**Are the Views of Motivational Mentors and Philosophers Compatible?**

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**Abstract**

Ostensibly, philosophers and motivational mentors belong to different realms of thought and activity. It is widely assumed that philosophers belong to the "spiritual world," while motivational motivators are part of the “world of action”. The purpose of this article is to examine whether there is a connection between the advice philosophers and motivational mentors give regarding how to achieve fulfillment and happiness in life (van Tilberg and Igou 2019). Do they share common principles? If so, what are they?

In this article, we compare two motivational mentors, Brian Tracy and John C. Maxwell, with three philosophers, Søren Kierkegaard, Jean-Paul Sartre, and Lucius Annaeus Seneca. Tracy and Maxwell offer three main recommendations in their books and lectures: 1. setting goals; 2. proper use of time; 3. taking action. The two elements of setting goals and taking action are also central in the philosophies of Kierkegaard and Sartre, while Seneca emphasizes the proper use of time. The philosophers and motivational mentors examined in this article all express the idea that goals are achieved through action, precise planning, and self-improvement.

**Keywords:**

Philosophers, Motivational Mentors, Goals, Time, Action

**Introduction**

Apparent Differences between Philosophers and Motivational Mentors

There are some fundamental differences between philosophers and motivational mentors. For example, at the basis of philosophical thought is the motivation to clearly define questions, even when no empirical and/or logical technique can provide absolute answers (Berlin 1992). Philosophers are willing to address issues even if they remain unresolvable and will not lead to practical results. In contrast, motivational mentors try to identify ways to put ideas into practice. Philosophers live in the world of ideas, while mentors live in the world of action and the successful realization of goals. Philosophers strive to examine and teach about fundamental ideas and provide general explanations, without pretensions of offering perfect solutions. They avoid offering specific, practical solutions, and focus instead on general ideas and directions for action. They address the questions “why” and “what is the essence of this issue?” In contrast, motivational mentors claim that they can guide real success. They give advice about how to improve one’s life. They see themselves as teachers of practical methods, not only theoretical ideas. They address the question “how”—specifically how to achieve success.

Another prominent feature distinguishing between philosophers and mentors is their different target audiences. Philosophers address the intellectual elite, while motivational mentors address the general public. Motivational mentors address anyone willing to take responsibility for their life and to change negative personal habits. That is, they want to cause a behavioral change, not just a cognitive change in consciousness. We are not advocating one approach or criticizing the other, but rather emphasizing how these two genres address different audiences.

However, despite the apparent dichotomy between philosophers and motivational mentors, we demonstrate that the difference between them is far from absolute. Philosophers give practical advice, like motivational mentors, and motivational mentors address fundamental philosophical questions. In general, it can be said that the philosophers and motivational mentors whose ideas are discussed here relate more strongly to the present and the future than to the past. They argue that where one came from is less important than where one is going. This attention to the present and future leads to activism, whereas the preoccupation with the past creates fatalism. Emphasis on the present and the future is based on an assumption of free choice, which means that it is possible to influence and change one’s life by taking responsibility, making commitments, and taking action. This approach is optimistic and indicates a belief in the possibility of change through action (Matthiessen 2009). It does not view what exists as a given, but offers a path for change through action. Having meaning (Kenyon 2000) and purpose in life helps ease difficulties. Taking planned action towards goals, through effective self-management, enriches life and gives it meaning.

**Thesis Statement**

The thesis of this article is that the fundamental motivation of philosophers and motivational mentors is the same: to propose a method by which one can live a fuller and happier life. The philosophers and motivational mentors we discuss offer knowledge, based on logic and life experience, which can lead to a happier and more meaningful life. In general, it can be said that they offer methods based on their desire to help people achieve self-realization and guide them towards success and fulfillment within the unclear and confusing reality of human life. Their advice is not based on concepts of reward and punishment in the “next world.” Rather, their works deal with this world as it is: without illusion, but with hope.

