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Existing More

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Abstract

In this article, I invite readers to think about what it really means to *taste* life. I intend this to be an opening to a broader conversation about what it means to be virtuous, to flourish collectively, and even to experience transcendence. Guiding the reader through various existential views and scenarios, I explore the potential to transform both our lives and the fabric of our shared reality. Living such a life entails far more than a mundane and restrained biological, functional existence. In short, we need not 'merely exist'; we can *exist more*.

I learned that every mortal will taste death,
but only some will taste life.

Rumi

Introduction

What does it mean to *taste* life? In the above evocative aphorism, thirteenth-century poet and Sufi mystic Rumi puts forward a new formulation of the question passed down to us from the Ancient Greeks: 'What is the good life?'

Some have suggested that there is a modern-day 'crisis of meaninglessness'. We are creatures who seek meaning in life, and its absence leads to despair and the kind of escalating mental health crisis that we are currently witnessing. Ironically, in today's fast-paced, hyper-connected society, many people find themselves isolated. They also struggle to find a sense of purpose amid the chaos of social media and similar ever-present and often intrusive technologies. This points to an existential vacuum, one in which traditional frameworks for understanding life's worth have been eroded. People fail to cultivate a sense of wonder and genuine connection to life, which can lead to profound despair.

This bleak backdrop has rekindled some interest in age-old philosophical inquiries into what it means to live well. Rather than merely addressing the symptoms of mental illness, we might need to question the very nature of human existence and fulfilment. The modern mental health crisis might be a product of a culture that fails to provide guidance in the art of cherishing life and the world around us.

Indeed, a reinvigorated commitment to exploring life's meaning could serve as a counterbalance to the darkness that modern life can introduce. The goal is then a fully actualized life, one that is marked by happiness, flourishing and inner tranquillity. Simply put, we urgently need a novel perspective on life and a rejuvenated understanding of *the good life*.

Existential Virtues

When life becomes overwhelming, people typically seek out therapy or medical care, often in the form of psychopharmaceutical drugs. But

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these problems cannot be relegated to just psychiatrists and therapists, who have, in many ways, proven inadequate to the task. At heart, the problem is *existential* – a problem related to how we exist in the world. If this is the case, then we can construe our current crisis as a call for an *existential awakening*.

An existential awakening represents a profound shift in consciousness – a moment when one begins to perceive life in its raw, unfiltered essence. We are invited to confront the inherent uncertainties of existence with courage and authenticity. We are called on to break away from the routines and societal expectations that mask our true selves. This process can engender the kind of 'tasting of life' that Rumi seemed to have in mind. Specifically, it involves engaging deeply with our emotions, our relationships and the natural world. In so doing, we can find beauty and meaning amid chaos and despair.

Key to this process are what we might call 'existential virtues'. These are active, dynamic qualities or traits – a set of inner characteristics that enable us to navigate the complexities of life with resilience and insight. They cultivate our capacity for self-reflection, openness and an enduring sense of wonder. When properly understood and employed, existential virtues help us not only to endure life's challenges but also to transform them into opportunities for personal growth and a more enriched, meaningful experience of being. We might also call existential virtues 'virtues of the heart' because they manifest in experiences such as joy, love, awe, peace, gratitude and admiration.

In this framework, how we experience and relate to both our own being and the natural world is as crucial as how we act towards others. This encourages us to scrutinize the fundamental structures of existence, including our inner lives, how we perceive our self-identity, and how we relate to the world around us. By so doing, existential virtues provide a crucial link between our external moral behaviours and our internal lived experience. This, in turn, suggests that an excellent life must harmonize ethical conduct

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with a deep, reflective understanding of what it means to *be*.

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What I have argued for above indicates an overtly holistic approach. The quality of our inner experience and our capacity for self-realization are inseparable from both our external actions and our pursuit of fulfilment (or what the Ancient Greeks called *eudaimonia*). Thus, by embracing existential virtues, we not only cultivate a richer personal identity but also create a foundation for a more integrated, meaningful life. Importantly, existential virtues enhance our ability to experience life profoundly. I call this '*existing more*': we do not just exist; we *exist more*.

