

## CQ REVIEW

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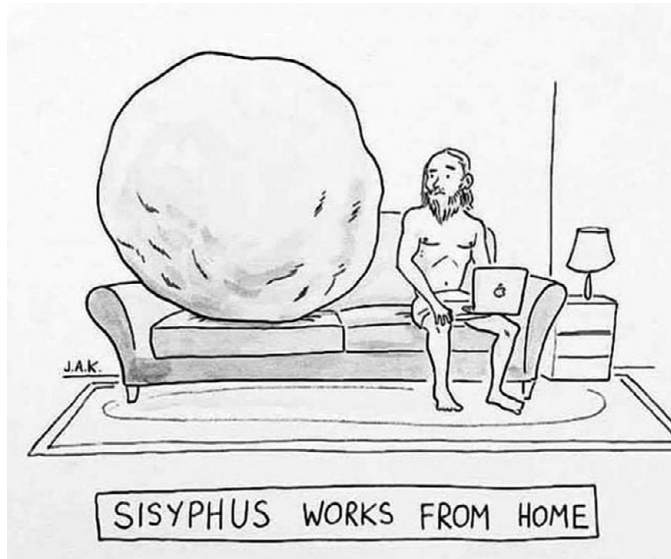
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**Midlife: A Philosophical Guide** by Kieran Setiya, Princeton University Press, 2017.

For most of its history, philosophy was not sharply distinguished from self-help. Think of the Stoics and the Epicureans, to take two obvious examples. Nowadays, philosophy by professional philosophers as self-help is, to say the least, rare. This is not to denigrate what philosophers do but to note the relative absence of something else they might do that could be beneficial. In this context, Kieran Setiya's *Midlife: A Philosophical Guide* is a breath of fresh air. Setiya tackles the midlife crisis with a host of new ideas and unapologetically describes the book as a "self-help book." Millions of people suffer from what they consider midlife crises every year, and the topic could not be more timely. The pandemic and associated lockdowns have left us alone with our thoughts, which prove to be fertile ground for existential despair. That combined with the inevitably much more repetitive shape of our daily lives under lockdown is enough to produce considerable solidarity with Sisyphus.

Setiya puts his project in the context of the famous "U-shaped" theory of well-being, according to which our well-being tends to be worst at midlife but then picks up again, perhaps as we adjust our expectations (read: adaptive preferences). Our lives are apparently at its worst at the age of 46. Setiya notes that there have been some replication problems with the studies supporting the U-shaped theory, but generally works within its parameters. The aim of *Midlife* is to help those "in the depths of the U-curve." The book begins with a focus on how the sense that life is just too demanding can drive some midlife crises. It then moves on to the perhaps deeper and more intractable sense of loss that comes with aging as one forecloses more and more possible alternatives, and has interesting things to say about how to learn to live with this ("options are overrated and...there is something good about missing out"). He then discusses how awareness of our mortality feeds the midlife crisis before pivoting to how there is a sense of repetition and exhaustion associated with the series of projects that make up one's life. Finally, he offers a positive proposal for mitigating at least some elements of the midlife crisis: live in the present. It is this positive proposal on which I will focus in this short critical note.

Setiya's argument for living in the present draws heavily on what we might call Schopenhauer's Dilemma. Schopenhauer (in)famously argued that our lives are inherently miserable because they are driven by desires that are either unsatisfied, making us miserable because we do not have what we want, or satisfied, which leaves us feeling bored and unfulfilled, having lost the activity of striving that gave us direction. Setiya argues that, although Schopenhauer's conclusions are exaggerated, his dilemma contains a fundamental insight. As Setiya puts it, there is a sense in which our engagement with value is "self-destructive," in that the way in which you relate to activities you value is to "complete them and so expel them from your life." Of course, we can take satisfaction in completing a project, but once the champagne is finished and the excitement wears off, we will need to find something new to do with ourselves. Eventually, this feeds into one of the syndromes of the midlife crisis, one so well summed up by



Peggy Lee’s classic song “Is that all there is?” Setiya illustrates this well with his discussion of John Stuart Mill’s nervous breakdown in chapter 2, driven by Mill’s realization that the achievement of all his life’s goals (themselves oriented around maximizing human happiness) would leave him feeling empty. Indeed, Setiya’s eloquent testimony about his own personal experiences is evocative on this score:

...I turned 40, a tenured professor with a wife and child, two books, and twenty-odd articles in print. I love the profession of philosophy, but not with the fire I had ten years ago. The novelty of accomplishment is gone: first publication, first lecture, first day of class. I will finish the paper I am writing; it will eventually be published; and I will write another. I will teach these students; they will graduate and move on; I will teach more. The future is a tunnel of glass: the rest of life goes by, in its variety, elsewhere...I feel the finitude of life: the years are numbered; time is moving fast.

