, he taught philosophy in Rome and lived to be almost a hundred years old.²¹

Epictetus lived the life of a slave and an exile, but he considered his own life to be good. His answer to the Big Question was simple: to have a good life, you must (1) master your desires; (2) perform your duties; and (3) think correctly about yourself and the world. Most people neglect the first two and focus only on the third.

Epictetus would say that Kurtz and Rand have a huge underlying problem: they base happiness on chance. Most of life is out of our control. The pleasures they describe may sound attractive, but what if you were born a slave? What if your parents die and your uncle is killed? What if there is more pain in your life than pleasure? Is your life bad? Epictetus puts happiness in the one place that's immune to life's disasters:

your own power of choice. We can lead happy lives under any circumstances, as long as we master our desires and depend only on those things that are in our control:

I must die. Must I then die lamenting? I must be put in chains. Must I then also lament? I must go into exile. Does any man then hinder me from going with smiles and cheerfulness and contentment?²²

Epictetus addresses something that is essential to Spider-Man and every other superhero: attachment. What is Spider-Man's greatest weakness? His attachment to Aunt May and MJ. Even if Spider-Man were immortal, his friends aren't. Nothing he has is his very own; it is given to him for the moment, not forever or inseparably, but for a season. Peter should remind himself of this whenever he saves his loved ones from danger or even takes pleasure in their company. Epictetus asks us this provocative question:

What harm is there in whispering to yourself as you kiss your child, "To-morrow you will die," and to your friend in like manner, "To-morrow you or I shall go away, and we shall see one another no more?"²³

Would Epictetus have given Spider-Man a passing grade in his school for Stoics? Peter is a hero and a scholar, so he gets full credit for duties and learning. Has Peter mastered himself? Peter is no coward—he doesn't run from pain or mortal danger. Yet self-mastery is more than courage in battle; it's freedom from the pains of this world. In the movies, he spends years pining for MJ, basing his happiness on something he can't obtain. He spends his life torn between the call of duty and a need for personal comforts. He doesn't prepare himself for loss and pain, so when they happen to him, he loses his peace. Spider-Man has a long way to go before he can be counted among "The Wise." As much as he cares for Aunt May, he needs to learn that his obsession with her safety keeps him from living the truly good life.

Viktor Frankl—Meaning and Sacrifice

Perhaps it's just the opposite. Perhaps genuine care for others is what the good life is all about. Viktor Frankl (1905–1997) lived a life just as hard as Epictetus's but came up with a different answer. Frankl was a Jewish psychologist who suffered in several concentration camps, including Auschwitz, Dachau, and one camp without a name. While he was in Auschwitz, he decided that the best way to keep himself going was to write a book on the psychology of death camps. He did survive, and what started as a book became an entirely new school of psychology that seeks to relieve emotional distress through meaning.

For Frankl, the good life is the life of meaning. “Meaning” is primarily a matter of responsibility—there is some good I *need* to do.²⁴ In a meaningful life, I have a sense of my own irreplaceability—nobody else can carry out my particular duty for me. In that sense, there's no one “meaning of life.” Rather, each person's life has an entirely unique meaning that needs to be discovered.²⁵ Meaning shapes and organizes everything else within my life. It's the reason I get out of bed in the morning. Meaning also changes the nature of suffering. Frankl claimed that “There is nothing in the world . . . that would so effectively help one to survive even the worst of conditions as the knowledge that there is a meaning to one's life.”²⁶ He was fond of quoting Friedrich Nietzsche (1844–1900), who wrote, “He who has a why to live can bear almost any how.”²⁷ If suffering is associated with meaning, with love, it becomes sacrifice. Sacrifice, rather than being something to avoid, is actually an essential part of the good life. Frankl is very clear that the very worst life is the life of *boredom*, which can only lead to an obsessive pursuit of temporary highs.²⁸

To decide whether Spider-Man has a good life, it's not enough to admire his heroic actions—Peter must see the purpose himself. Although it's obvious to us that nobody else can do what he does, he may not see the point of it all. The pain in Peter's life is real. Not only did Peter suffer from his childhood

as a poor, unpopular orphan, he suffers in the present from his own actions and lifestyle. He suffers when he gets hurt, and he suffers in his personal life.

Frankl, on the other hand, would have asked *Peter* to decide whether his life is good. He would have sat Peter down and asked him, “Why don’t you kill yourself?” This rather shocking question would not be meant to *encourage* Peter to jump off a bridge. Instead, it would force Peter to find the things that keep him going, despite the suffering. Frankl said that it’s ironic that most people think the job of the psychologist is to relieve stress. The best way to help people in crisis is often to *increase* the amount of tension in their lives by helping them focus on their responsibilities. He used a metaphor from architecture—to strengthen a weak arch in a building, you *add* weight. Frankl could have added to Uncle Ben’s advice: with great responsibility comes the knowledge of your own purpose.

