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Why should you care about philosophy? | Meghan Sullivan

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The Veritas Forum

PART OF A SPECIAL 6-WEEK SERIES | What academic study can help you live a better life today? Medicine, Business, Anthropology, Social Science... Our guest this week, Dr. Meghan Sullivan, argues that philosophy should be on that list. Meghan is a philosophy professor at Notre Dame — she teaches the popular course, God and the Good Life, the freshman intro philosophy course — and she discusses with us four philosophical skills that can help you live a better, happier, even Good, Life. You can order Meghan and her co-author Paul's new book, *The Good Life Method*, here: <https://www.amazon.com/Good-Life-Method-Reasoning-Questions/dp/1984880306> Like what you heard? Rate and review *Beyond the Forum* on Apple Podcasts to help more people discover our episodes. And, get updates on more ideas that shape our lives by signing up for our email newsletter here: https://mailchi.mp/veritas/newslettersubscribe_pd. Thanks for listening!

Transcript

There's a famous thought experiment called the trolley problem. You may have seen it on season two of *The Good Place*. On the show, the resident philosopher Chidi described the experiment to his quote "students" who are really just other residents of *The Good Place*.

You are driving a trolley when the brakes fail, and on the track ahead of you are five workmen that you will run over. Now, you can steer to another track, but on that track, is one person you would kill instead of the five. What do you do? One of his students, Eleanor, immediately asks who the people are.

Do we know anything about the people? Like, is one of them an ex-boyfriend? Or that snooty girl from Rite Aid who is always silently judging my purchases? Chidi tells her that they are unknown hypothetical people, and Eleanor says the answer is simple. Okay, well then that's easy, I switch tracks, kill one person instead of five. But Chidi then complicates the thought experiment a bit.

Good, but there's a lot of other versions of this. Like, what if you knew one of the people?

Does that change the equation? Or what if you're not the driver? You're just a bystander. Chances are you've never faced this exact problem, and never will.

So you may be wondering, what's the point? Our guest today is Megan Sullivan. She's a moral philosopher. She says that we encounter philosophical questions like the trolley problem all the time.

I, this morning, had to make a decision about making a donation to charity. And I'd saved some money. It's the start of the new year, so I usually make charitable donations this time of year.

And I faced this decision of, should I give the money to my brother and sister-in-law who just had a baby and are struggling to pay for childcare? Should I give it to the University of Virginia, which I feel a really strong sense of obligation to because they helped educate me? Or should I buy malaria nets in Sub-Saharan Africa that I know statistically are likely to prevent one or two people from dying from preventable cases of malaria if they had access to this technology? That's a trolley problem. One way of looking at the problem is how many lives are going to be improved or saved as a result of my investment, and maybe I should maximize the results by giving it to the malaria foundation rather than my brother. And the questions don't stop there.

Then there's this interesting question of, like, how does my giving change me as a person and affect my pursuit of flourishing life? And am I allowed to weigh that at all? And if so, how? The trolley problem asks us to do a sort of cost-benefit analysis. Would you give up one life to save five? How do you make the biggest impact? But perhaps the most important question, Megan, says is whether those questions are even the right ones to ask. Perhaps there's an entirely different way of approaching these issues altogether.

There are moral objections to that way of thinking of the world, but there's also alternative morally serious ways to tackle some of these trade-off puzzles that don't require just counting up lives. You may think moral philosophy is too esoteric for you. You may think it's for people like Megan who work in ivory towers of theory, not for everyday people who have to act in the here and now reality of life.

But in this episode of the podcast, Megan wants you to ask yourself, how might my life be better if I thought and reasoned like a philosopher? This is Beyond the Forum, a podcast from the Veritas Forum and PRX that explores the ideas that shape our lives. This season, we're talking about character and virtue. I'm your host, Bethany Jenkins, and I run the media and content work at the Veritas Forum, a Christian nonprofit that hosts conversations that matter across different worldviews.