All is not lost, though! Setiya offers a diagnosis and a cure for this disease. He draws a distinction also found in Aristotle between activities that are “telic” and those which are “atelic.” Telic activities “aim at terminal states, at which they are finished and thus exhausted.” Atelic activities “do not aim at a point of termination or exhaustion, a final state at which they have been achieved.” Walking home is telic, because it has a terminal end (your being home), whereas simply walking is atelic. A complication here is that telic activities characteristically have atelic counterparts. Writing a philosophy book is telic, but writing and thinking about philosophy is atelic. Setiya recommends that we navigate between the horns of Schopenhauer’s Dilemma by shifting from telic activities to atelic activities. This is because atelic activities are “inexhaustible” in that your involvement with them does not destroy them and because they are “fully realized in the present, not directed to a future in which they are achieved in the past.” It is in this sense that we are to live “in the moment:” by engaging in atelic activities. He gives parenting as another example, which he claims is not a project which aims at a terminal state. Rather it is “complete at every instant; it is a process, not a project.” Because the activity is complete at every moment, we do not feel deprived in the way the first horn of Schopenhauer’s Dilemma implies, but because they are inexhaustible, we never “finish” them and so never feel empty or bored by them either. It is easier to live in the moment with atelic activities. The tendency to be entirely absorbed in telic activity makes it difficult to appreciate the beauty of the process. We must therefore “overcome the pull of the telic orientation,” if we are to avoid Schopenhauer’s Dilemma.

In some respects, parenting is a peculiar example for Setiya’s purposes. Although parenting has no terminal goal such that you achieve it and then say, “There, I’ve finished parenting—next challenge!” it is

made up largely of a series of telic activities. Get your kid to brush his teeth, comfort your child where this has as its *telos* that the child's feeling comforted, get your kid to do her homework or clean her room, and so forth. And these activities can be repetitive and tedious. Moreover, the practice of parenting as a whole, while not technically having a terminal goal, does typically undergo massive transformation when your children go out into the world. At this point, your children typically are far less a part of your daily life and "empty nest syndrome" can make many people feel empty and unfulfilled, not knowing what to do with themselves in much the way that the second horn of Schopenhauer's Dilemma indicates. Indeed, it is hard to think of a clearer case than parenting of engaging with a value to expel it from your life! You literally spend 18 years of your life working very hard to make sure your child is ready to leave the home and (typically) become far less a part of your daily life.

Somewhat surprisingly, Setiya's proposed solution can be undermined by some ideas from the philosophy of play and games, or so I am going to argue. The first problem can be illustrated by Bernard Suits' distinction between what he calls "Open Games" and "Closed Games."<sup>1</sup> In his masterpiece, *The Grasshopper*, Suits argues that all games by definition have constitutive goals. But some goals, like checkmate, are such that when you achieve the goal that also ends the game. Games with goal-ending goals are Closed Games. Not all games are like that. What Suits calls "Endless Ping-Pong," where the goal is simply to keep the ball in play (through normal means of volleying) as long as possible do not have a game-ending goal. The game ends only when you fail to achieve the goal (keep the ball in play) and the volley ends. Suits thinks children's make-believe games, like "Cops and Robbers" are Open Games too, where the goal is to keep the story going without using a script but relying on your own spontaneous imagination (to my mind, a more plausible goal of many such games is to tell a *good* story, but that is tangential in this context). Endless Ping-Pong is, according to Setiya's definition, atelic because it does not aim at a final state at which it has been achieved. However, Endless Ping-Pong quite clearly is not inexhaustible in the needed sense. Eventually, through fatigue, one of the players will fail to return the ball and that will end the game. Of course, you can always play another game, but that is true of Closed Games, like chess, which are clearly telic in Setiya's sense, so *that* cannot be enough for inexhaustibility in the needed sense, or we would not need to shift to atelic activities to find inexhaustibility. Recall that the prospect of simply writing yet another article, or teaching yet another class, was what drove Setiya's own midlife crisis, so that sort of inexhaustibility seems not to be its remedy.

