

Introduction

Not to be born is the first choice, the prize beyond any other. But once he has seen the light, the next best is to go back to that dark place from which he came as soon as possible. In thoughtless youth all seems well at first – then suffering begins and every blow strikes home: envy, factions, war, and murder. Troubles abound. And afterwards comes hateful, feeble old age, crabbed and friendless – the evils compound.

(*Oedipus at Colonus* 1225–38; trans. Fainlight and Littman)

But the wise man neither rejects life nor fears death. For living does not offend him, nor does he believe not living to be something bad. And just as he does not unconditionally choose the largest amount of food but the most pleasant food, so he savours not the longest time but the most pleasant. He who advises the young man to live well and the old man to die well is simple-minded, not just because of the pleasing aspects of life but because the same kind of practice produces a good life and a good death. Much worse is he who says that it is good not to be born, ‘but when born to pass through the gates of Hades as quickly as possible.’ For if he really believes what he says, why doesn’t he leave life? For it is easy for him to do, if he has firmly decided on it. But if he is joking, he is wasting his time among men who don’t welcome it.

(Epicurus, *Ep. Men.* 125–127; trans. Inwood and Gerson)

I.1 Questions and Objectives

The central and familiar concern of ancient ethics is to give an account of a good or happy human life (*eudaimonia*).¹ A happy life is the best possible life for humans. This project addresses a different and less familiar ancient concern about the value of human life: what does it take for humans to

¹ Scholarly treatments of ancient theories of happiness abound. Some of the most representative examples include Kraut (1989); Annas (1993); Richardson Lear (2004); Cooper (2012); Rabbås (2015).

have a life worth living (*biôtos*)? Are only happy lives worth living, or can also unhappy lives be worth living for those who live them, perhaps even regardless of their prospects of achieving happiness during their lifetime? If so, under what conditions? Let me start with unpacking these questions by introducing central terms and distinctions that inform this interpretative project. At this stage, I intend these to be uncontroversial and intelligible from both the ancient and modern perspective.

The notion of a life worth living can be understood in a twofold sense. We can ask whether it is *worth being born* at all; or whether it is *worth staying alive*, once we have been born. Answers to these questions can come apart: it may be better for you not to have been born in the first place, but the continuation of your life could still be worthwhile with a view to any existing goods or commitments in your life; alternatively, you may come to the conclusion at some point that your life has been worth it, but that staying alive any longer is not worthwhile. In both cases, to ask what it takes to live a life worth living means to ask about the *threshold* – the minimal value that a human life must reach if it is to be at least barely worth living, or worthwhile. ‘Life worth living’, or ‘worthwhile life’ means *a life that is just barely good enough to be worth living or a life that is better than that*. It covers a whole range of lives that clear the threshold of a life worth living, from lives that are not good but just barely worth living up to the lives that are most worth living.

Two default assumptions can be made about this threshold. First, the threshold is just barely above zero: when the good things in one’s life are greater than the bad things, then life is worth living; if the bad things prevail, then it is not. The things in one’s life are life’s *contents*. Typical bad contents are pain, poverty or vice; typical good contents are pleasure, virtue or friendship. A compelling account of a life worth living is able to specify which of these good and bad contents are relevant for reaching the threshold or falling short of it, and why, and how much each of them matters for so doing. Second, the relationship between a happy life and a life worth living can be understood in terms of a threshold–target distinction. A happy life is the life most worth living; Aristotle expresses this intuition when he says that it is ‘most worthwhile to live’ (*malista zên axion*) for the person who lives well, or happily (NE iii.9, 1117b11–12). But unless one holds that *only* happy lives are lives worth living, there is a scope for lives that are not happy but still good enough to be worthwhile.

The notion of a life worth living is different from the notion of a meaningful life. When we ask whether a life is worth living, we ask whether this life is worth living for the person who is living it. This internal evaluative

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perspective underlies the ancient accounts of the happy or good life: the good life is a life that is good for the person who is living it. But we can also ask whether a life has a value from a standpoint that is external to the individual whose life is being evaluated, such as from the standpoint of other human beings, society or the universe. When an individual life makes a positive contribution to such a larger structure, or matters for other humans, it can be called *meaningful*, in contrast to useless, futile or even harmful. There is a chance that whatever makes your life meaningful makes it also worth living, and vice versa. For instance, by being a good parent, you make your life matter in positive ways for your family and perhaps even for the world at large, but your role as a good parent is also likely to make your life more rewarding for you – for example, by being a source of fulfilment and satisfaction. We should not assume, however, that worthwhileness and meaningfulness fully overlap; perhaps there are lives that are worth living but not meaningful or, conversely, lives that are meaningful but not worth living. Consider a typically ancient, and controversial, case: the lives of slaves. Many of them are certainly making a positive contribution to the welfare of the city, and so their lives are meaningful, but does that necessarily also make them worthwhile?

