# HOW TO MEASURE THE GOOD LIFE

*In a new book, the conservative pundit Arthur C. Brooks offers tips to "young strivers" on maximizing their daily meaning quotient.*

**By Becca Rothfeld**

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In "The Meaning of Your Life," Brooks no longer trumpets free markets, extolls entrepreneurs, or praises work as "a blessing," as he did in earlier books. Now he claims that the ambitious professionals he calls "young strivers" lead superficial and unfulfilling lives. Illustration by Pablo Amargo

The bromide has it that a liberal is a person who won't take his own side in an argument. To this we might add a corollary: there is a certain kind of conservative pundit who has never really had a side to take. A creature of think tanks and business schools, galas and morning talk shows, he is assiduous about following the fashions of the right-wing establishment—at least, as long as they do not require him to relinquish his air of noncommittal politesse. In 2003, he opined on patriotism and national security, but never too rudely. In 2010, he railed against Obamacare, but never too peevishly. Now, in 2026, the peculiarities of the moment and the spiritual extremities of Trumpism oblige him to discourse on the point of life and the nature of the good—a task for which he is remarkably ill-equipped.

No specimen of this endangered breed is more irritating or more exemplary than Arthur C. Brooks, whose new book, "The Meaning of Your Life: Finding Purpose in an Age of Emptiness" (Portfolio), strains to match the febrile mood of contemporary conservatism. On the face of it, Brooks looks like just the man for the job. In the course of a chameleonic career, he has proved himself a master of reinvention. At nineteen, he left college to play the French horn, eventually finding a position with the Barcelona Symphony Orchestra, and it was not until his late twenties that he earned a bachelor's degree. During his studies, he "fell in love" with free-market economics and decided to pursue a Ph.D. in public-policy analysis at the RAND Corporation. Later, he would frame his unconventional origin story as proof positive of the capitalist concept. "I'm a living example of the happiness vocation can bring in a flexible labor market," he wrote in the *Times,* in 2013.

The flexible labor market has been good to him indeed. In 2009, after a stint in academia, he became president of the premier center-right think tank in the United States, the American Enterprise Institute. In this capacity, he demonstrated himself adept at flattering donors and chasing fleeting trends: initially, he championed a hard-line free-market agenda—but when Mitt Romney's 2012 defeat kicked off the "reform

conservatism" movement, he quickly fell in line. By 2015, Washington *Post* columnists were describing him as the "godfather of reform conservatism," and in a best-selling book published that same year he promoted laissez-faire conservatism with a compassionate face (and basic welfare protections). "I simply don't buy the argument that Trumpism is characteristic of Tea Party supporters or conservatives in general," he wrote in early 2016. "I look at the Republican governors. . . . Many are pragmatic, serious, non-populists. I could plausibly argue that this is the future of the movement."

Rarely has a political prognostication proved so wrong. In 2016, Brooks could not even conceive of the spasms and breaches of etiquette that Trumpism would produce on an almost daily basis. How was he to navigate the brave new world that MAGA would build over the next decade? Some of his more spirited peers on the professional right, such as David Frum and Jonah Goldberg, declared themselves Never Trumpers; less honorable figures, such as Tucker Carlson, reimagined themselves as disgruntled men of the people and started dressing in plaid. Brooks, for his part, equivocated. He made some tentatively anti-MAGA gestures during the 2016 Presidential campaign, opposing Trump's anti-immigrant rhetoric and interventionist economic orientation, but he quickly lost what little remained of his nerve. He walked back his critiques, hosted Vice-President Mike Pence at A.E.I., and eventually beat a retreat from politics altogether, installing himself at the Harvard Kennedy School and the Harvard Business School, in 2019.

A bout of frantic rebranding ensued. In 2020, Brooks began writing a popular column about happiness for *The Atlantic;* by 2022, he was commanding hefty speaking fees and churning out best-sellers. The business of happiness, he discovered, was booming. And make no mistake: it was a *business*. Brooks had been experimenting with an entrepreneurial approach to self-cultivation since at least 2015, when he confessed in a *Times* op-ed that he treated his courtship with his wife "as if it were a start-up." Soon, he was urging his audience to think of themselves in similar terms. "The whole idea is that you are your own enterprise," he told them. "You are the CEO of You, Inc."