Another game that lacks a game-ending goal is *Twister*, which leads me to the second idea from the philosophy of play and games I want to use to put pressure on Setiya's view. Here I have in mind Thi Nguyen's concept of "Striving Play," which he illustrates via the idea of "Stupid Games" (a technical term), and *Twister* is a prime example of a Stupid Game.<sup>2</sup> Stupid games are (1) fun only if you try to win, but (2) the best is when you fail. *Twister* is a Stupid Game because the fun part is when someone fails and everyone collapses in a heap, but the game works only if everyone tries not to fail. Under the heading of "stupid games" we also find many drinking games, and Nguyen's very memorable example of *Bag on Your Head*. In *Bag on Your Head*, everybody puts a brown paper grocery bag on their head and then tries to take the bags off other people's heads while stumbling blindly around the room. Once the bag is taken off your own head you are eliminated. Eventually, there is only one person stumbling blindly around the room with a bag on her head while everyone else watches, trying to suppress laughter. That last person is the winner, but the best part of the game is getting to watch that person stumble about, so the real value of the game is found in losing. Nonetheless, the game only works if everyone tries to win. What stupid games demonstrate is that it is possible to play a game without seeing any value in winning: this is Striving Play.

In Striving Play, you adopt a temporary and "disposable end," where you do not actually think the end itself is valuable *at all*. In fact, as in *Twister* and *Bag on Your Head*, you think losing is the best part of the game. However, you must genuinely adopt and pursue the game's constitutive end or the activity of pursuing it, and hence the fun of failure, would not be possible. Here we find a reversal of ends and means. Normally we adopt the means to achieve the end, but in Striving Play we adopt an end only because it allows us to engage in the means. Nguyen's concept of Striving Play has its roots in Suits' idea of "reverse English," where ends and means are reversed in just this sense. Suits gives the nice example of Kierkegaard's seducer, who does not actually value or enjoy having sex with the women he seduces. For

him, the real value is “in the chase,” the activity of pursuing the women he seduces. Not very admirable, but it illustrates the possibility of Striving Play—or, in Suits’ terminology, reverse English. It is perhaps worth noting that not only Setiya, but some of his critics have also overlooked the possibility of Striving Play. Here, for example, is Antti Kauppinen in his critical discussion of Setiya insisting that to engage in an activity in pursuit of some end you must see that end as valuable:

To engage in philosophizing for the sake of philosophizing, a valuable atelic activity, you must take the problem you are trying to solve seriously, which means you can’t simultaneously think that it is a matter of indifference whether you realize your aim of solving the problem.<sup>3</sup>

Striving Play is a direct counter-example to this ancient doctrine of the “guise of the good,” a point discussed at greater length in Ridge and Nguyen forthcoming and Ridge 2021.<sup>4,5</sup>

How does this bear on Setiya’s proposal that we resolve our midlife crisis by shifting into atelic activities? Perhaps this is already obvious, but it at least demonstrates that his solution is not *necessary*; that is, we can instead engage in Striving Play. Striving Play can still be *telic*, and it can even have goals which, when achieved, end the activity. With Open Games, like *Twister*, there is no game-ending goal, but Nguyen argues that we can engage in Striving Play even for competitive games like chess or *Settlers of Catan*. We just have to play those competitive games with the right attitude—an attitude that recognizes, at least in our reflective moments, that achieving the game’s end is not what really matters. To invoke an overused cliché, it is the journey, not the destination that matters. Still, to play such games properly, we must aim at their ends and pursue them in earnest. If this is right, we can achieve the advantages that Setiya associates exclusively with atelic activities by engaging in Striving Play. We will still focus on the process and evade Schopenhauer’s Dilemma, but we can do so while still engaging in highly telic activities.

One might object that many of the goals we might adopt for telic activities are too obviously valuable for us to adopt this orientation. Curing cancer or writing a stunning novel, for example. In those cases, Striving Play might seem impossible because you do value the end—it is not merely a round of *Twister*. But we can distinguish *pure* Striving Play, where you take the end to have no value, from *impure* Striving Play, where you value the end but adopt the end at least *in part* because of the value of the activity. This might still lead to Schopenhauer’s Dilemma to some extent, but I argue elsewhere that some of these issues can be resolved by adopting a more Stoical attitude to the ends of your impure Striving Play.<sup>6</sup> In particular, you can and should treat them as what the Stoics call “preferred indifferents”—goods that you relish if you achieve them, but such that you do not become attached to them or dependent on them for your happiness because you recognize that their achievement is not entirely under your control.

