

If Life Is a Journey, These Are the Rules to Live Well

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In our society, “becoming a professional¹ with the *first* degree” has become an acronym of “a pathway towards a good life”. It is therefore common to see young people adopt myopic (e.g. money-driven) attitudes towards their life activities². Influenced by such culture, I used to imagine life as a straight line (Figure 1A). Ten-year ago, I thought I had made a mistake in choosing a science subject with an aim to pursue a career in medical research. Today, I reckon my misconception was a consequence of being ignorant of the meaning of a well-lived life.

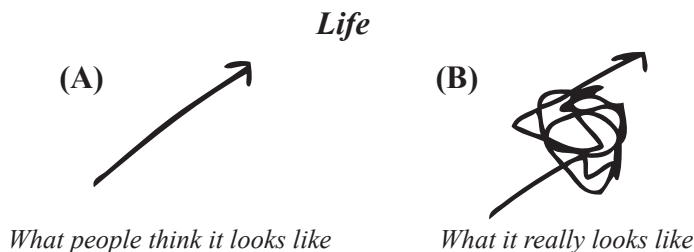


Figure 1. Imagination and reality of life. (A) Common misconception of a life's pathway. (B) The reality of life's pathway.

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- 1 The definition of becoming professional here means the academic degree leads to a professional license.
 - 2 These include tailor-making university application package (subjects of study, volunteer and extra-curricular activities, etc.) solely for admission purpose, and neglecting the purposes and if those activities are in line with students' will.

What is a well-lived life? In this thesis, Aristotle's *Nicomachean Ethics* and Homer's *The Odyssey* are to be discussed with respect to my experience to explore insight of a well-lived life for today's young people. Towards the end, a purpose driven life is proposed.

Expect Adversities in Life and Solve Them by Trial-and-error

To live a life well is not about living without adversities. After the completion of my first degree and PhD in Biochemistry, I realized the drawback of being an academic researcher³. Despite the myriad hurdles⁴ I encountered during the postgraduate study, I managed to publish 28 peer-reviewed articles. Three years after graduation, I was admitted to the MBChB program in the same university in the fourth *trials*⁵.

My experience invokes my feeling of connection to *The Odyssey*, which suggests life as a journey of *trials*⁶. Through story-telling, *The Odyssey* depicts the home-coming journey of Odysseus, whom survived his fight in Troy (Homer 1:13) but was separated from his dear ones. He was first detained by Calypso, and after returning to Ithaca, he and his family were confronted by suitors, who tried to marry Penelope. In total, Odysseus endured twenty years of suffering and wandering away from his home (16: 219). Indeed, both Odysseus's and my journey are rougher than ones could have expected for life (Figure 1B).

3 These include the lack of insight in disease and thus cannot formulate meaningful research question from perspective of patients.

4 Briefly, the lack of research funding and poor culture makes conducting money-demanding scientific research difficult in Hong Kong. Very often, conceived ideas were not executed because of lack of money and/or results were scooped by big research groups overseas.

5 I completed my Bachelor in Biochemistry in 2008 and PhD (Biochemistry) in 2012, both in CUHK. I was admitted to the Medicine program in 2015, after failure on my first, second and third attempt on 2012, 2013 and 2014, respectively. I considered my various prior attempts as an example of *trial-and-error*.

6 Original text: "*We have not yet come to the end of our trials*" (23:255; emphasis added, same hereafter); "*My wife, we've had or fill of trials now*" (23:364).

Although Aristotle did not explicitly discuss adversity in *Nicomachean Ethics*, he nevertheless implied also the necessity of trial-and-error in life, including building friendship.

Aristotle categorized the basis of friendship as utility, pleasure and goodness. While friendship built on top of the former two ceases once the utility or pleasure disappears, friendship based on goodness tends to last. Aristotle then opined that a long time is required to prove oneself being worthy of love for a friendship based on goodness (1156b1–30). Since the grounds for dissolving friendship were also discussed, such that friendship built based on deception⁷ might be dissolved if it is incurable (1165b5–19), it follows that Aristotle agrees that in life we try to make friendship by trial-and-error.

If adversities are inevitable, how should we react to them? Nowadays, young people often suffer from delay of life-course transition, which is perceived to be one among the adversities and is difficult to accept⁸. However, *Nicomachean Ethics*, *The Odyssey* and my experience all argue that such delay may be considered as a test of self-determination, and could be dealt with by exercising virtues and personal growth.

As Aristotle proposed explicitly in *Nicomachean Ethics*,

even in adversity nobility shines through, when a man endures repeated and severe misfortune with patience, not owing to insensibility but from generosity and greatness of soul (1100b20).

7 Not truly liking another for the character but actually only for profit or pleasure. However, one might make friendship by pretending to like the character of another person.

8 Due to economic recessions, the young people usually has a delay in their progression of life-course. Briefly, life-course transitions, including leaving parental home, family formation and home purchase, which used to occur earlier in their 20s, now occur usually in their 30s (Izhuara).