**Literature Review**

The article is based, first and foremost, on the philosophical tradition, moves on to encompass the writings of psychologically attuned philosophers and philosophical psychologists and finally turns to motivational mentors. The studies discussed below do not include the primary literature by the philosophers and the motivational mentors, but rather analyses of their works. (For articles on Seneca see: Maizeray and Janand 2015; Trinacty 2016; literature about Sartre: Baring 2010; Spademan 1995; West 2008; literature on Kierkegaard: Berthold, 2013; Bond 2016).

Bailey and Fernando (2012: 140) note that “Frankl’s [thought] … is based on the principle that humans are primarily motivated by a search for meaning and purpose”

Frankel’s philosophy is based on the premise that people are primarily motivated by a search for meaning and purpose. The study examines the connections between various activities, such as social engagement, to the level of happiness. The article concludes with Frankl’s assertion that “…the true meaning of life is to be discovered in the world rather than within man or his own psyche, as though it were a closed system” Meaning in life is achieved through interaction with the outside world, and not only through internal investigation as if a person is a "closed system" (Frankl 2006: 110, quoted in Bailey and Fernando 2012: 150). This indicates that ideas contained in Frankl’s writings on happiness and how it relates to the meaning of life are expressed both in the works of the philosophers who preceded him and those of the motivational mentors who followed him.

Furthermore, the conceptual principle of “meaning” refers to having an appropriate attitude regarding making goals for the future. The article, “Assessing stability and change in a second-order confirmatory factor model of meaning in life” states, “A sense of meaning also involves expectations for the future or goals for which to strive…Goals help people organize their current activities and provide a conduit for focusing and implementing energies, efforts, and ambitions” That is, finding meaning in life also includes setting goals for the future, pursuing them, and ultimately reaching them. Channeling energy and effort, and properly organizing and prioritizing tasks are activities undertaken as a result of having clear goals (Krause and Hayward 2014: 241). The motivational mentors and, to a large extent, the philosophers assert that meaning in life can be achieved by setting goals and taking actions towards achieving them. In this way, life becomes fuller and more vital.

Zimbardo and Boyd (2008, p. 6) offer a new direction for referring to time based on empirical scientific research. “We want to share with you a new science and psychology of time that we developed based on personal, scholarly, and experimental investigation. Your personal attitudes toward time…have a powerful effect on all human nature…This is the first paradox … Your attitudes toward time have profound impact on your life and your world, yet you seldom recognize it” They present research that examines personal attitudes in relation to time. This psychological study shows that, paradoxically, while people’s attitudes regarding time and relationship to it have a radical and profound effect on their life, they seldom are aware of this. In their opinion, the relationship to time is a central factor shaping life, even if one does not consciously pay attention to it. Both the motivational motivators and Seneca strongly emphasize having an appropriate relationship to time.

Time management has psychological benefits: “The time management of each person for both workplace and personal activities means the management of one's own person as a whole” Managing time at work or in one’s personal life means managing the whole person (Borcoşi: 2018: 127). This article raises the idea that proper time management is central to life management. “You have to give yourself daily time to think, to plan, to dream, to create. You will effectively manage your life, time if you will regularly think about who you are, what you want, and how to act to get what you want. Think of where you are today and where you want to be in five years, for example. Analyze the activities you are involved in and determine which ones have a greater impact on your future” The recommendation is that a person should dedicate time every day to thinking, dreaming, planning, and creating. Efficient management is the result of constant thought about fundamental, internal questions: Who am I? What are my desires? How do I plan to achieve my ambitions? Where am I today? Where do I hope to be in five years? The recommendation is for people to analyze all the activities in which they participate and to assess which ones are likely to have the greatest impact on the future and which ones are likely to have less, thus enabling prioritization of activities (ibid: 128). Proper planning helps one consider how current actions affect the future. Planning and life management largely depend on determining the major goals of one’s life. “Determine what your values are, what is your purpose in life, what makes you truly happy, fulfilled, means identifying what daily activities are in harmony with the values you appreciate.”