At a Veritas Forum event in 2017, Megan talked about the first time she took a philosophy course when she was an undergrad at UVA. And at first, I thought, this class

is kind of goofy. It was issues of life and death, so a really big 150-person ethics course.

What did I love? I loved it from like the second week onward. My philosophy class was the first one where, one, the teacher actually cared what I thought about the questions. So is it permissible to commit suicide? Is abortion morally permissible? She's asked some questions that matter, but I'm going to get a bad grade if I don't answer it sincerely and accurately.

And two, we're learning how to argue and I really love just ripping apart people's arguments. I mean, I have this vicious tendency when I was 17, 18 years old. And the idea that there was a class where I could just do that to other students and get rewarded for it was an amazing discovery for me.

After majoring in philosophy at UVA, Megan got her masters at Oxford, where she was also a Rhodes Scholar. Then she went to Rutgers for her PhD. Today, Megan has been teaching philosophy at Notre Dame for 11 years.

But she doesn't teach philosophy to our students how she was taught it. The way that I kind of learned about it as a graduate student was that you introduced students to these historical views and the order that they appeared. And you usually stop sometime around the end of the Enlightenment.

And students come away with a view that only dead people in Europe were ever allowed to wonder about these questions. Instead of approaching philosophy primarily through an historical lens, Megan and her co-teacher, Paul Blashko, based their philosophy course around some of the most fundamental questions to both philosophy and life. How should we live? What makes life meaningful? Aristotle famously taught this course at the Lyceum that was on happiness and the good life.

And we have his lecture notes in the form of the Nicomachean Ethics, which is one of the most important coolest books ever written in philosophy. And it deals with this question of just what is it that we're striving for in life and how should we think about whether or not we're moving closer to it or further away from it. But you get to the second chapter in Aristotle pauses at the very beginning of his lecture notes.

And he says, "We are studying this not so that we can know what virtue is, not so we can know how to define all the terms that Plato introduced and Socrates introduced, but so that we can become good. Otherwise, there's no benefit." He thought not only would it make them smarter, but it was going to make them happy and like fulfilled. Megan and Paul's course, which is called God in the Good Life, now has a whole team around it, from faculty to teaching assistants to dialogue leaders.

Students learn what the greats, like Aristotle and Plato and Descartes, had to say about how to live well. And the students reason through real world case studies were

philosophical considerations underlying major life decisions. The course was so popular at Notre Dame that Megan and Paul turned it into a book, *The Good Life Method*.

It was published by Penguin in January 2022. The book follows the arc of the class. Instead of focusing on which philosopher said what and when, Megan and Paul offer practical skills or habits to cultivate if you want to live the good life.

These four skills are strong questioning, loving attention, agency and making meaning. Let's take each in turn. The first skill that almost everybody would agree is this idea of asking philosophical questions and appreciating them.

I think one thing philosophy professors don't do a particularly great job of is really explaining what makes these questions magic. Megan makes a distinction between strong and weak questions. She says that most of our everyday questions are weak.

They're questions like what are we having for dinner or how do I get from point A to point B. They're questions that for the most part have narrowly defined sets of answers. But strong questions are different. The strong question was a question where you genuinely don't think you know the answer.

You're curious about learning something and you think what you learn might help you get closer to knowing the truth about a philosophical topic. The trolley problem raises strong questions. Like is there a moral difference between letting someone die by passively continuing on the track and killing them by actively changing course? Or are all people equally valuable? And moral philosophers like Megan often use thought experiments like the trolley problem to bring out those strong questions and uncover our hidden assumptions about what we think is important.

So the question is what should you do? And then it's a trick because then the more interesting question is why. And then you start playing with details about the people and seeing if you want to change your mind. Oh man, that one worker is your dad or has the cure for cancer or the five workers all have different organs which if we harvested after they died we could use to save the life of the president.