Existing more – which we could also call the 'art of existence' – is the ultimate goal of the process described above. The basic idea is that by embracing and properly employing existential virtues, we can attain a state of existence that goes beyond the chaos of contemporary, distracted and frantic living. This state entails embodying a harmonious and peaceful existence, one that is filled with awe and contentment.

Along with the existential virtues, this transformation is informed by our *ontology* – our metaphysical view of the world's fundamental nature. This means that existential virtues (e.g. joy, love, peace and awe) can be cultivated by shifts in our ontological perspective. This idea is closely related to the notion of an '*existential stance*', which is our central perspective or the lens through which we engage with the world. It is a dynamic, lived perspective, one that shapes both our beliefs and our emotional responses. By adopting a particular existential stance, we choose a specific mode of engagement with the world. In other words, to expand our capacity for joy, love and reverence, we must first recognize that how we experience life is deeply shaped by the underlying metaphysical framework that we adopt. With reference to these ideas, I propose that we begin speaking of 'virtue ontology' as a subdiscipline of philosophy. To live a virtuous human existence, one must not only act well or know well but also *exist well*. Just as virtue ethics and virtue epistemology are now established fields essential for understanding ethics and knowledge, so too should virtue ontology be named and explored. At its core, it asks a basic yet profound question: *what ontology must I embrace in order to live a good life?*

Whether we see the world as fundamentally chaotic, ordered, indifferent or infused with meaning affects not only our emotions and attitudes but also our ethical choices. A person who believes that existence is random and devoid of deeper significance might be inclined to adopt an ethics of self-assertion, carving out meaning through personal will. In contrast, someone who sees the universe as a manifestation of divine love might cultivate an ethics of surrender, gratitude and devotion. Thus, some (but not all) existential stances open us to deep insights and transformative experiences. By adopting such stances, we lay the groundwork for cultivating existential virtues that enrich our lives from the inside out.

This points to the value of a spiritual or theistic outlook. If we embrace a metaphysical vision that sees existence as sacred, interconnected and divinely guided, then our ethics will naturally shift towards compassion, reverence and

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openness. As we shall see below, Sufism offers an especially compelling demonstration of this connection. This is because its ethical ideals – love, generosity and humility – are inseparable from its metaphysical foundation in a divine unity – a spiritual connectedness of all things.

Little has been written about existential virtues. The approach I have outlined above demonstrates the importance of these neglected virtues, which, when properly cultivated, enhance our ability to appreciate life's 'higher' qualities. The hope is that people will gain a transformative framework for understanding how to cultivate a more authentic, more purposeful and therefore more fulfilling life. In other words, they will learn how to *exist more*.

As intimated, this novel approach goes beyond a discussion about conventional moral virtues. It is more practical in that one can deploy actionable and effective tools that will help to nurture an inner sense of worth, resilience and, ultimately, the sort of traits exemplified in *existing more*. Such a notion of *self-worth* is key. It can equip people with strategies for reclaiming the uniquely human capacity for mysticism and deep self-awareness. As might be apparent by now, my approach has a spiritual component. In this respect, it can be thought of as part of a larger endeavour to 're-enchant' the world. In other words, it involves restoring a sense of wonder, mystery and meaning in a world that has largely lost these glorious things.

Stoics, Sufis and Existentialists

Fleshing out the general framework introduced above requires a salient historical component. In exploring the nature and merits of *existing more*, it is important to note the philosophical perspectives exemplified by Stoicism, Sufism and other important ancient traditions. This can help to bring the existential virtues of joy, self-worth, reverence and the like to the fore. In a sense, it involves building a bridge between age-old philosophical traditions and modern existential challenges. As suggested, the latter are pertinent to the current mental health crisis, specifically the existential disconnect brought about by the advent of modern technology. In particular, we can question what it means to exist as a human being in an era in which artificial intelligence (AI) is rivalling and even overtaking certain human capabilities.

