The Concept of a Good Life

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1. The luthier's question

Andreas is troubled. Facing a terminal diagnosis, he has begun to take stock, and is not sure what to think. An accomplished builder of acoustic guitars, he has no regrets about his professional achievements. He has, for the most part, led a life of integrity and at least been decent in his dealings with others. And while he has had the good fortune to enjoy close, loving relationships, he has done some things that weigh heavily on him. While he has lived long enough, seventy-four years, his devotion to craft has left him wondering whether he didn't pass up too many opportunities for a more well-rounded life. As well, he was rarely happy, being generally irritable and given to worry. And while this never bothered him before, his disdain for happiness has faded with the growing clarity of his timeline. He regrets not enjoying life more, and now en-vies his happier friends, who seem more fully realized, having made lives that seem better suited to their natures. Perhaps it would be wiser not to devote his remaining time to such doubts, but he has no intention of wallowing in regret. He just wants to be of one mind about his life: should he be glad of the course it took? Was it a good life?

Deeming this a philosopher's question, Andreas summons a friend who teaches the subject at a nearby university. What do philosophers have to say on the matter? His friend demurs a bit, noting that her expertise concerns only the Western philosophical tradition, but brings him a textbook from that canon bearing the promising title, *The Good Life*.[3] In it, he learns of three broad schools of thought in what is called "normative ethics," exemplified by three philosophers: Kant, Bentham, and Aristotle. Reading the excerpts from Kant, he finds a few bits of interest, such as the idea that people are to be treated as ends in themselves, and that one should aspire to be worthy of happiness, or else one's happiness has no value. But for the most part Kant leaves him feeling no more enlightened than when he began: "useless as tits on a boar," he concludes. Bentham is less dully commonsensical, and simpler, to be sure—indeed, what could be a clearer

[1] This is a draft of a chapter for a book ms, *Good Lives*. References are doubtless incomplete, and I welcome suggestions or other comments.

[2] For invaluable feedback on earlier versions of this material, I want to thank Neera Badhwar, Sam Clark, John Bronsteen, [add others….], commenters at *PEA Soup*, as well as audiences at Loyola University Chicago, the Well-Being and Time conference in Münster, Georgia State University, Wheaton College, the Happiness, Well-Being and the Good Life conference in Montreal, and the Congreso Interamericano de Filosofía in Bogota. I am also grateful to the John Templeton Foundation and Saint Louis University for their support of this project.

[3] While it is common for philosophy texts to have some variant of this title, I have no particular volumes in mind—the example in question is entirely fictional. Note that while I think Andreas' reactions in this section are understandable, they do not represent my views. The major philosophical traditions endure for good reason, as there is much to recommend in each of them. But non-specialists first coming to the literature could be forgiven for taking a less sanguine view of their merits.

philosophy of life than that pleasure is the sole good, our sole aim being to maximize the sum of it in the world? For the same reason, Andreas finds it utterly alien to his experience of human life, distilling a rich tapestry to something nearer a pair of nylon socks. Its stark clarity of purpose reminds him of the simplistic charms he once saw in Ayn Rand, and others of his friends still find in Marx. Whatever makes for a good life, Andreas thinks, it surely involves something too complex to be deduced by turning a crank. Aristotle, it seems to him, gets much closer to the mark. There is no pretense that life can be boiled down to simple principles, yet there is real guidance, and not merely the tenets of common sense: the good life is a life of excellent activity, in which one fully exercises one's human capacities. Indeed, this is also the life of flourishing, moreover a highly pleasant, fulfilling life. Unlike the others, Aristotle seems to recognize the value of the kind of excellence he sought in his craft. Aristotle can also acknowledge the gravity of his moral failures, as well perhaps as the sacrifices made in focusing so narrowly on one sort of activity, and finally of his lack of happiness. Something is missing, in the Aristotelian picture, if one doesn't enjoy one's life. Without pretending too much in the way of precision, Aristotle seems to offer Andreas a meaningful framework for thinking about his life.

He ponders this one for a while, but concludes that it too falls short. While he appreciates the elegance of Aristotle's theory, it is perhaps too elegant for its subject matter. Human beings do not strive solely for well-being or flourishing, or for any other one thing: the human psyche is a kluge, as a book he'd read a few years back put it, cobbled together over many millennia from whatever parts came to hand. We want sex, we want love, we want achievement, we want leisure, we want milkshakes, we want fairness, we want revenge. If he has learned anything in his fourscore and two, it is that people are maddeningly complicated, capable of the most bizarre juxtapositions of motives.