But it's the president and the other political party. It's like you know you try to mess with all the details. But strong questions aren't just hypotheticals.

They're questions about real life like the one Socrates asked. Socrates is going around at Athens 2,400 years ago. He's asking everybody who's willing to talk to him these questions like what is justice? What is democracy? Do we care about the right sorts of things? What is love? And Socrates is a bit of a cautionary tale for asking strong questions, Megan says.

And the caution is sometimes strong questions if you take them seriously as keys to unlock the truth, sometimes they can be so provocative that they can disrupt your life.

Or in the case of Socrates, even get you killed. The eventually gets himself killed by the Athenian government because first they think the questions are entertaining and then they realize he really wants the answers and they destabilizing their democracy so they end him.

What is there to admire in this? And we think that the beginning of trying to set philosophical goals for your life or trying to pursue a good life has that kind of philosophical way behind it means first coming to be the kind of person who understands why questions can be really powerful. The second skill to living the good life is loving attention. In their book, Megan and Paul talk about loving attention as a way to see and appreciate one another.

You may remember one of the most read New York Times articles in 2015, which wasn't a news article at all but rather a list of questions. The article was called 36 Questions That Lead to Love. And it described an exercise proven to cultivate intimacy between two people, even between two complete strangers.

I've had friends who have used this list on date nights with their significant others and I knew people who went on dates with people they met online and they could tell that they had read the article based on the questions they asked. The questions start off light. Would you like to be famous? In what way? Or what would constitute a perfect day for you? But they get increasingly serious as you go down the list.

If you were to die this evening with no opportunity to communicate with anyone, what would you most regret not having told someone? Why haven't you told them yet? Megan and Paul consider all of these questions to be strong in the strong question sense. But they also encourage loving attention by focusing on self-disclosure between two parties. They invited people not to perform acts of love, though acts of love are wonderful in their own right, but instead to share their "inner worlds," their intentions, their desires, and their unique way of thinking.

This is the key to loving attention, Megan says. To illustrate, she told me a story about her dad. My dad's like total sportsy dad.

He is not that into philosophy. We don't share a lot of like, "My whole world is theoretical." He's a very practical dad very much like, "We're going to solve this problem kind of dad." I share this story about being near the end of elementary school and being a super awkward, weird, shy kid. My parents spent most of that time when I was little trying to figure out what to do with me.

I was very much trying to figure out my own weird place in the world. We had the school competition where we had to dress up as animals and enact these skits about animals solving human problems. I had set my heart on becoming a shark, and it reflected all of the weirdness that was going out of my life when I was like nine, 10 years old.

I wanted to be vicious. I wanted to be very scary. I was definitely not presenting like a normal little girl.

My dad, who I'm sure has no clue, really did not have any clue what it was like to be in my grade school class or to be as afraid of my teachers as I was and the other kids really poured himself into trying to understand this project and worked with me on it and helped me build this really elaborate kind of disgusting, very bizarre shark costume. Meghan's dad entered into her reality without his own agenda, and that, she says, is loving attention in action. This experience of him just willing of his own free will to enter into my bizarre world and to come into it and sit in it with me and not judge it or try to control it or tell me it's stupid or tell me that I should have other desires than I have, but instead just to kind of be in carny my weird bizarre life and try to join his with it.

Loving attention is part of living the good life because the good life includes living in relationship with other people and how we relate to them matters. Do we see them as merely the means to our own ends or as extensions of who we want them to be or are we really seeing and appreciating them for who they are? And that's a really important form of love that doesn't require like having a plan for what you want to do to people but instead how you want to like pay attention to them and appreciate who they are. Hi all, this is Carly Regal, the assistant producer of Beyond the Forum.

If you're loving the podcast so far, we want to invite you to continue engaging in these important conversations by signing up for our newsletter. Each month, you'll receive thoughtful content about the ideas that shape our lives, updates from our student and faculty partners, and other Veritas news and events. You can sign up today by visiting veritas.org. Thanks for tuning in and enjoy the rest of the show.