The recommendation is that people’s daily activities be derived from their values and their answers to the fundamental questions listed above. Daily activities should be linked to personal ideals. First and foremost, people must set their own values and goals and know what makes them happy and what they find fulfilling. People derive their daily activities from the goals they set for themselves.

The articles mentioned clearly express the three ideas expressed by the motivational mentors and the philosophers: setting goals for life, appropriate and efficient management of time, and taking action.

**Goals, Time Management and Action According to the Philosophers**

As we have seen, motivational mentors offer three main recommendations for personal development: 1. setting goals; 2. the importance of time; 3. taking action. These ideas also appear in the writings of the philosophers Kierkegaard, Sartre, and Seneca.

Søren Kierkegaard (1813 –1855): Goals Related to Actions

# For the three philosophers to whom we refer, setting goals and taking action are intertwined. Kierkegaard wrote in one of his journals, “What I really need is to get clear about what I must do, not what I must know, except insofar as knowledge must precede every act. What matters is to find a purpose, to see what it really is that God wills that I shall do; the crucial thing is to find a truth which is truth for me, to find the idea for which I am willing to live and die” (Kierkegaard 1967: 24).

Kierkegaard expresses a desire to clarify the most significant thing to which he should devote his life. Kierkegaard speaks of a commitment, which constitutes his personal destiny (Bassham 2015; Berthold 2013). This is not an intellectual or objective understanding, as exists in science, math, or logic. This truth is the meaning of life or even death. Kierkegaard asks himself what he should do. That is, he wonders how he should live in a practical way, not only in the world of thought. For him, purpose and action are intertwined.

Kierkegaard’s philosophy is a multiplicity of paradoxes (Bond 2016; Radu 2012). The following is a summary of the paradox of the “self”: On the one hand, it is only when the self exists that there is freedom; that is, the self is the reason for freedom. On the other hand, the self is created through free activity prior to the self. The question arises whether the self creates freedom, or is it created from the free activity that preceded it?

“At the moment of choice, he is at the point of consummation, for his personality is consummating itself, and yet at the same moment of choice he is at the very beginning because he is choosing himself according to his freedom” (Kierkegaard 1843/1987: 251).‏ Despite the paradoxes of Kierkegaard’s thought, the foundation of his philosophy is the idea that a person’s existence begins with free choice.

Finding meaning in life is a supreme goal, and not only a means to peace of mind and reducing existential pain. As noted in an article that relates to this issue, the point is not necessarily to be cured, but rather to: “… become sick to some purpose…to seek a way of life in which we may find meaning in the midst of our afflictions” (Berthold 2013: 145). For Kierkegaard, a person’s most important task is finding the purpose of his or her life and to actively live in light of this goal. That is, one should act to identify the goal and then take the required action to achieve it.

Jean-Paul Sartre (1905-1980): Man, Purpose and Action

Sartre’s philosophy of existentialism differs somewhat from the philosophy of Kierkegaard. In Sartre’s view, a person is self-created through goal-directed actions. In the book *Existentialism is a Humanism*, Sartre claims, “Man is nothing else but that which he makes of himself. That is the first principle of existentialism” (Sartre and Mairet 1975: 3) Man is not created in advance; he becomes what he is (Baring 2010). The first step, in Sartre’s view, is for each person to take responsibility for his life and actions. Ownership is related to self-responsibility. “Man is responsible for what he is” (ibid: 3). Sartre also emphasizes the value of commitment: “What counts is the total commitment” (ibid: 10). In his opinion, each person has a potential, unspoiled future, waiting to be created. by man himself (Spademan 1995). Life, for the existentialist, is related to action. The most obvious example is that there is no love outside the act of love, meaning there is no possibility for love outside its realization. Similarly, there is no genius beyond that expressed in the creation of art. A person is a totally free creature in the absolute sense: “There is no determinism - man is free, man is freedom” (ibid: 6). Freedom, according to Sartre, is the foundation of all values (West 2008). Sartre dismisses as “cowards” those who hide their full freedom from themselves. Each person must find himself in freedom, and recognize the basic fact that nothing can save him from himself. In Sartre's opinion, man is free to act in order to find his goals, to live them, and to be responsible for them.

