

Labeling the Summum Bonum for Business Students

Kieran Mathieson

School of Business Administration
Oakland University
Rochester, Michigan 48309
U.S.A.

mathieso@oakland.edu

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Abstract

The most basic question in ethics is that of the *summum bonum*, the final end, the ultimate purpose of action. If instructors want to introduce the *summum bonum* to business students, how do they do it? Discussions of standard philosophical terms like "the purpose of life" might be resisted by students, if they think the terms are inappropriate for business courses. This study examined whether the term "personal success" would be acceptable. A survey of undergraduate business students found that on average they thought about the *summum bonum* more than expected. The data also showed that students deemed standard philosophical terms inappropriate for a business class. "Personal success" was judged appropriate, though not as much as pure business terms like "strategy" or "leadership." Analysis also suggested that thinking about ethics and the *summum bonum* was not driven entirely by interest in religion or spirituality. Implications of the results for business ethics education are discussed.

Keywords: ethics, survey, university, labels, purpose, meaning, religion, spirituality

Enron, WorldCom, Andersen, NBC - these are a few of the companies involved in recent scandals (Aronson, 2002; Forbes, 2004; Rossiter and Thomson, 2004; York, 2004). The moral failures of business executives, auditors, stock analysts, and others harm employees, customers, investors, and, arguably, all of society.

University business schools have a responsibility to address these issues through their curriculum. There is little evidence that they are succeeding. In fact, business schools are not even successful in promoting ethical behavior in their own domain, given that business students are particularly prone to cheating (McCabe, 2005).

There are various approaches to business ethics education, including single courses, integrating ethics throughout the curriculum, and creating honorable business schools (Trevino and McCabe, 1994). However, business schools have limited control over students, who receive messages about business and ethics from friends, coworkers, parents, the media, and so on. Students develop their own ideas about what content is appropriate in business courses. This could be a barrier to ethics education. If students are motivated by materialist concerns and think that ethics is an "optional extra," they may reject ethics discussions.

The most basic question in ethics is that of the *summum bonum*, the final end, the fundamental purpose of action in life. Ultimately, this underlies every ethical theory, and, in principle, every considered ethical judgment. Epicurus believed the *summum bonum* was pleasure. Aristotle thought it was happiness. Aquinas wrote that it was to live in God's grace. Nietzsche decided there was no *summum bonum*, at least not in any objective sense. Not considering the *summum bonum* leaves ethics unanchored at its core, and may limit the value of business ethics education. Further, not asking students to

confront the question at all makes a university degree less distinguishable from a trade school certificate.

If instructors want to introduce the *summum bonum* to business students, how do they do it? Will students think that discussions of "purpose" and "meaning" have a place in business courses? If not, are there related concepts students find acceptable in the context of business courses?

One candidate is the concept of "personal success." The word "success" often appears in business. There are successful marketing campaigns, success stories, and secrets to success. Success is usually defined in materialist terms, of course. However, discussing "personal success" seems to lead naturally to less materialistic ideas. Instructors don't need to force the issue. Ask students to talk about personal success, and they may drift towards the *summum bonum* themselves. "Personal success" seems to have both business and philosophical connotations.

This paper reports on an empirical study designed to:

1. Find out whether students already think about the *summum bonum*.
2. Examine students' views of the appropriateness of the *summum bonum* in business classes.
3. Test whether the term "personal success" was more acceptable than standard philosophical terms.
4. Test whether the term "personal success" was as acceptable as standard business terms.

Some other variables were examined to see if they affected beliefs about concept appropriateness, namely religiousness, spirituality, and ethicality.

Method

Subjects

The subjects were undergraduate business majors taking a required course in management information systems at Oakland University (OU). OU is a public school with more than 17,000 students, located in Rochester, Michigan, USA. Most are commuter students.

There were 62 women and 53 men in the sample, for a total of 115 participants. Their average age was 22.4 years. The subjects were volunteers, who received course credit by participating in the study. If they chose not to participate, they could earn the same credit by completing an alternative exercise.

Measures

The data was gathered using a Web application developed for the purpose. The measures used fine-grained Likert (FGL) scales. Coarse-grained scales force respondents to choose between a few anchor points, usually five or seven. FGL scales let subjects select values between the anchor points. The sample scale in Figure 1 has over 100 different values. Mathieson and Doane (2005) have shown that analyses of data gathered using FGL scales are more statistically powerful than analyses of data gathered using coarse-grained scales.

Seeking Meaning

The following items measured the extent to which participants believed they thought about purpose:

1. I think about the purpose of my life more than most students.
2. I think about the reason for my existence more than most students.
3. Compared to most students, I am more interested in figuring out what I should do with my life.
4. Compared to other students, I spend more time thinking about how I can live a life that matters.
5. I am more interested in working out my life's direction than most students.

All responses used the 7-point FGL scale shown in Figure 1. Cronbach's alpha for the scale was 0.95.