The third skill for the good life is agency. Agency is figuring out what parts of your life you're responsible for and which parts are just things that happen to you. It's taking ownership for your actions, your responses, your motivations, and more.

To live the good life, Megan says, it's important for you to feel like you're leading your life, not just experiencing it. Agency is a really important concept in virtue ethics, really in all of ethics, and I think it's probably neglected because most of the moral paradigms we have right now ask you if you want to decide whether you made a good decision or your action is good or bad, we just look at the consequences. Like, what did you do? How many people did you hurt or how many people did you help? How much money did you make? How much money did you give away? Thinking that everything that's more really significant about your decision is something that's observable from that outside.

The trolley problem involves agency. If you pull the lever and divert the trolley to the other track, then you're actively choosing to kill the one person and save the five people. Yes, the thought experiment is complicated.

Yes, you have your reasons, but you need to own that you did make a choice. And Megan emphasizes that your motivation is key to accepting agency and responsibility. After all, when it comes to motivation, no one else can really know your motivations or intentions better than you.

Here's a simple example. You've like installed a hidden camera in my house, and you see me go home from work tonight and light a candle and place it on my table and then sit quietly in front of it. If you don't know what is going on in my head, you can't even describe what I'm doing.

Like, if you know the story that I'm telling myself, maybe I'm talking about my friend's mother who's very sick, and I'm praying. But that totally depends on the way that I'm describing to myself what this candle means and what kind of world I'm in, and why I care so much about this particular person. Knowing what's in my head, you know that this is an active prayer, but if you don't know that, you can't distinguish what I'm doing for maybe lighting it candles to set the mood for a romantic dinner or lighting a candle because I just really like fire and I think it's freaking cool, and I like watching all the colors change or lighting it candle because I want my house to smell nice.

We're often tempted to paint ourselves and our motivations in the best light. It's hard to acknowledge and own our actions and motivations when our intentions aren't always the most virtuous. It's a skill if you want to lead a moral life, and if you also want your moral decisions to be intelligible to other people to learn how to get better at giving yourself those reasons, and a lot of times we tell ourselves that we're doing one thing, but it's propaganda, you know, it's self-serving, kind of lies.

Like, I tell myself that I'm sending this email to my friend because I want to set the record straight about his views and I care about the truth, but I'm really just sending it to be me and to hurt his feelings. Like, the intentions matter quite a bit, and so one of the things we want to work on in the book is using philosophy to help you develop better intentions and not just accepting that, like, whatever story you tell yourself about why you do what you do is the truth. If you want to live the good life, then you need to be honest with yourself, especially about your own motivations and intentions.

The fourth and final skill for living the good life is making meaning. Meaning making is developing and creating space for contemplating what you've already done and trying to see how it's connected up with all of the other lives that have been hopefully lovingly connected with your own life. In the book, Meghan and Paul write about the many terrible things that might happen in your life.

Tragedy, loss of friendship, illness, and more. When these things happen, you have a choice. You can either avoid them or you can take a closer look and make meaning from them.

Making meaning allows you to process what has happened. It's an active and intentional way of reflecting on your past, making sense of it, and considering how the episodes of your life fit together in one coherent narrative. One concrete expression of making meaning is storytelling, because stories aren't just the facts of what happened.

They usually include interpretive choices. How you tell your story matters just as much as telling your story at all. At a Veritas form event, Meghan shared her own journey to make meaning in light of the attacks of 9/11.

She was a freshman at the time at UVA. Some people say those attacks were like, they're wake up and call. They realized we lived in a completely different world than they thought we lived in.

It wasn't like that for me. I didn't know anybody that lived in New York or Washington DC. For me, when the attacks happened in 2001, it was like an event happening in another country.

And I didn't really register immediately how important it was. But people at college were talking about it. It was coming up in my politics classes.