Staying within the internal evaluative perspective, the question of what makes a life worth living needs to be further distinguished from a question whether the mere fact of being alive (*zên monon*) has some value *independently* of life's contents. Many philosophers agree that mere living has instrumental value, because it is the necessary condition for living well. But could it also have a non-instrumental value, regardless of whether one lives well or badly? Some ancient philosophers make remarks to that effect. For instance, the Stoics include mere living on the list of the so-called preferred indifferents, that is, objects of selection that are non-instrumentally valuable, such as health or wealth. What are we to make of such claims? Would the fact of being alive, while living a bad life, still be non-instrumentally valuable? Could the non-instrumental goodness of mere living, if any, possibly outweigh, in part or fully, the badness of lives with some very bad contents, such as pain or vice?

This last question indicates how the question about the value of mere living is related to the question about the conditions of a life worth living. Even if mere living does not have any non-instrumental value, a life can still be worth living; and even if mere living does have some non-instrumental value, that does not guarantee that a life is worth living. For it is not only the value of life *per se* that matters for a life worth living but also

the value of its contents, that is, how well or badly one lives. The value of mere living, if any, can contribute to life's worthwhileness along with life's contents. If one grants that even mere living has some non-instrumental value to start with, then the mere fact of being alive already puts one closer towards reaching the threshold of a life worth living than if this value is denied. So the question about the value of mere living can be regarded as a sub-question of the question about the criteria for a life worth living.

From the distinctions among the value of happy life, life worth living and mere living, an axiology of life emerges that spans three different levels. On the bottom level, life may be good *per se*, independently of its contents. On a higher level, life can be valuable in the sense of being worthwhile or worth living. Unless the value of mere living is by itself sufficient to make a life also worth living, a life worth living will comprise the value of mere living – if any – *plus* the value of some good contents, or freedom from bad contents, that are sufficient to clear the threshold of a worthwhile life. Finally, the top level of the axiological hierarchy is reserved for happy lives, or lives lived well. Unless one maintains that what makes a life happy is wholly different from, or wholly identical with, what makes it worth living, happiness includes the value of whatever makes a life barely worth living *plus* the value of further good contents, or the freedom from bad contents, that is necessary for a happy life.

It is the top level of this hierarchy that is most explicitly discussed in the ancient texts and has deservedly received ample attention from commentators. The main contention of this project is that the ancient axiology of life is not exhausted by the theories of happiness. My main objective is to understand how ancient philosophers conceive of these three levels of value of life and the relationships among them. Throughout antiquity, we find philosophical accounts of a life worth living, as distinct from a happy life, as well as of the value of the mere fact of being alive. In contrast to the theories of happiness, these accounts often remain only implicit or, if explicitly set out, are stipulated rather than argued for. In such cases, my task is to reconstruct these accounts on the basis of the available evidence, and, in cases of stipulations, supply plausible arguments that justify these stipulations on the basis of other premises that these philosophers committed themselves to.

The most fundamental question about this three-level axiological hierarchy is whether it is a hierarchy at all. For that to be the case, all lower levels of value must be, in some way, contained in the top level. This containment is also presupposed by construing the relationship between a happy life and a life worth living in terms of threshold–target distinction.

If a life is worth living, but not happy, then it will have a part, or degree, of the overall value x that makes a human life happy. We shall see that this is indeed the mainstream position in ancient philosophy, endorsed by both Plato and Aristotle. In these cases, then, we want to understand what degree, or what part of x , is sufficient to make life worth living, and why.

Not everyone followed the suit, though. Perhaps the most influential dissenting voice are the Stoics, with their claim that being virtuous or vicious is irrelevant for life's worthwhileness. In combination with their view that virtue is both necessary and sufficient for happiness, they arrive at the conclusion that whatever makes a life worth living does not necessarily make it happy, and – more strikingly – that what makes it happy does not necessarily make it worth living. This points to an axiological conception where the top and middle level (a happy life and a life worth living) are constituted by two incommensurable orders of values, x and y , where x amounts to virtue and y to a value other than virtue. In that case, the threshold–target distinction collapses. But what good reasons did the Stoics have for allowing that a happy life may not be worth living?