The closest thing we have to Peter’s answer to this question may be the encounter he has with the evil psychologist Dr. Judas Traveller, in *Amazing Spider-Man* #402 (1995). During the infamous *Clone Saga* (1994–1996), Traveller meets Spider-Man at an all-time low point in his life: Aunt May is dead, his baby with MJ may have genetic defects, and Peter has been imprisoned. Traveller offers Peter a chance to have the peaceful life he always wanted but at the cost of innocent lives. He refuses and attacks Traveller. In doing so, Peter shows us that he’d rather live a life of great sacrifice and pain than betray his love of humanity.

Thomas Aquinas—God and Virtue

There’s one superhero we haven’t talked about so far. You may not have heard of him, but there are specialty stores where you can still get his books, pictures of him, and even his emblem on a chain. Like Harry Osborn, he was born to a rich and

powerful family. They wanted to use their influence to get him a cushy job, but he wanted to join a rag-tag band of men who wandered the world helping those in need. His family was so opposed to his plans that they had him kidnapped and locked in a castle tower for almost two years. His mother had a change of heart and had his sisters rescue him with some ropes and a basket. He has some nicknames, the Angelic Doctor and the Dumb Ox, but most know him simply as Thomas.

Yes, I am talking about St. Thomas Aquinas (c. 1225–1274). I put him last—a dead giveaway that he’s my favorite. Thomas Aquinas wrote on most major branches of classical philosophy. Believing that faith and reason are entirely compatible, he also wrote on a wide variety of subjects, including angels and even economics. If you’re brave, get a hold of the medieval equivalent of a comic book, Dante’s *Divine Comedy* (including the ultraviolent *Inferno*), which is an epic poem about a man who travels from Hell to Purgatory to Heaven. Dante was so inspired by Thomas’s philosophy that he used it as the setting of his poem.

Like Kurtz, Thomas argued that all men want happiness, and that a perfectly good life would fulfill all of our desires, including that for the perfection of our bodies.²⁹ Also like Kurtz, Thomas believed that it’s an essential part of our nature to care for others, and that all people are capable of living virtuous lives, whether or not they accept Christianity.³⁰ Like Rand, Thomas believed that true morality will always benefit the one who acts, and that pleasure in acting *increases* the moral worthiness of the action.³¹ He held, with Rand, that we love what’s good, what’s deserving and praiseworthy and excellent.³² Even the best person shouldn’t love other people more than he loves himself.³³ Thomas agreed with Epictetus that happiness is ultimately a choice, and it cannot be taken away by the actions of others.³⁴ Finally, like Frankl, Thomas believed that in the good life, love is the ultimate motivation, and love allows us even to enjoy suffering for our friends.³⁵

How could Thomas say all of this? I don't have enough room here to give even the roughest sketch of Thomas's ethics. It'll have to suffice to say that for Thomas, everything was good, our bodies, our minds, the world, and especially God. The only way you could even get anything bad would be if a thing was missing something it should have (people usually use blindness as an example or a car without brakes or a superhero without a costume). Every desire we have points to some good thing that can fulfill it. Our desire for happiness has no limit, and the more we experience of the world, the more we know that it can't perfectly satisfy us. Thomas said that everybody wants to be happy, but what they don't realize is that only God, Who is unlimited Goodness, can make them perfectly happy.³⁶

Reading Kurtz or Rand, one would think that Aquinas hated this world, hated life, and hated the body, but it is quite the opposite. Thomas adopted Aristotle's (384–322 BCE) concept of a *virtue*. Yes, a virtue is a good habit, but it is more than that. A virtue changes you—it makes you enjoy doing good. A generous person actually *likes* giving. Doing an occasional nice thing here or there is fine, but if you do it enough, you get hooked, and it stops being work to do the right thing. That's how Thomas could link *morality* with *pleasure*. The truly virtuous person is filled with joy when doing good and, in a sense, can do whatever he or she wants.

Without any notion of God, people can still love one another, because every person is born with a sense of decency, a sense that moral actions are compatible, appropriate, and healthy. This is because of the Natural Law, called so because it comes from our nature as rational beings. We start with loving ourselves, but we can come to identify with others, see them as *other selves*, and love them as well. Through God's action, we can be given the virtue of charity, which allows us to love God in a completely selfless way, to love those around us as images of God, and to love ourselves and our bodies as God's creations.³⁷

What would Thomas say about Spidey's life? I actually find it difficult to picture driving Thomas Aquinas to a movie theater, but if we could arrange it, I think he would have good things to say about Mr. Parker. He would praise Peter's moral and intellectual virtues: courage, creativity, good judgment, compassion, and restraint. Most of us don't have the opportunity to do good to all men, but Peter does, and his beneficence is very close to the highest virtue, charity.³⁸

The life of a superhero does have its pleasures. Thomas would say that Spider-Man enjoys saving the world for three important reasons: First, the *effect*—the love he has for the people he saves allows him to enjoy their good as if it were his own. Second, the *end*—Peter knows (or at least hopes) that he'll receive good things for his efforts, such as gratitude and praise. Finally, the *principle*—he enjoys using his superpowers, exercising his virtues, and doing things out of love.