Lucius Annaeus Seneca (c. 4 BC – AD 65): Time Management and Life Management

Seneca is a “practical” philosopher in that his advice is not limited to theoretical ideas and intellectualism (Maizeray and Janand 2015), but relates primarily to practical questions, such as how one's life should be organized, and what character traits should be adopted, developed, and expressed in practice. He discusses how to relate to reality. One of Seneca’s most significant recommendations for a good life, found in the book *On the Happy Life*, is developing the proper attitude to time. This can cause a dramatic change in life. A proper attitude to time (Zhang, J. W., Howell, R. T., & Stolarski, M 2013) and planned and accurate use of this precious resource can change lives. According to Seneca, meaningful action in life requires a different attitude to the time given to human beings. In his opinion, laziness, going through life “asleep,” and unwilling to leave one’s comfort zone are barriers to happiness; while action creates the potential to live a happy and meaningful life (Maizeray and Janand 2015; Miller 2010; Noe 2016).

According to Seneca, many people never progress in life because they begin tasks but do not finish them. Seneca recommends completing tasks by a planned date. Thus, practical control over time can bring about a change in one’s life. In *Moral* [*Letters to Lucilius*](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Letters_to_Lucilius) (Trinacty 2016), Seneca emphasizes that time is lost due to people’s disdain for it. Seneca advocates taking one’s use of time seriously and, in this way, one’s life as well. He advocates shifting from a situation of being a “slave of time” to one of “working with time”.

In his book *On the Shortness of Life*, Seneca writes that people are chronically wasteful of time. “It is not that we have a short space of time, but that we waste much of it. Life is long enough, and it has been given in sufficiently generous measure to allow the accomplishment of the very greatest things if the whole of it is well invested” (Seneca 2004: 1). The main problem is not the short human lifespan, but rather that most people mismanage their lives. They do not properly plan the time given to them and live as if their lives are endless. As a result, their lives slip away from them (Machek 2018). According to Seneca, the most outstanding quality of a great person is not allowing time to pass without benefit. A great person takes advantage of every moment of life. In his opinion, life is worthy of living fully and actively (Kulikov 2015) in every moment, and not with the passive expectation and false hope that life will somehow live itself.

For Seneca, the main point is to dedicate time to the right thing, which in his opinion is wisdom. Only those who dedicate their time to wisdom are masters of their lives and overcome the bounded time of their lives. They center their lives around knowledge rooted in the past, which exists within them and serves them, helps them live in the present actively and effectively, and creates a connection with the future. In other words, such people break free from the chains of the number of years decreed for them and embrace a larger span of time.

**Between Philosophers and Motivational Mentors**

Brian Tracy has offered seminars for several decades, written dozens of books, and recorded hundreds of videos. John C. Maxwell is a writer, motivational speaker, and [pastor](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Pastor) who has written many books on self-help and leadership. He is world-renowned in teaching leadership and in May 2014 was named the number one leadership and management expert in the world by [*Inc. Magazine*](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Inc._Magazine) (Haden 2014). These two motivational mentors can be said to broadly represent the spectrum of motivational instruction, and for that reason examining their ideas can provide a solid basis for the comparison with philosophers.

“Goals” in Brian Tracy's Books and YouTube Videos

Tracy defines the concept of goals in his books and lectures: “Your ability to set goals is the master skill of success. Goals unlock your positive mind and release ideas and energy for goal attainment. Without goals, you simply drift and flow on the currents of life. With goals, you fly like an arrow, straight and true to your target” (Tracy 2003).