Conversely, some cases of value commensurability can be intriguing as well. Consider Aristotle's views about the value of mere living. He notes that even 'mere living' (*zên monon*), as distinct from 'good living', has 'a share' of the 'fine' (*kalon*) (*Pol.* iii.6), the same term that describes the value of virtuous actions and a life lived well. *Prima facie* at least, this suggests that the value of mere living and the value of good living (the bottom and the top level of the axiological hierarchy) are different degrees of x , where x amounts to the 'fine', so that a happy life fully maximises the value already inherent in mere living. But what would such an account of the good life mean and would it be compatible with core commitments of Aristotle's ethical theory?

These preliminary interpretative queries indicate that the theme of life's worthwhileness, as distinct from life's happiness, has a potential to open up new angles on familiar themes and texts. This theme will also draw attention to texts and philosophers that have been less widely read, such as Plato's *Clitophon*, Aristotle's *Protrepticus*, the Cyrenaics and the later Peripatetics. Commentators have not entirely neglected the ancient views about the life worth living.² But the questions surrounding this broadly conceived axiology of life have not yet been addressed from the more panoramic perspective of ancient Greek and Roman philosophy as a whole.

² Brickhouse and Smith (1989) on Plato; Warren (2001) on Socrates and Plato; Echeñique (2021) on the Peripatetics; and Machek (2022) on Aristotle.

Besides happiness, another more familiar theme that lies in the vicinity of our questions relates to ancient views about the moral appropriateness or permissibility of suicide.³ To the extent that suicide is appropriate when, or because, a continued life is not worth living, we can learn a great deal about ancient views about the life worth living by looking at the accounts of the appropriateness of suicide, and vice versa. Unsurprisingly, in some cases, as in Stoicism, some of the most important evidence about life worth living is embedded in the discussions about suicide. But we should not think that an account of a life worth living can be simply extracted from the accounts of the morality of suicide. One reason is that the appropriateness of suicide cannot be determined solely on the basis of whether a life is worth living or not: there are cases when staying alive would be worthwhile, and yet suicide is the appropriate option. Conversely, in other cases staying alive is not worthwhile, and yet one ought not to commit suicide, since there are intervening moral, legal or religious constraints; for instance, in the *Phaedo* Plato famously prohibits suicide on the grounds that it is against the divine law (*Phd.* 60c–63c). On the whole, views about life's value and worthwhileness are more fundamental than views about suicide; the former always rest on the latter. But precisely for this reason these views deserve more attention than they have so far been given.

Along with attempting to take a step towards filling a gap in the historical scholarship, this study also aims to benefit philosophers who work on questions related to life worth living from a contemporary perspective, such as in biomedical ethics and the ethics of procreation. First, it intends to serve as a point of reference for those who would like to make their work more historically informed. The possibility of formulating the above research questions in a way that is comprehensible both from the ancient and from the modern perspective indicates that there is a reasonable degree of continuity between ancient and modern approaches to defining a life worth living, but this common ground will also allow us to identify important differences and contrasts.

It is by bringing out these contrasts that this study can be useful in yet another respect, namely in promoting deeper, more fundamental reflection on modern views about the life worth living, and the assumptions behind them. Some influential ancient views about life worth living may, from the

³ Christensen (2017) and (2020); Werner (2018); Cooper (1989) and Warren (2001) on Socrates and Plato; Papadimitriou (2007) and Zavalvi (2019) on Aristotle; Rist (1969); Seidler (1983); Cooper (1989); Brennan (2005) on Stoicism. Long (2019), ch. 7 has a comprehensive discussion of suicide in ancient philosophy.

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modern perspective, strike one as harsh, unpalatable, even outlandish. It is easy to explain this by pointing to the different philosophical predicaments of the ancient and modern worlds, as well as to developments in the social, political and also scientific (particularly medical) conditions that inform these views. But one may also ask, more provocatively, whether these contrasts could prompt us to critically question certain influential modern ideas, such as the view that life is worth living if only one wishes to stay alive. Are not modern philosophers who hold views such as this, which are unparalleled in the ancient context, too deferential to unreflective popular sensitivities, in contrast to the ancients, who simply searched for the truth, often challenging widespread opinions? It is not my aim to defend a particular answer, but rather to present the ancient material in a manner that shows this question to be at least deserving of serious attention.