Brooks's shift toward happiness was canny, and strategically timed: well-being, once the province of philosophers, had been thoroughly usurped by podcasters, data scientists, and influencers by the time he got his hands on it. Hellenistic thinkers, such as the Stoics, had once proposed, in the words of the philosopher Martha Nussbaum, that "philosophy heals human diseases, diseases produced by false beliefs"—in other

words, that by understanding and living in accordance with our nature we could achieve *eudaemonia,* which translates roughly to "flourishing." Earlier thinkers, most famously Aristotle, had gone so far as to propose that *eudaemonia* was an inherently communal accomplishment, one that could only take root in the proper social and political context. But the social psychologists who catapulted to prominence in the early two-thousands were less interested in the richer concept of *eudaemonia* and more interested in a thinner, hollower, and vastly more individualistic enterprise of happiness, of simply feeling good. In 2006, two books by social psychologists—Daniel Gilbert's "Stumbling on Happiness" and Jonathan Haidt's "The Happiness Hypothesis"—set the latest wave of happiness studies in motion. But the written word was never the ideal medium for their particular message, and by 2026 innumerable podcasts had sprung up like mushrooms after a squall. There was "The Happiness Lab," with Dr. Laurie Santos; there was "10% Happier," with Dan Harris; and, inevitably, there was "Office Hours," with Arthur Brooks.

These days, the C.E.O. of Brooks, Inc., appears to be thriving. He has acquired a jaunty wardrobe of loud suits and colorful pocket squares, and he exudes an avuncular charisma in videos he posts on YouTube. With the brisk, competent manner of a doctor prescribing medication, he assures his audience that his six-step morning "protocol" helps him manage "the negative side" of his "affect profile," and expounds on "the science behind being good at leisure." He has so thoroughly expunged his image of any unsavory political taint that he has co-authored a self-help book, "Build the Life You Want" (2023), with Oprah—and, as he never tires of informing his readers, paid a number of visits to the Dalai Lama. As of January, 2026, he had joined CBS News as a contributor and become a columnist at the anti-woke outlet *The Free Press*. His metamorphosis into social scientist-cum-sage appears to be complete.

In "The Meaning of Your Life," he no longer trumpets free markets, extolls entrepreneurs, or praises work as "a blessing," as he did in earlier books. Now he claims that the ambitious professionals he calls "young strivers" lead superficial and unfulfilling lives. What they lack, in his view, is "the one thing that can never be simulated: *meaning*."

There are any number of prospective material explanations for the young strivers' predicament, and Brooks makes brief note of several, among them the punishing housing market and the imminent collapse of the social safety net. But calcified habits die hard, and rather than seriously entertain any of these explanations, or even clarify

why he rejects them, he turns instinctively to what he knows best—dubious social science.

To make sense of the strivers' malaise, Brooks relies on the work of Jonathan "Happiness Hypothesis" Haidt, whose 2024 best-seller, "The Anxious Generation," argued that digital natives have been addled by excessive screen time. What he adds to Haidt's account is a dash of questionable neuroscience: in his telling, "hemispheric lateralization," the phenomenon whereby cognitive functions are localized in different halves of the brain, "explains the acute crisis of meaning today." A nebulous alloy of smartphones, social media, and a lust for optimization has thrust society into a "left-brained" orientation, forcing us to adopt a hyper-practical outlook. "The modern world of technology is literally changing the way people use their brains," Brooks writes, "rendering them less and less capable of finding life's coherence, purpose, and significance."

Even though researchers have found no evidence that contemporary populations use one hemisphere of the brain any more than the other, every part of this picture is presented with slick confidence. Appeals to "the science" abound. Brooks is apt to fall back on that old assurance "studies show," even when studies conflict—or, worse, when the very studies he cites do not show what he says they do. In his book "The Conservative Heart," from 2015, for instance, he avers that monogamy yields happiness, then adds, "This isn't my moral opinion; it's what empirical evidence tells us." The "empirical evidence" in question is a study showing that subjects with a single sexual partner have an average of 0.077 additional "happiness points." But it also found that people who have sex four or more times a week, possibly with any number of partners, have 0.12, a fact that Brooks conveniently neglects to mention.

"The Meaning of Your Life" also contains its fair share of misrepresentations, as when Brooks muses that "the idea of opposites attracting might even be biological," then cites a 1995 study that subsequent researchers have called into question. But no one reading the book will come away with the sense that studies are often contested, or that many of the findings of social psychology and economics remain unsettled, or that results can be interpreted in many ways. Like much popular social science, it makes no effort to prove or even to persuade. It simply asserts and instructs.

Its tone as it does so is distinctly infantilizing. Chapters are subdivided into digestible sections ("Get Bored the Right Way," "Give More to Transcend Yourself") and often

end with homework, set aside in a little box, as in elementary-school textbooks. When Brooks is not offering "Questions for Reflection and Self-Assessment," he is laying out "Three Big Things to Remember," as if he were providing a study guide for the exam of a meaningful life. In his book "Love Your Enemies," from 2019, he admiringly cites "The 7 Habits of Highly Effective People"—which he describes, perhaps with a sense of defensive self-awareness, as a "masterpiece" that is not "just cheesy self-help." Brooks, for his part, rarely imposes on readers by asking them to count as high as seven, perhaps assuming that "three major lessons from the science of morality" and "five simple facts" make more manageable mathematical demands.