Appropriateness

These items measured appropriateness of a term in a business course:

1. I wouldn't object to the topic "<term>" being in a business class.
2. Having the topic "<term>" in a business class would be OK with me.
3. I wouldn't be against having "<term>" as a topic in a business class.
4. It wouldn't bother me if the topic "<term>" was in a business class.

<term> was replaced with business strategy, successful leadership, your life's meaning, your life's purpose, and personal success. This yielded five different instruments of four items each. All responses used the 7-point FGL scale shown in Figure 1. Table 1 shows Cronbach's alpha for all five instruments. All of the values are acceptable, although the value for strategy is at the lower end of the acceptability range.

Religiousness

These items measured religiousness:

1. I am more religious than most students.
2. God is more important to me than to most students.
3. I have a stronger relationship with my creator than most students do.
4. I respect God more than most students.

All responses used the 7-point FGL scale shown in Figure 1. Cronbach's alpha for the scale was 0.95.

Spirituality

These items measured spirituality:

1. I am more spiritual than most students.
2. Spirituality is more important in my life than it is for most students.
3. Compared to most students, I am more drawn to the spiritual aspects of life.
4. I care more about spiritual life than most students.

All responses used the 7-point FGL scale shown in Figure 1. Cronbach's alpha for the scale was 0.68. Further analysis showed that the last item was negatively correlated with the others. The reason for this is not clear. Removing it increased the alpha of the remaining items to 0.97. The three-item scale was used for all subsequent analysis.

Ethicality

These items measured self-judged ethicality:

1. Other students cheat more than I do.
2. I am more honest than most students.
3. Most students "bend the truth" more than I do.
4. I keep my promises more than most students.
5. I am more ethical than most students.

All responses used the 7-point FGL scale shown in Figure 1. Cronbach's alpha for the scale was 0.92.

Results

The study's first goal was to find out whether students think about the *summum bonum*. Table 2 shows descriptive statistics. The mean for seeking meaning is 4.8, above the midpoint of the scale. Figure 2 shows the frequency distribution. The distribution is centered to the right of the middle of the scale. In fact, only 31% of the participants rated themselves at or below the midpoint of the scale. Two in three participants thought they sought meaning more than most students. The results suggest that these business students believe they do think about the *summum bonum*.

The study's second goal was to examine students' views of the appropriateness of the *summum bonum* in business classes. Table 2 shows that the means for the business terms (strategy and leadership) are much higher than the means for the philosophy terms (meaning and purpose). Paired t tests yielded p values less than 0.001. The means for the philosophical terms are less than the midpoint of the range, suggesting that, overall, participants judged the terms as inappropriate.

What was unexpected was the number of participants who rated the philosophical terms as appropriate. The percentage of participants selecting a point above the midpoint of the scale was 30.7% for meaning and 32.8% for purpose. Overall, although most students do not think that the *summum bonum* has a place in business classes, a substantial minority do.

The third goal was to test whether the term "personal success" was more acceptable than standard philosophical terms. Table 2 shows that the mean for personal success was substantially higher than the means of the philosophical terms. The differences are highly statistically significant. With respect to the fourth goal, to test whether the term "personal success" was as acceptable as standard business terms, the answer is "no." The means for strategy and leadership are significantly higher than that for personal success. However, the mean for personal success is above the mid point of the scale by slightly more than one standard deviation. Only 12.3% of the participants thought the topic inappropriate for a business class (i.e., selected a value below the midpoint of the agree/disagree scale). Overall, the term personal success is seen as an appropriate topic for a business class.

Table 3 presents correlations. Notice that the pure business terms (strategy and leadership) are correlated with each other, and the pure philosophical terms (meaning and purpose) are correlated with each other. There are no correlations between the business and philosophical terms. Personal success is correlated with all of the business and philosophical terms. It seems to sit between the two, having something in common with both.

Table 3 also shows correlations between other variables. Seeking meaning (the extent to which a student says he or she seeks meaning) is correlated with religiousness, spirituality, and ethicality. Religiousness and spirituality are highly correlated with each other. They are also correlated with seeking meaning though less so. Do they represent separate effects? That is, is seeking meaning entirely accounted for by religiousness and spirituality, or is there another component?

Regressing religiousness and spirituality on seeking meaning yields an adjusted R^2 of 0.29. Adding ethicality increased adjusted R^2 to 0.41, a large additional effect (in both analyses, multicollinearity makes the regression weights unreliable, but proportion of variance explained is not affected). This suggests that interest in the *summum bonum* is not driven entirely by religion and spirituality.

Discussion

The results mostly confirmed expectations. Students thought that the *summum bonum* was not a suitable topic for a business class when cast in standard philosophical terms. However, when given a business flavor with the term "personal success," the topic was acceptable.

A surprise in the data was that about one third of the business students said that they thought about the *summum bonum* more than other students, and that it was an appropriate topic for a business class, even when cast in standard philosophical terms. This is an important result. Instructors could use this significant minority to drive discussion of the nonmaterial aspects of personal success. It seems that the seed is already there, ready for cultivation.