Given my emphasis on *existence*, it is also important not to neglect natural science, which is, in some ways, the activity of exploring and understanding reality (i.e. what exists). However, science has limitations and it might even pose a threat if we are concerned with ethics and notions such as the self, the nature of freedom, the foundations of right and wrong, and the prospect of a meaningful life. Indeed, it is standardly accepted that the sciences' empirical methods cannot definitively inform us about these kinds of normative or non-material issues.

Empirical, scientific methodologies risk reducing the rich, multifaceted nature of human experience to mere data points and neural processes, thereby sidelining the sensitive, subjective and often ineffable qualities that have traditionally been the domain of the arts and literature. Such a reductionist approach can inadvertently marginalize the value of symbolic meaning, ethical ambiguity and aesthetic experience – all of which are essential to a full understanding of what it means to be human. Importantly, science also appears to demystify our yearning for transcendence, which is a key component of *existing more*.

It is important to mention here Jean-Paul Sartre, who famously developed *existentialism*. Existentialism foregrounds individual autonomy and the search for meaning in what appears to be a purposeless cosmos. Both Stoicism and Sufism offer ways to reconcile with existence, the former through rational mastery and the latter through ecstatic surrender. Sartre suggested a different approach. Rather than seeking harmony with a predetermined order or dissolving into divine love, his existentialism places human beings in a universe devoid of inherent meaning. Each individual must create their own purpose through radical freedom and choice. For Sartre, life, which is devoid of inherent significance, receives meaning through *our* choices and actions.

Nietzsche, in turn, spoke about 'great individuals'. These are people who embrace burdens

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and responsibilities in pursuit of a higher calling. Such a 'higher type' does not merely drift through life but actively shapes it in accordance with a grand vision. For Nietzsche, 'higher types' do not resent existence or wish for a different reality. Rather, they embrace life in its entirety, including its struggles and suffering. The concordant ability to craft oneself and one's life into a kind of unified work of art is thus supposed to be a key marker of greatness.

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Although inspiring, Sartre's and Nietzsche's existentialist visions arguably fall short under scrutiny. These visions are not reductionist in the way that 'scientific existentialism' is, but they still fail to capture much of what is nuanced, special and transcendent about *existential virtues* and therefore the pursuit and attainment of *existing more*.

Recently, so-called 'neuroexistentialists' have attempted to reduce existential angst and longing to cognitive or biological processes. However, as before, this fails to account for what is transcendent in us – specifically an openness to the spiritual dimension of the human mind. Sartre's philosophy is, in contrast, grounded in radical freedom, responsibility and a confrontation with the absurdity of existence. He rejects the idea that there is an inherent order to which we must conform and instead insists that human beings are 'condemned' to create their own essence (or self). For Sartre, there is no God, no intrinsic meaning to life and no external authority that dictates how we should live. This absence of preordained meaning can be both liberating and terrifying because it places the full weight of responsibility on the individual to create their own value and purpose.

Existential Self-love

Stoicism, with its vision of serene rationality, offers reconciliation rather than transcendence, teaching acceptance of the world as it is rather than ways to experience it more deeply. Nietzsche and Sartre grappled endlessly with existence, seeking to impose meaning through sheer will or perpetual self-definition. But what if the goal of human existence is to expand into a fuller, richer way of being rather than to struggle, endure or even master oneself? Sufism, Buddhism and Søren Kierkegaard's version of Christianity all present ways of engaging with life that go beyond resignation, struggle or detachment.

Kierkegaard was critical of institutional or hierarchical Christianity. In its place, he advocated for a radically individual, existential sort of practice. Christian living is, he said, about a personal, intimate relationship with God rather than about following doctrines or belonging to a conventional church. For Kierkegaard, such a relationship is the only way to cure despair, which he considered a 'sickness of the self'. Sufism, Buddhism and Kierkegaardian Christianity illuminate the possibility of exploring paths that do not merely confront existence but rather invite us to embrace it profoundly or even go *beyond* it. Each tradition teaches that existence is

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not necessarily a burden to be endured or conquered but rather something to be 'tasted', loved and revered. This sounds a lot like what I have referred to as *existing more*.