Not only is Striving Play an alternative to “going atelic,” it arguably is a superior one, at least for some people—there need be no “one size fits all” approach here. Myself, I would find purely atelic activities very *boring*. For people who enjoy activities that bring with them drama and excitement and the possibility of improvement over time, and achievement, the shift to a purely atelic lifestyle may seem drab and unsatisfying. Furthermore, there is a kind of beauty in Striving Play that cannot be found in atelic activities. This is, in fact, one of Nguyen’s main points. His book is entitled *Games: Agency as Art* for a reason. He argues that there is a distinctive aesthetic value to be found in relishing your own agency *in the pursuit of an end*, where there is a perfect fit between your action and the end (Nguyen calls this “harmony of solution”). When you find just the right move in a chess position to skewer the opponent’s queen to his king, there is a beauty that can be appreciated only relative to the goal of the game. At a higher level, there is also the beauty of a game that is perfectly matched to the player’s ability, so that winning remains challenging but not impossible, but an appreciation of which very much requires an awareness of the goal being sought. Pace Setiya, absorption in projects does not threaten to obscure the beauty of the process; indeed, it is a kind of beauty that can be appreciated only relative to the activity’s telos. Atelic orientation of the sort Setiya recommends would ironically close off an entire domain of beauty. Finally, this sort of beauty plausibly is *exactly* what we need to deal with some of the existential anxieties that arise out of sense that we do not “fit” into the world. To quote Nguyen, the harmony between your capacities and the world found in good Striving Play is “something of a balm to the perpetual sense of friction between ourselves and the world.”

Consider again Setiya's description of turning 40. He still loved philosophy but not with the "fire" he did when he was younger. His proposed solution is to focus on the atelic aspects of doing philosophy. That is one approach, but it misses out on certain goods. He could instead treat doing philosophy as a striving game, albeit one whose end is also valuable. Heeding the lessons of Stoicism, he should not become "attached" to the ends he sets himself when doing philosophy. Perhaps, in the end, he will never solve the Liar's Paradox (or whatever); that is not entirely up to him. However, he can recognize that this goal and indeed the smaller goals that may be intermediate steps to this larger goal are worth pursuing as "preferred indifferents." He can then at the same time recognize that setting himself this end enables him to engage in an activity that itself has intrinsic value. He can appreciate the beauty of an argument that is perfectly suited to the conclusion he needs to reach—its elegance, its symmetry with analogous arguments in other areas of philosophy whose relevance others have not yet spotted, the way in which each of its premises seems undeniable yet when conjoined are so powerful. All of these elements of beauty can be properly appreciated only against the background of the end he is trying to achieve though—that is, give a good argument for his intended conclusion. If all of this is done as Stoical impure Striving Play, then it can be achieved without the pitfalls of telic activities which worry Setiya. Admittedly, this may not rekindle the "fire" he had for philosophy in his youth. However, that may be too much to demand and not something that simply "going atelic" can deliver either. Your relationship with your projects may in this respect be like your long-term romantic relationships. Your love in each case may begin with much "fire," or passion, but then be transformed into something different but equally valuable. That being said, developing a cool new argument *can* be quite exciting even in and beyond midlife. Sure, you've made cool arguments before, but never *this* cool argument, in all its beautiful detail.

Midlife crises do not force us to give up on telic activities. It just means we should consider approaching them more in the mode of Striving Play. And, perhaps, instead of buying that flashy sports car or cheating on your spouse, just try out some new games!

### Notes

1. Suits B. *The Grasshopper: Games, Life and Utopia*. Edinburgh: Scottish Academic Press; 1978.
2. Nguyen CT. *Games: Agency as Art*. New York, NY: Oxford University Press; 2020.
3. Kauppinen A. Against seizing the day. In: Timmons M, ed. *Oxford Studies in Normative Ethics*. Oxford: Oxford University Press; forthcoming.
4. Ridge M, Nguyen CT. The disguise of the good. In: Kirchin S, ed. *The Future of Normativity*. Oxford: Oxford University Press; forthcoming.
5. Ridge M. Illusory attitudes and the playful stoic. *Philosophical Studies* 2021;178(9):2965–90.
6. See note 5, Ridge 2021.

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