Finally, it should be noted that there is one question that could reasonably be considered to fall under the thematic ambit of a work such as this, but that this project does not systematically address, namely the question about the value of human life in comparison to the value of other forms of life. This question is central to contemporary environmental philosophy and animal ethics, and was also pursued with some vigour by several ancient philosophers, including Aristotle, the Stoics and the later Platonists. These discussions have also attracted significant attention from commentators.⁴ I refer to these discussions only when they have immediate relevance for the questions on my agenda.

The remaining part of this introduction has the following structure. Section I.2 offers a selective overview of influential views about life worth living in early Greek non-philosophical literature. Insofar as philosophers were engaging with these views, in one way or another, they constitute the broader cultural background against which the motivation and significance of philosophical theories will stand out with greater clarity. Section I.3 outlines in more detail some terms and distinctions that make up the analytical framework of my interpretations. In Section I.4 I sketch contemporary philosophical discussions about life worth living and explain how the ancient discussions connect with these debates. Section I.5 discusses some important philosophical assumptions on which the ancient discussions rest, and sets out how they differ from the contemporary context. Finally, Section I.6 describes the general approach of this book.

⁴ The most important studies include Rist (1983), Sedley (1991), Sorabji (1993), Osborne (2007) and Torres (2021).

I.2 Pessimistic Poets, Optimistic Philosophers?

The worthwhileness of human life was a pervasive theme in ancient non-philosophical literature.⁵ As the epigraphs to this introduction attest, philosophical discussions of these questions were informed by this broader cultural context or even directly engaged views of the poets. The widely accepted cosmological dichotomy that underlies these views is that of powerful and immortal gods, on the one hand, and largely powerless human mortals, on the other. Insofar as godly interventions in the human affairs, if any, are not always benevolent, this prompts a fairly pessimistic outlook on the value of human life; not to be born is the ‘first choice’, as Sophocles puts it in *Oedipus at Colonus*. A similar statement can be found in Theognis: ‘The best lot of all for man is never to have been born nor seen the beams of the burning Sun; this failing, to pass the gates of Hades as soon as one may, and lie under a godly heap of earth’ (425–428; trans. Edmonds).

It is possible that some human lives may be worth living, but this worthwhileness is heavily conditional upon the contents of those lives. This conditionality is inherent in the view that ‘death is better than a miserable life’ (Aeschylus, fr. 90), or that ‘to die is better than to live in pain’ (Euripides, *Troades* 636–7). Life must be of some quality if it is to be worth living. What makes the human predicament tragic is that the contents that make a life worth living are difficult to secure and, if they are secured, then they come at a significant price. Even more disturbingly, the bad contents that make life not worth living are difficult to avoid: ‘no mortal can complete his life unharmed und unpunished throughout’ (Aeschylus, *Choephoroi* 1018–20; trans. Smyth). This is why happiness is not within human reach: ‘For no mortal ever attains to happiness (*eudaimonia*). One may be luckier (*eutuchesteros*) than another when wealth flows his way, but happy (*eudaimôn*) never’ (Euripides, *Medea* 1229–30; trans. Kovacs).⁶ The best mortals can hope for is a degree of good luck but not the state of happiness, or blessedness, which is regarded as the exclusive preserve of the gods. The difference between being lucky and being happy lies chiefly in the fact that the former condition depends on factors that are not within human control, and is thus generally unstable; rather, it is determined by chance, fate or the fickle will of the gods.

The tragic poets are fascinated by human characters who are not bad, or who are even good, and yet meet with utmost misfortunes because they

⁵ Unless otherwise noted, the translations of the poets quoted in this chapter are my own.

⁶ Cf. ‘No mortal is blessed, but all whom the sun looks down upon are in a sorry state’ (Solon, apud Stob. *Ecl.* iv. 34. 23).

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cannot escape their fate. This inherent vulnerability of the human condition goes hand in hand with the fundamental epistemic limitations of humans. These limitations can be directly responsible for misfortunes, Oedipus' patricide being perhaps the most familiar and disturbing case. But they also prevent us from accessing knowledge that could make our lives somewhat less miserable. Consider the assessment of the nurse from Euripides' *Hippolytus*: 'But the life of mortals is wholly trouble, and there is no rest from toil. Anything we might love more than life is hid in a surrounding cloud of darkness' (189–95; trans. Kovacs). What we are inclined to cherish is our mortal life, but that life is, on the whole, rather miserable; whatever would be a more appropriate object of attachment is hidden from our sight.