From this perspective, the existential virtues of joy, reverence and self-love emerge as crucial elements in our journey through life. They provide the means for expanding our experiences of life rather than simply navigating its difficulties. Although distinct in their foundations, Sufism, Buddhism and Kierkegaardian Christianity point towards a common realization: to live truly is to move beyond struggle into a deeper, more expansive or even transcendent way of being.

The notion of *self-love* (or *self-worth*) mentioned above is crucial, and it has become especially relevant in the age of AI. AI can process vast amounts of information, but it does not have the existential depth to taste life. AI systems cannot revel in joy, cultivate self-love or experience reverence. This points to a fundamental difference between intelligence and existence. A machine does not struggle with its own existence or search for meaning. Joy, self-love and reverence are not mere cognitive functions; they are deeply lived realities that require an 'I' – a *self* that perceives and reflects. If this is the case, then genuine self-awareness, existential thoughts and mystical experiences remain uniquely human.

One might then talk about 'existential self-love' or 'existential self-worth'. This is not about adhering to external standards. Rather, it is about nurturing an inner reservoir of meaning – a reservoir that affirms our unique role in the cosmic tapestry. In this sense, our worth does not come from what we produce, but rather from who or what we are: we are beings capable of experiencing the world with depth, emotion and transcendence.

Machines also do not experience the virtues of the heart (joy, reverence and self-love). These are the inner conditions that allow life to be *fully lived*; they are the very foundation of human flourishing. In short, machines do not have existential virtues and therefore cannot 'taste life', engage in the 'art of living' or *exist more*.

Sufism's Ontology of Love

Kierkegaard's Christianity challenges us to take a leap of faith – to embrace life with a passion that transcends mere rationality. Buddhism guides us through the dissolution of ego, revealing the possibility of liberation from suffering through radical awareness rather than force. Both of these views encourage us to deepen our relationship with life itself. That being said, it is Sufism that most fully embodies the ideal of *existing more*.

Sufism uniquely integrates devotion and experience, surrender and intensity, and reason and love. It insists that the very fabric of existence is already infused with divine beauty, and that our role is not to escape suffering or merely endure despair but to embrace life as an unfolding reflection of the Divine. This orientation directly nurtures existential virtues: awe emerges from perceiving the sacred in all things, joy arises from communion with divine love and gratitude flows naturally when one recognizes existence itself as a gift. It seeks not merely reconciliation with existence but also a complete immersion in beauty, teaching that to live truly is to see all things as manifestations of the Divine. This accords nicely with the goal of *existing more*. Such a goal should, moreover, appeal to, encourage and benefit a wide sector of the population. After all, many people are struggling with the existential challenges listed above, specifically challenges related to being surrounded by and engaging with products of the current technological age.

In Sufism, the ethical ideal of love is not merely a moral prescription but rather a reflection of the very nature of reality itself. If existence is ultimately an expression of divine love, then being is not a neutral, indifferent state. Instead, it is an active, relational unfolding – an unfolding that invites participation rather than mere observation. This suggests the possibility of what we might call an *ontology of love*. Here, existence is not defined by struggle, competition or mere survival, but rather by connection, longing and a deep resonance between self and world. An ontology of love further suggests that meaning is already present, waiting

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to be perceived and embraced. In this sense, existence can transform us through love.

What sets Sufism apart, and what most captivates me in this inquiry, is its teaching that existence itself is not flat or singular but unfolds in degrees of being (*marātib al-wujūd*). Human beings are not confined to a single, material layer of reality. Rather, existence opens outward and upward into multiple realms, each offering new lenses through which to relate to the world. To 'exist more' in the Sufi sense, then, is to become attuned to these different layers – to perceive reality not only in its surface immediacy but also in its hidden depth. The more one refines one's inner perception through love, awe and remembrance, the more one ascends these degrees of existence. This dynamic vision means that selfhood is not static but expansive: one can taste life in richer, more profound dimensions by awakening to these ontological layers.

