Hey, have you heard of Charlie Munger? Well, relatively few Americans know Munger's name, but a whole lot of folks really like Munger for what they consider as his practical wisdom…his philosophical musings… even his proven ability to help a number of folks make a whole lot of money with their investments.

Along these lines, if Charlie Munger gained a measure of fame at all, it's as the supremely effective and influential partner of Warren Buffett, the ultra-billionaire investment sage and Chairman of Berkshire Hathaway. But poking around on a few facets of Munger himself…his thinking…his beliefs and practices…and his teachings is a fascinating prospect to yield some interesting thoughts.

So, let's start with a short chronology, a summary of key aspects of Charlie Munger's life. Munger was born in Omaha, Nebraska in 1924. A child and teenager growing up in the Great Depression, Munger was unavoidably influenced by observing the destitution and hopelessness of many Americans during that era.

Munger entered college at the University of Michigan to study mathematics but dropped out in 1943 to serve in the U.S. Army Air Corps, rising to become a second lieutenant. Discovering Munger's high math aptitude, the Army ordered him to study meteorology at the California Institute of Technology, the college well-known even then for very high standards in science and math. Despite the fact Munger never graduated college with an official degree, his advocates helped him overcome a rejection of his application to attend law school at Harvard, where he then proceeded to graduate with honors in 1948.

After graduating with his law degree, Charlie moved to California with his family and started his career as a real estate attorney, soon migrating to where he generally spent the rest of his life: investing with some real estate development mixed in. To that end, for the next twelve years, Munger's investment firm of Wheeler, Munger, and Company succeeded with great compound returns of a reported 19.8%. But his firm then had losses of 32% in 1973 and 31% in 1974, leading him to close his firm in 1976. Surely, Munger's two years of high losses and very poor results after years of success shaped his thinking fruitfully. Regardless, along the way, Charlie Munger and Warren Buffet met and connected deeply as to their thinking about investments. And they then made business history over many decades…

Early on, Buffet's company acquired a company named Wesco Financial Corporation where Munger long-served as chairman. Wesco Financial controlled companies like CORT Furniture Leasing and Precision Steel but also held significant equity positions in companies like Coca-Cola, Wells Fargo, and Kraft Foods. Munger's tenure at Wesco was lived in parallel with his affiliation for many years with Buffet and his behemoth company, Berkshire Hathaway. It was during this extended time that Munger gained a reputation not only as an astute investor but as a street-smart philosopher of life and business.

To that end, some of Munger's thinking is memorialized in his book *Poor Charlie's Almanack: The Wit and Wisdom of Charles T. Munger.* Of course, Munger's book title is a take on American Founder Benjamin Franklin's famous publication of his own wit and wisdom each year for a quarter century in the mid-1700s—that volume was titled the same each year as *Poor Richard's Almanack.*

Clearly, Munger live similar patterns in life as Franklin—someone who was succeeding in multiple areas of endeavor, including dispensing wisdom even while progressing with his accomplishments. The advice, counsel, and thinking of both men cast a wide net across a variety of topics. For Franklin, it was the politics of national independence and international diplomacy and printing and advancing scientific types of stuff. For Munger, it was business and investing and building design and active charitable support.

Charlie Munger was a voracious reader, attributing his success to that foundational activity, saying that his seven kids growing up mostly remembered him as an opened book held aloft in front of his face with two legs sticking out from underneath it. Now that's funny! Munger gave a number of educational institutions quite significant, multimillion dollar gifts, often towards building special buildings that he had an affinity for. He contributed to several schools and a museum in Los Angeles as well as giving to Stanford University, the University of Michigan, and the University of California-Santa Barbara.

Now Munger had many "mental models" and approaches that he advocated for success. And one of those approaches was what's called *backward thinking*. The key source of backward thinking for Munger was a German math whiz Carl Jacobi, who coined a phrase in German that's translated "invert, always invert." And what does that mean? Here's how Munger reports on that: "Jacobi knew that it is in the nature of things that many hard problems are best solved when they are approached backward." More crisply, to Munger, *backward thinking is a problem-solving technique where you focus on how you are apt to fail to achieve your goal, rather than how to succeed.* So, how about an example? *Rather than focusing only on those things that make a happy life, think about what things will cause a miserable life--then avoid those choices.* A really basic rule helps encapsulate this principle: *avoid obvious stupidity*.

A well-known example that Charlie shared from his personal experience was his thinking and meteorological training from World War II when he asked himself this question: "How can I kill these pilots?" He concluded that the main way to avoid that was teaching pilots about key hazards like icing and running out of fuel. The overall motivation of Munger in all of this is captured in one of his quotes often voiced by his fans: "The best thing a human being can do is to help another human being know more."

That's interesting. So…what about the religious beliefs of Munger, the wisdom-giver? Bishop John Harvey Taylor served on the board of directors for the Good Samaritan Hospital in Los Angeles when Munger was chairman. And Taylor wrote this: "Charlie had his own views on faith and experience with the church."

So, AI was called into action here, just to get a sense of what a large data base and algorithms might yield. The query asked was this: "was Charlie Munger a Christian?" Here's how AI responded. "Munger was raised in a household where his family attended church. …[But] later he often expressed [views] with a focus on rationality and a secular worldview …His professional and public focus was on business principles and a secular, often pragmatic, approach to life." Pragmatic business? Yeah, Munger died in 2023 an elite and influential billionaire at age 99—among the richest people who has ever lived throughout all history.

Revealingly, beyond his book, it seems Munger really did use Benjamin Franklin as a model. Both were effective influencers and thinkers, both accomplished much, both were widely admired, and both were sought after for wisdom. But can we easily find either Franklin or Munger unashamedly claiming Christ?

You see, when someone like Charlie Munger dies, Christians should be reminded to ask: did this person have a solid belief in God…perhaps even a grand commitment to Jesus Christ as Lord and Savior? Interestingly, in this regard, God long preceded Munger when it comes to avoiding stupidity—yes, God reveals this in Romans 1:19-20 (ESV): "For what can be known about God is plain to them, because God has shown it to them. For [God's] invisible attributes, namely, his eternal power and divine nature, have been clearly perceived, ever since the creation of the world, in the things that have been made. So they are without excuse." Yes, this is God's version of backward thinking, making sure that humans are without excuse—absolutely none can claim ignorance. *Yes, God has revealed Himself for all to discern.* Psalm 14:1 says this: "The fool says in his heart, 'There is no God.'" And, to the positive, God spoke through the prophet Jeremiah (29:13) with this: "You will seek me and find me, when you seek me with all your heart."

Hey, for many decades, Charlie Munger invested money for people with fantastic success. Well done! And he worked hard to invest his funds in students and their education with notable giving of his wealth. Again, well done! But when he invested in people as to his personal philosophies, did He invest at the highest level in others—especially given he was privileged to start out in a churchgoing household? It appears that Munger largely missed using his influence to proclaim a foundational acknowledgement of God revealed in nature and then most fully revealed in Christ and the Bible!

For sure, believers can surely append six more words to Munger's highly-regarded quote to now read in much deeper fullness and impact like this: "The best thing a human being can do is to help another human being know more—indeed, to know more about Christ." *Yes, the privilege of every believer is exactly that!*

A&A: Application & Action

1. Do you believe in the general approach to foundationally avoid basic downsides or stupidity as a clear, even essential, part of achieving success? Discuss.

2. Given the sketch above, what's your quick take about the life of Charlie Munger? Discuss.

3. The Bible states in Romans 1 that those who deny God are without excuse. Elsewhere, the word through Jeremiah says God will be found "when you seek me with all your heart." Discuss.