Still, Brooks's turn away from politics and toward a more therapeutic project has not been wholly unhelpful. His practical advice fares better than both his theories and his pallid attempts at profundity. In his columns, he recommends such commonsense remedies as a good night's sleep and regular exercise. "The Meaning of Your Life," in particular, contains several promising suggestions. Who would deny that we would all do better to turn off our phones, interact with other human beings, and maybe even go outside for a walk every once in a while? Brooks struggles, however, when he strays from the cozy precincts of self-help and into the rugged realm of philosophy.

If his subject has shifted, his methods have lagged. Nothing in his background has outfitted him with the intellectual equipment to grapple with our "age of emptiness," and at times he comes close to recognizing the inadequacy of his register and frame of reference. "In their technical excellence," he concedes, "strivers trivialize their humanness by reducing life's magnificent inscrutability to a series of complicated but solvable problems." How do these remarks square with Brooks's fondness for compressing expansive human goods into orderly formulas? In "The Conservative Heart," Brooks wrote of "the happiness portfolio," which consists of "faith, family, community, and meaningful work." Now the portfolio has been supplanted by a less prescriptive and more schematic "happiness equation," according to which "Happiness = Enjoyment + Satisfaction + Meaning." ("Meaning" is further subdivided into "Coherence + Purpose + Significance.") It is perhaps unsurprising that Brooks measures his body-fat percentage with calipers and keeps a dutiful record of his own happiness on a spreadsheet, assigning various elements of his life a number and then a force multiplier reflecting their importance. (How do his children feel knowing they command a mere eight out of ten importance points, but his faith and his marriage

both rate a nine?)

Readers may resent being abstracted into algebra, but they are nonetheless invited to sort themselves into one of four categories on the basis of a short quiz. They might be Hopeful Wanderers, unsure of the meaning of their lives but in active search of it, or Happy Homebodies, so sure of the meaning of their lives that they have little need to search for it. Alternatively, they might be Relentless Seekers, who have some notion of the meaning of their lives but remain in search of it anyway, or, worst of all, Lost in Place, the sort that is neither sure of the meaning of life nor in any rush to find it.

It would be one thing if Brooks were reconciled to writing Enneagram tests, but "The Meaning of Your Life" is self-help that dreams it is philosophy. It makes a scattered show of its erudition in the form of drive-by efforts to project philosophical literacy. Only the aggressive carelessness that once enabled Brooks to write a column about how to "enhance your mood" with a playlist inspired by the unremitting pessimist Arthur Schopenhauer could have yielded his tortured misreadings of Ralph Waldo Emerson, Søren Kierkegaard, and Karl Marx. Friedrich Nietzsche once declared, "The discipline of suffering, of great suffering—do you not know that only this discipline has created all enhancements of man so far?" This doesn't stop Brooks from summarizing Nietzsche's position as follows: "There is no essence to life, so the secret is to have fun and not worry too much about it."

But none of these ornamental flourishes can conceal his fundamental incuriosity. "Until recently," Brooks writes hazily, of the meaning of life, "the definition probably wasn't so important, because of the way people lived, just naturally going about life in ways that delivered meaning every day." Which people? How recently? Readers of "The Meaning of Your Life" could be forgiven for thinking that despair was invented in 2007, the year the first iPhone was released. Brooks has no interest in the broader sweep of history and, indeed, no apparent knowledge of the philosophical accounts of encroaching meaninglessness which have been on offer for centuries—the 1785 letters in which the German philosopher Friedrich Heinrich Jacobi developed the idea of nihilism to describe the etiolation that accompanied the Enlightenment, for instance, or the fin-de-siècle sociologist Max Weber's lament about how modernity shattered a formerly coherent world.

Nor is Brooks any more inquisitive about remedies for meaninglessness than he is about its origins. "The Meaning of Your Life" is the clearest possible demonstration of

the extent to which the old think-tank mode, with its conspicuous show of reasonableness and its distaste for unseemly convulsions, is incongruous with the existential questions roiling contemporary conservatives (and not just conservatives) since Trump's election in 2016. How should we live? What is the nature of the beautiful, the good, and the true? What Brooks proffers is not the philosophy these queries require but a kind of pharmacology—a pill designed to alleviate every last pang.

It is striking that, in a book that is ostensibly about meaning, nothing approaching a positive picture of meaning ever emerges. Brooks ventures no substantive defense of the practices he recommends. Instead of exhorting readers to adopt any particular belief, he presses them to refrain from the rigors and responsibilities of commitment, urging them to "refuse to participate in ideologically polarized culture." Moral and political causes seem like precisely the sorts of things that might afford a person a sense of meaning—but they provoke some measure of dishevelment, so Brooks renounces them in favor of more soothing stratagems. The logic he prefers is vulgarly instrumental. You should do things not because they are in fact valuable but because they generate meaning, which produces an enjoyable tingle. It is not because religious doctrine might be true that you ought to keep an open mind to what Brooks anemically calls "a metaphysical dimension to your life"; it is because "you will benefit."