As a mystical tradition, Sufism provides a framework that goes beyond the material world and invites a deeper exploration of the spiritual and transcendent realms. Here, the self is not just a rational being. It is a spiritual entity, one that seeks reunion with the source from which it arose. This view harmonizes with the central theme running through this article, which is to understand how existential virtues can enhance our experience of life (the art of living) and thereby allow us to *exist more*. Notably, Sufism contains a vision of joy, reverence and self-discovery that offers a compelling alternative to the emphasis of modern existentialist philosophy on anxiety, alienation and self-imposed burdens. Most importantly, love now takes on a central role.

It is worth reiterating here that how we see the world informs (or even determines) our ethics and therefore our degree of *existing more*. If we see the world as fundamentally chaotic and indifferent, then our ethical priorities will probably emphasize self-reliance, individual assertion and personal meaning-making in an otherwise meaningless universe. Conversely, if we view reality as intrinsically ordered, infused with meaning and even sacred, then our ethics will incline towards reverence, gratitude and participation in a larger cosmic structure.

There is also a social aspect to all of this. Insofar as existential virtues sculpt individual lives by aiding the discovery of meaning and purpose, they also prompt strong social bonds and foster compassion in light of a new-found understanding of the uniqueness and sacredness of all Creation.

According to Rumi, our attraction to worldly beauty is an underlying desire for the Divine – a yearning for beauty's real source. His words beckon us to see past mirages and reflections in discerning the Divine presence that endows superficial things with meaning. Within this framework, no entity can claim independent existence; any sense of independence is an illusion. This realization allows us to reorient our hearts and souls towards the origin of all beauty and love, thereby forging a connection to the cosmos. Importantly, this is not some sort of elitist enterprise reserved for a chosen few. Instead, every person has the potential to follow the method outlined above and thereby exist more.

Conclusion

Sufism's ontology of love offers a vision of life that moves beyond mere survival or passive resignation into a richer, more expansive mode of being. A Sufi cultivates a state of being in which love is front and centre, even in the face of adversity. The same can be said of Buddhism and Kierkegaardian Christianity. But what does this actually look like in practice? What qualities define a life that fully embraces, rather than shrinks from, existence? The answer lies in the cultivation of existential virtues. These are dispositions that do not simply regulate behaviour. In fact, they shape how we experience and engage with reality itself.

The metaphor of life as something to be tasted – to be savoured and then eaten – suggests blending a piece of the external world with oneself. It also opens up a new horizon of ideas and discourses for discussing the value of life. To taste life is to engage with it fully; it is to let life enter into oneself, to allow it to work transformatively, and to dissolve the barrier between experience and being. Put otherwise, tasting life does not merely involve passing through life or

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analysing it from a distance. Rather, it involves active participation and allowing oneself to be shaped by the experience of being.

The good life is, then, not merely about ethical conduct or rational deliberation. Rather, it is about the depth and intensity with which one exists. This implies what we might call 'mystical existentialism' – a kind of existentialism that engenders *existing more*. And, if we take this call seriously, then the pursuit of the good life is not just an intellectual endeavour. It is a lived practice. In a sense, it is living *itself*.

In sum, we should experience life not as a problem to be solved but rather as a reality to be fully inhabited. This motif will, no doubt, resonate with many readers. Endless books have been written on how one can attain a more meaningful, rewarding or happy life. My project goes a step further. Inspired by historically rich and thought-provoking Sufi motifs, it introduces practical, efficacious ways not only to navigate but also to thrive in our modern and sometimes overwhelmingly complex world.

In this sense, then, this article is intended to be an invitation – an opening to a broader conversation about what it means to be virtuous, to flourish collectively and even to experience transcendence. As we explore existential views and scenarios, we find the potential to transform both our lives and the fabric of our shared reality. Living such a life entails far more than a mundane and restrained biological, functional existence. In short, we need not 'merely exist'; we can *exist more*.

Safiye Yigit

Safiye Yigit holds a PhD in Philosophy and Education from Columbia University. She is co-editor of *The Moral Psychology of Curiosity* (Rowman & Littlefield, 2018), and her research focuses on wisdom traditions and philosophies, existential virtues, and their intersections with questions of love, selfhood and human flourishing.

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