Odysseus's positive attitude towards his journey back home reflects Aristotle's above-mentioned notion in shining through adversity. In particular, Odysseus assembled a raft from scratch efficiently in four days (Homer 5: 235–263), and even more, “*Odysseus's heart sang as he spread sail to the wind*” (5: 269), albeit in anticipation of the *painful* hard sailing in the open sea along the way home (5: 174–175).

Aristotle's notion that “it is the active exercise of our faculties in conformity with virtue that causes happiness” (1100b10) could also be learnt from Telemachus's story of personal growth. Initially, Telemachus was a weak and childish person, who grumbled about the disappearance of Odysseus, although Odysseus may be struggling his way back or unfortunately died along the way home.

No one witness his own begetting. If I had my way, I'd be the son of a man fortunate enough to grow old at home (Homer 1: 233–235).

After receiving guidance from Athena (1: 120–330) and Odysseus (19: 198–339), Telemachus became more assertive and affirmed to Odysseus that he would not let Odysseus down (19: 327–329). Telemachus subsequently gave masterful words to Penelope, forcing her to go back to her room (21: 365–380), so that Odysseus could finish the archery challenge (21: 430–460). His actions during the challenge were the most “*noblest manner that the circumstances allow*”(Aristotle 1101a1–3) he could do to reunite the family.

Therefore, both myself, Telechamus and Odysseus have performed our best given the adverse situations we faced, and can be regarded as examples of today's young people.

Aristotle's Golden Mean Principle: The Proper Behaviors in Facing Adversities

Odysseus was considered to be ill-fated (Homer 1:54), who has suffered for long (1: 94) by Homer. However, if Aristotle is to be asked to comment on the Odysseus's act and fate, he would probably say Odysseus deserved such punishment because of his recklessness.

Why is that? Initially, he should be destined to see his dear with treasures more than he could take back from Troy after being released from Calypso (5:34–44). Unfortunately, in the Island of Calypso, Odysseus blinded Poseidon's son Cyclops (1: 75–76), and Odysseus further lost his self-control and revealed his identity to Cyclops. Poseidon was thereby enraged (1: 62) and subsequently destroyed Odysseus's raft in the open sea (5: 283–284). Thus, Odysseus was forced to spend many more years away from home. Here, Odysseus should have learnt the importance of self-control by committing such mistake. Specifically, mortals even as strong as Odysseus had to admit life is not always under own control. Only the gods (Zeus in particular in *The Odyssey*) are the moderator of fate, which was exemplified by the episode that Zeus sent the quicksilver messenger Hermes to force Calypso release Odysseus (5: 145–146).

The lesson to be learnt from *The Odyssey* echoes Aristotle's golden mean principle, where courage was defined as a state in between the two extremes of cowardice and recklessness⁹. Therefore, Aristotle would *appreciate*

9 When confronted by a dangerous situation, the cowardly person feels more fear than he should; and the reckless feels less fear than he should. Only the courageous person feels the right amount of fear.

Odysseus's *courage* to confront Cyclops (i.e. one kind of adversities¹⁰) but *condemn his reckless behavior* in revealing his identity to Cyclops¹¹.

As for myself, I was frustrated and could become slack or taut in the past 10 years¹², but I decided to keep my ambition and keep improving myself, which I see is the application of Aristotle's golden mean principle.

Young people today are often stereotyped to be self-centered (Smithstein). If they have read *Nicomachean Ethics*, they would realize being self-centered is analogous to losing self-control in *The Odyssey* and is an extreme state of reaction¹³.

Maintaining Good Relationships

Aristotle considered relationship as an essential external good for training of virtue to attain happiness because it allows ones to learn goodness from another person (1171b11–14). However, Aristotle's discussion was largely limited to friendship.

In contrast, *The Odyssey's* scope of relationship was broader, including king-to-civilian, family members, and human-to-god relationship.

In *The Odyssey*, good relationship was maintained between Odysseus and the gods (Homer 1:26–86)¹⁴. Without the help of Zeus, Odysseus

10 Odysseus and his men were trapped by Cyclops inside his cave.

11 Poseidon, the father of Cyclops and a god of the ocean, could therefore go after Odysseus.

12 Because I failed to realize my goal I set to myself 10 years ago.

13 Here, one extreme side is being self-centered; another extreme side is being too-generous.

14 *Odysseus is unique among the human beings that seems to maintain good relationship with gods.* This could be exemplified by various passages, including “[n]o other mortal has a mind like his, or offers sacrifice like him (Odysseus) to the deathless gods in heaven” (1:72–73); “[i]o bring Odysseus home. Poseidon will have to put aside his anger. He can't hold out alone against the will of all the immortals.” (1: 84–86) In contrast to other human beings, who always blame the god “Mortals! They are always blaming the gods for their troubles, when their own witlessness causes them more than they were destined for!” (1: 37–39)

would not be able to return to his native land¹⁵. Without the aid of Athena, Telemachus might not escape the suitor's ambush. Similarly, Odysseus would probably be recognized by the suitors if Athena did not disguise him as an old beggar and Penelope's contest of bow bending and arrow shooting through all twelve axes (19: 635–637) would not work (21: 330–343)¹⁶.