And it was kind of this constant hum of that, like, what's going on with the world? What are our lives mean? At the time, Meghan wanted to be a lawyer. And there was one strong question that she couldn't seem to shake, because she saw herself in her own story in the story of 9/11. One question that I got really stuck on, which now strikes me as a very much first-year philosophy major question.

But at the time, it seemed really profound to me. It was like, what is my life mean? And the way I thought about that question, and the way I really got stuck on it, was like, you got all these people who work in the World Trade Center, and they had the job that I wanted more than anything in the universe. They were high-paid attorneys working for these really different corporations, really important jobs.

And then one day, they just died, because some crazy people on an airplane flew it into their office building. Now, then he started encouraging me, I'm stressed, but then it started getting more serious. And I started thinking, like, what does my life mean? Someday, I'm just going to die.

They're the lives of the people I love. And I'm really close with my family. What does it mean that someday they're not going to be here? Meghan was still grappling with this question a year later, and long to be in community that could help her make sense of it.

So on the one-year anniversary of 9/11, Meghan found herself at church. And I had no idea what goes on at a daily mess, but I go there, and it's me and, like, a few old ladies and the priest. And it's a very typical weekday mess.

The readings were set long before September 11th happened. And then they did the readings, and there's lots of standing and sitting, and people are saying things that I don't, I've never heard. The better church services when I was younger, but I didn't really know, I didn't understand the energy at that point.

And there was a homily that was very brief and had absolutely nothing to do with the meaning of life, for these big philosophical, 18-year-old questions that I had. But I remember being there and thinking, like, okay, this is where I need to be looking. I've been looking at other places, and wasn't finding any kind of relief.

It wasn't confronting the real, like, sustenance that I needed to hear. It is weird as hell. And I don't really understand what's going on, but there's something that these people have that I really want and need, and I've been looking for, but I don't understand.

Two years later, during our junior year at UVA, Meghan joined the Catholic Church. But it wasn't because the church answered all of her strong questions. It was because, at least in part, Christianity helped her to make meaning of her life.

I started getting more and more interested in this, and at every step of the way, felt like, okay, this is really surprising. But I have these questions that are being met in this place, and they're not really being met in other parts of my life. And I just stepped up the way.

I was thinking, like, this is really right, and this is really helping me make sense of some things that I'm having a hard time making sense of. But it's not as simple as, okay, I'm a Christian, now everything makes sense. Meghan says that faith is cultivated as you practice it.

Religion's not some fixed thing that's foisted upon you or taken away from you. But it's something that you cultivate in various ways throughout your life, and philosophies very much in the business of helping us cultivate our affections and our desires for other people, for certain kinds of goals, and for somebody as big as God. And both she and Paul treat religion in this way in their class, God and the good life.

They're both Christians, but there is no faith requirement to take the class. And they insist that making meaning is accessible and available to people of all faiths or no faith at all. That's how we treat it in the book and in the class.

It's not meant to be like a gotchoo, like, ha-ha, you're never going to be good at giving money to charity unless you sort out the God stuff. A lot of these questions when you get into trying to think about somebody as big and complex as God, it doesn't get easier. We also try to be really honest about this with our students and in the book is like you introduce religious faith into your good life.

And some questions, faith is going to supply quick answers to, but other questions your faith is going to make the philosophy like significantly more difficult. One of those

questions that the idea of God complicates is the question of evil. The question is basically if God is all good and all powerful, then why does evil exist? And for anyone considering Christianity, this question threatens their ability to make meaning.

We suffer extraordinary losses, people that we really care for suffer. We suffer in our own lives in ways that we can't always explain. And you might think that adding God into your world answers that because he's omnipotent.

So God's going to stop the suffering because he can stop anything. But we know that that's not true. Like, my gosh, he's been here the whole time.

He's been part of all of this, but these things are still happening. And so that question, you've added somebody with the agency to stop things that we recognize as being an asymptote of the good life. To respond to this question, some people act as defense lawyers for God, coming up with justifications for why suffering isn't unfair or why it's morally permissible.