Another interesting result was that interest in the *summum bonum* is not driven entirely by religion and spirituality. Students who are not religious or spiritual can still perceive themselves as ethical, and be interested in the *summum bonum*.

This study has limitations, of course. It was done at a single university in the United States. Most students are not residential. There are no attempts to encourage broad philosophical discussion at this university. The results may be different at schools with different orientations. Second, most students had probably not experienced discussion of the *summum bonum* in their formal education. That was not in this study's brief; only initial opinions were considered. It would be useful to confirm their opinions after some experience. Third, terms like "life's purpose" no doubt represents different things to different students. Future work might examine what those different meanings are.

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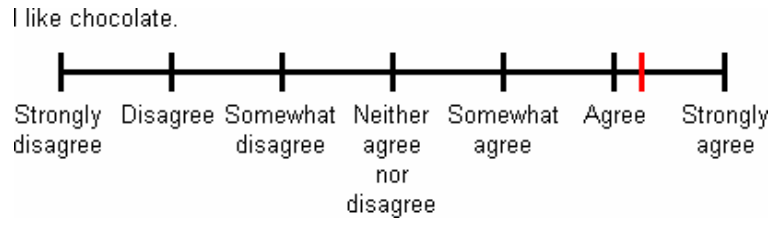


Figure 1. Fine Grained Likert Item

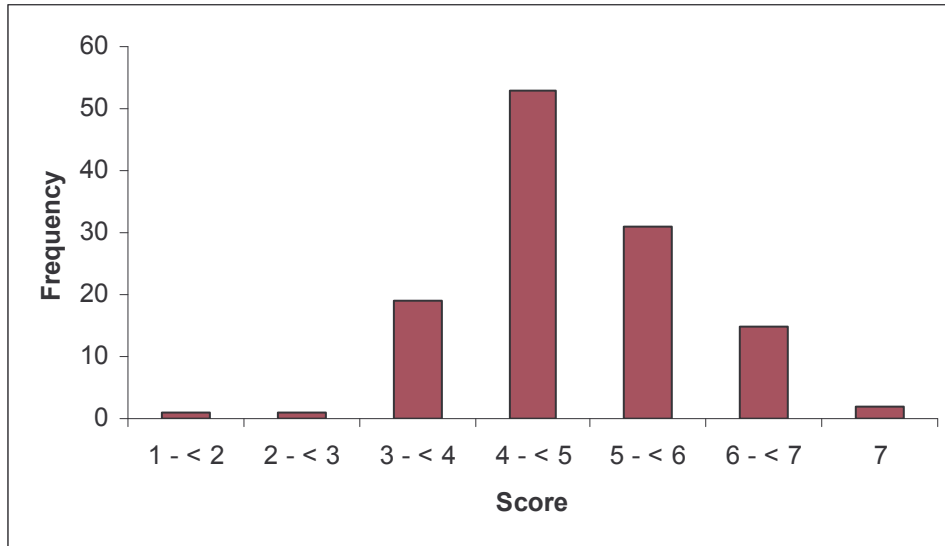


Figure 2. Frequency for Seeking Meaning

Instrument	Alpha
Business strategy	0.80
Your life's meaning	0.97
Successful leadership	0.94
Your life's purpose	0.99
Personal success	0.99

Table 1. Cronbach's Alpha for Appropriateness Scales

Variable	Mean	Std Dev
Seeking Meaning	4.8	1.0
Appropriateness		
Strategy	6.0	0.7
Leadership	6.1	0.7
Meaning	3.4	1.5
Purpose	3.3	1.5
Success	5.3	1.2
Religiousness	4.1	1.5
Spirituality	3.9	1.3
Ethicality	5.2	1.0

Table 2. Descriptive Statistics

	Seeking Meaning	Strategy	Leadership	Meaning	Purpose	Success	Religious	Spirituality	Ethicality
Seeking Meaning		-0.06 (0.52)	0.00 (0.97)	0.07 (0.47)	0.14 (0.13)	-0.01 (0.94)	0.56 (<0.0001)	0.53 (<0.0001)	0.47 (<0.0001)
Strategy			0.59 (<0.0001)	0.00 (0.98)	-0.03 (0.73)	0.22 (0.02)	-0.10 (0.26)	-0.07 (0.41)	0.00 (0.99)
Leadership				0.13 (0.15)	0.08 (0.37)	0.33 (<0.001)	-0.05 (0.55)	-0.03 (0.72)	0.09 (0.34)
Meaning					0.90 (<0.0001)	0.37 (<0.0001)	0.13 (0.14)	-0.03 (0.85)	0.15 (0.09)
Purpose						0.43 (<0.0001)	0.18 0.05	0.08 (0.41)	0.23 (0.01)
Success							0.05 (0.62)	0.03 (0.70)	0.22 (0.02)
Religious								0.87 (<0.0001)	0.19 (0.04)
Spirituality									0.19 (0.04)

Table 3. Correlations