Even if it were possible for at least some humans to remain quite lucky throughout their lives, their epistemic limitations and dependence on the mercy of gods would still prevent them from becoming happy. The occasional unpredictable strokes of good fortune are insufficient to make a life worth living. In fact, if one comes to lose whatever good things one happened to have, one is bound to be worse off than if one had not had them at all: 'The man who enjoys good fortune and then falls into misery is distraught in mind because of his previous prosperity' (Euripides, *Troades*, 639–40; trans. Coleridge). There is a short route from here to the conclusion not only that a human life cannot ever be happy but also that the condition of never having been born, or being dead, is preferable to that of being alive: 'For <one who is dead> feels no <more> pain <than those who have never been born> since he has <no> sense of his troubles' (ibid., 638). As the state without awareness of troubles, non-existence always comes out better.

This pessimistic view of the mortal condition in early Greek literature is not confined to tragedy. Perhaps the most characteristic Homeric expression is represented by the fate of Achilles. In Book IX of the *Iliad*, Achilles faces a momentous choice: 'Two fates bear me on to the day of death: If I hold out here and I lay siege to Troy, my journey home is gone, but my glory never dies. If I voyage back to the fatherland I love, my pride, my glory dies ... True, but the life that's left me will be long, the stroke of death will not come on me quickly' (*Il.* ix.410–16; transl. Fagles). Eventually, Achilles chooses a short life and immortal glory over a long and inglorious life. For glory is the means to transcend, as far as possible, the fate of mortals and approximate to the immortality of the gods. And yet, as the dead Achilles tells Odysseus in Hades when the latter suggests that the immortal glory should be a sufficient reward for being dead, this choice comes at a considerable price and misgivings: 'No winning words

about death to me, shining Odysseus! By god, I'd rather slave on earth for another man – some dirt-poor tenant farmer who scrapes to keep alive – than rule down here over all the breathless dead' (*Od.* xi.555–7). This striking affirmation by a Homeric hero that it is better to be a slave in life than a king in Hades does bring out a characteristically Homeric nod to the value of life, its warmth and sweetness, but this nod exacerbates rather than mitigates the tragic predicament of the mortals. Achilles did make the right choice – he could not have acted otherwise: were he to have chosen a long but inglorious life, he would have betrayed his character and made his remaining life hardly worth living at all.

Moving from poetry to prose, an important figure that should be mentioned, given his influence on some philosophers, is the Athenian statesman Solon. Herodotus tells us about Solon's visit from Croesus, the rich king of Lydia (*Hist.* i.30–33). Asked about the happiest men, Solon mentions Tellus, an Athenian statesman, who enjoyed a long life full of honours and a good death. Asked about the second-best life, Solon names brothers Kleobis and Biton, whom the gods rewarded with an early and painless death (i.31), expressing his view about the tragic nature of human life. The fortune of Tellus is so extremely rare among humans, and hardships so inescapable, that non-existence can be regarded as a favourable fate. Croesus is not on Solon's list at all. A happy life, according to Solon, must be successful throughout – one cannot call anybody happy until they are dead. But even that is not enough: to count as happy, one must also have an honourable death and be favourably regarded by posterity. So there is a whole lot of things that can go wrong and that one cannot control: 'man is entirely chance' (i.32.4, trans. Godley).

What about the philosophers? There is a well-established view in the scholarship, one which goes back to Nietzsche and which has been more recently espoused, in different versions, by Bernard Williams and Martha Nussbaum, that it was a central contention of Greek philosophers to affirm, in contrast to the poets, that happiness is, under certain conditions, within human reach. The strategy of the philosophers is to 'make the goodness of a good human life safe from luck through the controlling power of reason' (Nussbaum 1986: 3). Philosophers do not deny that some external goods such as health, noble birth or good children are not fully within our power; instead, they argue that human happiness is, to a significant extent, independent of those goods. For what makes our life happy, largely or wholly, are goods that amount to or depend on the perfection of our reason, and this perfection is – to some extent at least – impervious to external misfortunes. It has been acknowledged that some philosophers,