Another option is to try to make sense of God's behavior, guessing his motivations. But Meghan says there's a third option, living in the tension, not denying what suffering has happened, but also not impugning God's character. She writes in the book, quote, with God, no story that views him as a murderer could be the true one, the one that makes him intelligible to us end quote.

It's not an answer that is tied up with a red bow. It's an answer that acknowledges our finite human wisdom and God's mysterious actions in our lives. The awareness that whatever his reasons are, they're not they're not the ones that we would have thought they were.

And so that, you know, that really stops you in your tracks. Adding God into your philosophical world is going to give you a lot more to think about. And not a lot of it's going to be like producing any quicker, easy answers.

Meghan Impulse's book is called the good life method. So that begs an obvious question. How do you know this method works? One place you might look for an answer is in the lives of moral philosophers.

I mean, if anyone is going to be moral, won't it be the people who study this for a living? So I had to ask her one obvious question. How do you know this method works? There is a fantastic article by a philosopher named Eric Schifitzgable called Cheeseburger Ethics, where they basically studied the moral habits of a bunch of moral philosophers and asked this question, are moral philosophers any better or worse people than the rest of us schmucks? Like, are they kind to their parents? Do they steal from the coffee card at work? And like, just all kinds of like basic moral habits, are they willing to lie? How willing are they to lie for their own benefit? As it turns out, moral philosophers are no more

moral than the rest of us. I mean, a lot of doctors are not as healthy as the people that they treat.

So you wonder like, you know, this shouldn't be like a deal breaker, but you do wonder like, how are you an expert on this? And that's certainly a question that would be fair for me or my colleague Paul. Like, what qualifies you to be our good life coach, given that your life seems like half the time kind of a mess. But Megan points out that our expectations about what constitutes an expert may be misplaced.

Being an expert on a topic like the good life does not mean passing some theoretical test of like knowing all of the different theories, the same way your doctor knows all the different treatments for this kind of skin ailment. It also doesn't mean that you can give advice that you yourself are unwilling to follow. Instead of thinking of the good life as something to achieve, she says, "Think of it as something to try out.

Try out strong questions, loving attention, agency, and making meaning. See if it works for you, or where you might adjust." One exercise that Megan and Paul include in the book helps to exercise the skill of loving attention. It's a lot like the New York Times 36 Questions article, but they have just 10 questions.

They suggest you find a friend or a partner and take turns giving your answers. Pay close attention to your partner's answers and ask follow-up questions as they arise. I won't list all 10 here, but you could start with three and try out the loving attention skill.

Here they are. One, can you describe a time when you did something that was right, even though it came at a great personal cost? Two, in a single word, what's the thing you value more than anything else in the world? Explain. And three, if we wanted to become even better friends, what's one thing I'd have to know about you that I don't already know? Next week, we talk more about character in virtue and living the good life, but we take a new direction.

This time, we're talking about how you design your life, your career, your vocation, and your calling. Our guest is Dave Evans, Stanford professor in New York Times best-selling author of *Designing Your Life*. You won't want to miss it.

Hi again, this is Assistant Producer Carly Riegel. To end our episode, we at Beyond the Forum want to take time to say thanks to all the folks who helped us get this show together. Our first thanks goes to our guest, Dr. Megan Sullivan.

Thank you, Megan, for joining us and for your incredible book. Make sure you get yourself a copy of the Good Life Method as soon as you finish this episode. We also want to thank our production team at PRX.

Galen Beebe gave us fantastic edicts in our narration, and Jocelyn Gonzalez and Morgan Flannery made everything sound good, which is not an easy task. And of course, we

want to thank the students who host and plan these forum conversations, as well as the John Templeton Foundation and all of our donors for the generous support of our conversations. All right, that's all for this episode.

Thanks for listening to Beyond the Forum.

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