"You will benefit" (preferably in a chemically measurable way) is this book's single promise and its overriding concern. Religion is good—because "recalling spiritual experiences lowers activity in the medial thalamus and caudate nucleus (brain regions controlling sensory and emotional processing)." Beauty is good—because psychological research outlines "well-being strategies using music or art." Suffering is good—because "a belief that happiness requires an absence of suffering undermines happiness itself." Romantic love (and, in some cases, marriage) is good—because it yields an influx of "the neurotransmitters norepinephrine and dopamine" and activates "the ventral tegmental area, nucleus accumbens, caudate nucleus, insula, dorsal anterior cingulate cortex, and dorsolateral prefrontal cortex," all of which sound alarmingly contagious.

Philosophy, too, is pummelled into profitability. It is worthwhile because a foray into the "big questions . . . stimulates numinousness," as if thinking were a hormone. What "Socrates meant when he said, 'the unexamined life is not worth living,' " Brooks

explains, is that "a life that is not deeply questioned is bereft of meaning." But surely it is relevant that Socrates and Plato asked "big questions" not because they sought to increase their daily meaning quotient but because they cared about the answers. Might it be that pursuing love and religion primarily because they induce "pleasant feelings of warmth in the chest," as one Brooks-approved psychologist puts it, prevents us from attaining them at all? If my husband told me he married me to get his ventral tegmental area thrumming, I would file for a divorce immediately.

Brooks's discomfort with those pesky "big questions" is hardly surprising. After all, he came of age during a brief period when the liberal order seemed durable and secure. The watchword was "neutrality," a doctrine according to which the state must remain ecumenical about differing conceptions of the good life. Policies were justified not with reference to morality or metaphysics but with citations of white papers. Even those who advocated for conservative positions were compelled to make their case in language amenable to the liberal sensibility. But Trump's election proved that a sizable contingent of the population had no problem imposing their values on others—and even hoped that the government might do so for them. As the reactionary pundit Sohrab Ahmari wrote in a 2019 essay that has become one of the founding documents of the so-called post-liberal movement, the aim of the state is to produce "a public square re-ordered to the common good and ultimately the Highest Good."

The think-tank set was not prepared to tackle the common good, much less the Highest. Brooks has never even had the temerity to endorse what he is nominally endorsing: he eschews all convictions, save those about what makes people feel better according to "The Science" and its henchmen, "The Studies." How convenient, then, that the things that make us feel better are all conservative staples! Brooks, Inc., may have changed its advertising, but it has not quite abandoned its old politics. Brooks is still wont to assume that social crises are a function of our personal habits, not economic or political injustice, and his methodological tics are the same as ever. Free enterprise was a moral imperative in 2013 for the same reason that falling in love is advisable in 2026: because the "empirical evidence" shows that it tends to make us happier.

What's changed in the intervening years is certainly not the ubiquity of this style of argument. (Even the other Brooks in political media, David, helps himself to this mode of justification on occasion, encouraging Americans to wed because "married people are 30 points happier than the unmarried.") What's changed is the cultural

environment in which these wan pleas ring out. The post-liberals are calling for the Highest Good, and even capitalizing it Germanically—and there goes the think-tank brigade, clinging to the forms that predominated during the liberal consensus, making a point of their neutrality and apologetically suggesting that the numbers forced them to come out in favor of Christianity. Their solution to Trumpism is to tackle the new problems, but always in the old tone.

Arthur Brooks, in particular, has made a career of elevating his noncommittal waffling into a warped kind of virtue. In "Love Your Enemies," from 2019, a book that he completed as he was on the cusp of his supposed pivot away from politics, he dismisses moral argument as futile. "You aren't going to change [anyone's] mind through the force of argument any more than I will make my wife start liking cilantro by trying to force enough of it into her mouth," he writes. Then he tells readers to "make your moral discussions with most people like the cilantro at our family dinner," that is, treat ethical disagreements as trivial. As it happens, he has chosen the textbook example of what ethics are not like. Morality is not simply a matter of taste, of chocolate or vanilla. It transcends personal preference—and getting it right matters.

"I am not going to try to convert you to my religion," Brooks writes in "The Meaning of Your Life," before regaling us with neuroscientific findings about the health of religious brains. I almost wish he had. Reading Brooks, in all his fatal mildness, I could start to see how the ominous Highest Good might come to seem so appealing. A fanatical belief in *something*—and the irrepressible urge to proselytize that goes with it—is far more invigorating than the all-encompassing blandness of the therapeutic imperative. The post-liberals stand for cruelty and inanity, but Brooks can't admit to standing for much of anything at all. ♦

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