What about Peter's suffering? Thomas believed that in itself, sorrow or pain is not *evil* in a moral sense (disagreeing with Ayn Rand). There are actually several kinds of good pain: *remorse*, or sorrow for all of the harm we have done, is actually very good. Uncle Ben's advice is powerful because it's associated with a tragic mistake. The anger and loss Peter feels at the crimes of his opponents is also a kind of pain but a good pain. Suffering heightens Peter's awareness of risk and a desire to avoid repeating past mistakes, which is very helpful. Thomas agreed that suffering could be bad, but he insisted that no suffering, interior or exterior, could outweigh the badness of *failing to reject evil*.³⁹ If there's a balance to be struck, Peter has come out on the right side.

What Next?

Nothing is more depressing than talking to a philosopher who doesn't believe in anything. I have very strong beliefs about the Meaning of Life (a combination of Frankl and Thomas, with a little Detrich von Hildebrand thrown in for fun), but it's

not my plan to argue for one particular winner in this chapter. There are two general approaches to answering this question, the academic (read everything you can and make a decision) and the concrete (find someone who has what you want and ask how he or she got it). Whichever way you choose, it's vital for *you* to pursue the answer.

NOTES

1. Paul Kurtz, *Living without Religion: Eupraxophy* (Amherst, NY: Prometheus Books, 1994), 41.
2. Paul Kurtz, *Embracing the Power of Humanism* (Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield, 2000), 6.
3. Ibid.
4. Paul Kurtz, "Toward a New Enlightenment: A Response to the Postmodernist Critique of Humanism," *Free Inquiry* 13 (1992–1993): 33–37.
5. Kurtz, *Living without Religion*, 33.
6. See www.adherents.com/lit/comics/Spider-Man.html.
7. Paul Kurtz, "Where Is the Good Life? Making the Humanist Choice," *Free Inquiry* 18 (1998): 23–24.
8. Paul Kurtz, Vern L. Bullough, and Timothy J. Madigan, *Toward a New Enlightenment: The Philosophy of Paul Kurtz* (New Brunswick, NJ: Transaction Books, 1994), 21.
9. Ayn Rand, *Atlas Shrugged* (New York: Random House, 1957), 1059.
10. Andrew Hultkrans, "Steve Ditko's Hands," in Sean Howe, ed., *Give Our Regards to the Atomsmashers!* (New York: Pantheon Books, 2004), 209–223.
11. Rand, *Atlas Shrugged*, 940.
12. Ibid., 939.
13. Rand, *The Virtue of Selfishness*, 24.
14. Rand, *Atlas Shrugged*, 410.
15. Rand, *The Virtue of Selfishness*, 32.
16. Ibid., 1030.
17. Ibid., 959.
18. Rand, *Atlas Shrugged*, 1030.
19. Ibid.
20. *The Writings of Origen*, trans. Frederick Crombie (University of California: T & T Clark, 1872), 475.
21. John Lancaster Spalding, "Critical and Biographical Introduction," in *Discourses of Epictetus*, trans. George Long (New York: D. Appleton, 1904), iv.

22. Epictetus, *Discourses of Epictetus*, trans. George Long (New York: D. Appleton, 1904), 3.
23. Epictetus, *Epictetus the Discourses and Manual*, trans. P. E. Matheson (London: Oxford University Press, 2009), 97.
24. Viktor Frankl, *Man's Search for Meaning* (New York: Washington Square Press, 1984), 127.
25. *Ibid.*, 131.
26. *Ibid.*, 126.
27. *Ibid.*
28. *Ibid.*, 128.
29. Thomas Aquinas, *Summa Theologica*, Ia IIae, q.1, aa.6–7; and Ia IIae, q.4, a.6.
30. *Ibid.*, Ia IIae, q.91, a.2.
31. *Ibid.*, IIa IIae, q.27, a.3; IIa IIae, q.123, a.12; IIa IIae, q.27, a.8; Ia IIae, q.59, a.2.
32. *Ibid.*, Ia IIae, q.10, a.1.
33. *Ibid.*, IIa IIae, q.26, a.4; Ia IIae, q.29, a.4.
34. *Ibid.*, Ia IIae, q.3, a.2; Ia IIae, q.4, a.7.
35. *Ibid.*, Ia IIae, q.32, a.6.
36. *Ibid.*, Ia IIae, q.2, a.8.
37. *Ibid.*, IIa IIae, qq.23–46.
38. *Ibid.*, IIa IIae, q.31, a.3.
39. *Ibid.*, Ia IIae, q.39.