Odysseus was also respected by Aegyptius: "He's a fine man in my eye, and may Zeus bless him (2:34–35)", suggesting Odysseus was regarded favorably by his citizen.

On family relationship, Odysseus resisted Calypso's seduction and insisted returning home (5:205–224) and displayed extreme homesickness on the island (5:151–152). In Ithaca, Penelope also devised strategy in weaving the shroud to prevent the suitors from forcing her to re-marry (2: 105–107)¹⁷, and she broke in tears when Odysseus revealed their common secret of marriage bed (23: 184–247)¹⁸.

Therefore, both *Nicomachean Ethics* and *The Odyssey*, although focus on different kinds of relationships, both advocate the importance of relationship for a well-lived life, which offer insights to today's young people.

15 As discussed above. Zeus forced Calypso to release Odysseus.

16 Penelope's contest for suitors would not work, because the suitors would know the presence of Odysseus around them. And Eurymachus would probably rejected Penelope's saying of "[d]o you think that if this stranger [Odysseus in disguise] proves strong enough to string Odysseus's bow" (21: 331–333).

17 Despite the "*should I go with whoever the best . . . my suitors*" issue raised in class (19: 577–578). "Every day she would weave at the great loom, and every night she would unweave by torchlight" (2: 113–114). *Penelope prevented the suitors to marry her by preventing the completion of the shroud*, because "[e]ager as you are to marry me, you must wait until I finish this robe" (2: 106–107).

18 Penelope tested Odysseus on the bed, and Odysseus revealed the ways he made the bed out of olive tree. By then, Penelope believed the man is Odysseus. Penelope broke into "**tears [and] ran straight to him [Odysseus], threw her arms around him, kissed his face**" (23: 214–215), "*he wept he clung to his beloved wife*" (23: 239), and "*she would not loosen her white arms from his neck*" (23: 247). Such reaction suggested that Penelope desperately wanted his husband to return to her.

Live with a Goal and Understand Not Everything Is Under Our Control

Given Odysseus's tremendous effort paid to return to his native land, what if Penelope had already given up resisting suitor's pressure and married one among them? What if the suitors had already killed Penelope and Telemachus? Would that make Odysseus's effort in vain? Because of various mishaps that happened to Odysseus, was he an unhappy man?

Probably not! According to Aristotle, the proper function of man is an activity of soul according to rational principle and such logic was expanded into the perfection of distinctive excellence of the function of man (1098a7–18). Odysseus was a hero, and through his course back to Ithaca, he demonstrated excellence in being a warrior in various events (23: 318–353)¹⁹. As Aristotle stated, “For it is clear that if we are to be guided by fortune, we shall often have to call the same man first happy and then miserable” (1100b1–3). Therefore, because Odysseus has already accomplished what a hero should do in his life, he would be happy, regardless of the outcome.

Homer seems to be in line with Aristotle's belief that happiness is the ultimate goal of life because it is self-sufficient (1079a17–22) and is the most desirable of all things. This could be exemplified by what Penelope told Odysseus after all those miserable incidents: “*if the gods are going to grant you a happy old age, there is hope your troubles will someday be over*” (23: 293–294).

The only distinction to be drawn here is that *Aristotle* reckons happiness

19 Some examples are as follows, “how he paid him [Cyclops] back for eating his comrades” (23: 320–321); survived under “Charybdis and Scylla, whom no man had ever escaped before” (23: 337–338); “Zeus . . . slivered his ship . . . and he alone survived” (23: 340–342).

as an *internal character* that can be sought by making the right choices, whereas *Homer* seems to be more cautious and warns that happiness could be *altered by external factors*, such as the decisions of the gods.

Conclusion

Learning from *Nicomachean Ethics* and *The Odyssey*, today's young people should realize that adversities are inevitable in life, and should tackle them with appropriate attitude. Although not everything is under our control, if we live for a goal, maintain good relationships with others, and display perseverance by performing our best according to our ability, we would still attain a happy life.

I have created myself a second chance to achieve my goal of becoming a clinician-scientist²⁰. Although I may still be in the middle of the loop in my life (Figure 1B), my goal will walk me through any difficulties ahead of me. After-all, I have been always trying everything with my best to live my life well, and nothing else matters more than that.

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20 The University of Hong Kong initiated the official "Second Chance" program in 2016 (〈港大新計劃收醫科生 學歷非首要最緊要仁心〉)

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Teacher’s comment:

Li Jing Woei’s paper is a carefully integrated dialogue that juxtaposes his experiences with ideas from the classics. Without taking the thinkers as authoritative figures, he participates in their inquiries and by extension, the unfolding of achievements and struggles in human thought. In a consistent and detailed manner, he reads each idea in the light of others so that interpretations framed by his chosen focus would come through. Many of his judgements are nuanced and reflective. Taken as presenting what life-long learning looks like, Li’s paper is a good example of one of the prominent goals of general education—self-regulated learning for a free human being. (Yeung Yang)