Success is first and foremost related to setting goals. Setting goals is the only way to control life rather than be controlled by it. “The great summary statement of all religions, philosophies, metaphysics, psychology and success is this: You become what you think about — most of the time” (Tracy 2003). A person expresses purpose in life through his primary thought patterns. The act of thinking about a particular idea (Tracy 2015, p. 3) can transform it into a goal. Then, goals can be fulfilled creatively, even if they seem difficult to achieve at first. “These are some of greatest stimulants of all leaders to greater creativity...first decide on your goal or objective” (Tracy 2014: 8). Before doing so, one must define what the goals are. Creative solutions, according to Tracy, come to be through what he calls “mindstorming” (Tan et al. 2019). Tracy (2014: 12) describes mindstorming as “…one of the most powerful ways ever discovered to creatively solve problems and achieve goals”. When intricate goals are well defined, they can be solved creatively through mind storming.

In Tracy’s video *Goal-Setting Advice* he outlines three tips: 1. focus on the big goal; 2. write your goals effectively; 3. structure your goals as questions (Tracy 2017). In his video *Brian Tracy’s Top 10 Rules for Success*, three out of ten recommendations relate directly to goals: find your life purpose (#3); structure your goals as questions (#5); never give up your dreams (#10) (Tracy 2016).

Brian Tracy: Setting Goals for Correct Action and Managing Time

In many of the lectures that Tracy publicizes on YouTube, he concludes: “If you want to change the future, take action and take action now.” It seems that Tracy believes that change and improvement depend on action; understanding is not enough. In order for the action to be successful, it must be directed towards a goal, with effective use of time. Tracy gives practical tools for time management (Niiya 2018). Goals must be set in order of priority. “The starting point of time management is for you to determine your goals, and then to organize your goals by priority and value,” (Tracy 2003: 7).

The triad of goals, time management, and action is clearly expressed in Tracy’s words: “to achieve all your goals and become everything you are capable of becoming, you must  get your time under control… and sense of control is only possible you practice excellence time-management skills” (Tracy 2003: 209). He adds: “The fifth question, and perhaps the best question in all of time management is this: What is the most valuable use of my time, right now?” (Tracy 2003: 221). Goal-setting and time management are embodied in action and these elements are interrelated and inseparable. Action should be taken immediately towards the goal: “Make a list of everything you can think of to do that will move you toward your goal. Take action on at least one thing immediately” (Tracy 2003: 69). Taking action creates an emotional connection to the goal and a commitment to it. Tracy also expresses the depth of connection between goals, time management, and action is in his book *Eat that Frog!,* in which he suggests a seven-step formula that can bring about significant change in people’s lives: “Decide exactly what you want; write it down (p.10); set a deadline for your goal (p.11)…; organize the list into a plan (p.11)…; take action on your plan immediately (p.12)…; resolve to do something every single day that moves you toward your major goal build this activity into your daily schedule (p.12)” (Tracy 2007). These recommendations include the three elements of setting goals, organizing time, and taking action.

Goals in John C. Maxwell's books and YouTube videos

Tracy emphasizes personal development through economic development and independence. Maxwell also deals with economic development, but he emphasizes personal development as a tool to build leadership and shape leaders. For Maxwell, a leader must operate at a higher level than what he or she is trying to teach others. “To give you an example, if your leadership rates an 8 then your effectiveness can never be greater than a 7” (Maxwell 2007: 1). In general, Maxwell believes that the foundation of leadership lies in and profound interactions with people. To lead, one needs to know well and understand the people who will follow you. In his book, *The 21 Irrefutable Laws of Leadership*, he writes: “Follow them and people will follow you” (Maxwell 2007: 267). Leaders cannot teach what they have not personally accomplished. A leader must have high personal standards, be an example to others, and allow growth and development among his followers. For Maxwell, a leader’s influence must begin with defining what he or she wants to achieve: “Before you can persuade others on any issue you need to know just exactly what it is you want to accomplish…A goal is a dream with a deadline” (Maxwell 2013: 86-87). In order for a goal not to remain a fantasy, a leader must set a clear timetable to achieve it. After building strong personal elements, a leader must direct others to realize their ideals and desires: “Appealing to higher vision is simply helping others become not only what they are capable of becoming, but what really want to become” (ibid: 95).

Maxwell sees guiding people to find their purpose as a meaningful activity. In his opinion, a person should build on his or her own positive traits: “Whenever I mentor people and help them discover their purpose, I always encourage them to start the process by discovering their strengths not exploring their shortcomings” (Maxwell 2008: 59).  In his opinion, setting a goal is the most significant factor in raising the level of life management. “Simply possessing a goal will put you in a higher league than most of your peers” (Maxwell 2001: 151).

Maxwell notes the connection between clarifying personal goals and strategic leadership: “Define your purpose. Devote some time to the strategic side of the leadership equation” (Maxwell 2008: 182). In order to achieve a goal, a leader must delegate authority in a planned and logical manner, and encourage others to take action towards the stated goals and vision. “Every leader learns to stop merely taking action to fulfil the vision and start enlisting and empower others to take action,” (ibid: 99-100). In the video *Dreams are Free, the Journey Isn’t!* Maxwell says, “Find your passion” (Maxwell 2017). In the video *Make EVERY DAY Your MASTERPIECE!* Maxwell says, “Don't live someone else’s dreams” (Maxwell 2019), encouraging people to live out their personal passions and dreams.

John C. Maxwell: Setting Goals for Correct Action and Managing Time

Maxwell notes that people cannot slow down or speed up the passage of time, but rather must act within its bounds. People can manage their use of time, and that depends on their will. Therefore, the term “time management” is an oxymoron. “Time cannot be managed…you can’t manage your time so what can you do? Manage yourself! Nothing separates successful people from unsuccessful people like how they use their time. Successful people understand that time is the most important precious commodity on earth…they continually analyze how they are using their time and ask themselves the question ‘Am I getting the best use out of my time?’ Even though most people would acknowledge that time is finite, I think the majority of them don't really understand its value” (Maxwell 2008: 115).

Effective leaders must be thrifty in how they spend time and act according to a plan: “As a leader you already have too little time. Now all you need is plan” (Maxwell 2007: 128).

Maxwell believes that time is more valuable than money; lost money can be regained, but lost time will never return, so use of this resource must be carefully calculated. “But how you spend your time is more important than how you spend your money. Money mistakes can often be corrected, but when you lose time, it’s gone forever. Your priority determines how you spend your time and time is precious. The following statements may help you to put time in perspective,” (Maxwell 2016).

Maxwell also discusses timing, by which he means setting a specific action for the most appropriate time: “You will find a pivotal moment when the right leader took the right action at the right time,” (Maxwell 2007: 238). Maxwell sees value in striving to reach the final result. According to Maxwell, action is not a value in and of itself. Action is only valuable when precisely planned and directed at achieving a goal. “Motivation comes not by activity alone, but by the desire to reach the end result” (Maxwell 1993: 123). A leader’s actions create a dynamic atmosphere of purposeful, ongoing activity. The leader’s vital inspiration leads others to begin a chain of actions and reactions. The leader’s actions are not limited to specific effects, but rather create an environment of ferment and positive activity. “The action of the leader multiplies in reaction because there are a number of followers,” (Maxwell 1993: 106). Clear goals allow a leader to orient others, to plan appropriate actions, empower, clarify, and inspire others: “A set of goals becomes a map a potential leader can follow in order to grow” (ibid: 93).

**Conclusion**

In this article, we have examined the connections between the ideas of philosophers and those of motivational mentors for achieving fulfillment and happiness in life. We show that the philosophers Kierkegaard, Sartre, and Seneca, and the motivational mentors Brian Tracy and John C. Maxwell adhere to similar basic principles: 1. setting goals; 2. proper use of time; 3. taking action. Planned action towards goals, through effective self-management, enriches life and gives it meaning. Meaning and efficiency receive their power from an almost-sacred relationship to the resource of time (Zhang, J. W., Howell, R. T., & Stolarski, M. 2013). Philosophers and mentors point out potential obstacles in life and how to deal with them. They offer a method for leading a meaningful life in this world, without basing their ideas and advice on God, or reward in the “next world”, and thus they differ from the exhortations regarding the true life and happiness found in various religions.

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