For the same reason, Andreas cannot bring himself to believe that virtue and flourishing come to nearly the same thing. (Aristotle does allow some divergence between the two, notably through a curious fudge about the value of some indeterminate list of "external goods" for well-being—a move that sounds like a luthier's last resort after botching an instrument, tacking on extra hardware to yield an acceptable sound. Andreas would just pitch the thing if it came to that, and suspects Aristotle should perhaps have done the same.) The thought had some appeal at first, as his own happiness plainly depends a good deal on matters of excellence, and as a father he knew that his children would fare better in life if they were of sound character and had ample cause for pride. But again, human life is not so harmonious in his experience: the enviable and the admirable often conflict. On reflection, Andreas is glad of the path he took, and proud of his achievements. But it was not the path of happiness, in his view, and he'd have been better off in a less consuming but still fulfilling line of work, for instance building merely excellent guitars for a larger firm nearby. Instead he chose the path of excellence and beauty, striving as near to perfection in his instruments as was possible, even at cost to his own well-being. He came as close as anyone, but it was taxing to him and his family, and his throughput was accordingly low—his creations fetched a good price, but there weren't enough of them to make the venture very profitable. This was a commitment voluntarily taken on, and one he needn't have made—he might have taken on other, less arduous commitments without regret, and isn't certain that wouldn't have been a better choice. Having thought it through in recent days, however, he suspects there's no saying—the two sorts of life seem to be about on par with each other.[4] He faced a trade-off between two goods, excellence and well-being, and could reasonably have gone either way. That, at any rate, is how it seems to Andreas. The lives of virtue and happiness are not

[4] (Chang 2006).

unconnected, but they are nevertheless distinct, sometimes conflicting ideals. The goods in a good life seem not to harmonize in the way Aristotle thinks.

Something else irks Andreas, about all the theories: none of them actually has anything directly to say about his question, so one can only guess from their offerings what they actually think about the good life. Bentham, for instance, offers two theories: a utilitarian account of morality, and a hedonistic theory of well-being. Likewise, Kant proffers an intricate moral theory centering on the categorical imperative, and a desultory account of well-being as equivalent either to pleasure or more likely desire-fulfillment, depending on where one looks. Roughly, they tell us what is good for us, and what morality demands of us. But Andreas's question is not merely whether he did the right things, or whether he fared well. Even granting that these are the only things that matter in life, one can know the answers to these questions without knowing a further thing: *how does it all add up?* Did he have a good life? Suppose he was good but unhappy—would that have been a life he could justly affirm? Neither the Benthamite nor the Kantian theory holds out a clear answer to that question—or, more importantly, even recognizes the existence of that question, because the utterly familiar concept Andreas is using doesn't seem to enter into their vocabularies.

Again, Aristotle comes closer to the mark, as his theory does effectively address Andreas's interest in the good life: if one truly lives virtuously, then one already has the core element of well-being, though serious misfortune can deeply mar it. But it does so only incidentally, as it were, because Aristotle assumes at the outset that only well-being can ultimately matter, folding all other human values, notably virtue, into that one. If one rejects that assumption, as most people today have, then we are again left without even the ability to articulate the disagreement: Aristotle seems to have had no theoretically significant term for the good life beyond the common term for well-being, '*eudaimonia*'.[5] At least, no such term makes its way into Andreas's textbook, which from front to back is bereft of any mention of the subject matter that concerns him. Of course, some scholars might perhaps point to contrary evidence, on this or indeed all of the conclusions Andreas has reached about the philosophical literature. But such evidence has not made its way into his textbook, or into the memory banks of his friend the moral philosopher.

None of this is to say that Andreas finds no enlightenment from these philosophers—he has learned something from each, and all of them seem at least to offer the materials for divining the principal ingredients of a good life: at least, well-being and—perhaps amounting in part to the same thing, if Aristotle is right—virtue. They also teach him something of the substance of each ingredient. But he is surprised that philosophers, not known for reticence about big questions, should have so little to say about the larger picture—for instance, whether his life adds up to something he should be satisfied about, warts and all. Bentham's failure here is perhaps the starkest: he can answer one sort of question, namely whether Andreas fared well (not particularly, given his lack of happiness); or another, whether Andreas's life was morally righteous—or rather, lacking any basic moral notion other than an injunction to maximize happiness, how closely he approximated that ideal (probably not so closely, given his gruff disposition and the limited audience for his creations). But these questions are entirely distinct, and Bentham's theory offers no guidance on how one is to reconcile their answers and form some coherent notion of how one's life went—not just morally, not just prudentially, but period. Perhaps the problem,

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[5] "Theoretically significant": probably just about any language can muster some equivalent of 'good life'; the question is whether the notion of a good life is taken seriously as a distinct concept in the philosophical literature, not simply identical to other familiar notions like that of well-being.

for both Bentham and Kant, is that they are chiefly concerned not to articulate ideals of the good life so much as to determine the principles of morality. From Andreas' perspective this seems a curious choice of focus; of all the things he might have hoped to glean from the philosophy of "the good life," learning the difference between right and wrong is pretty low on the list, sort of a wisdom version of figuring out how to tie your shoes. The textbook has interesting moments regarding tough cases like eating meat or pulling the plug on Grandpa—maybe he'd have given up meat were that still a meaningful question for him—but for the most part he ends up about where he started: yup, they're pretty tough.

A deeper problem with this lacuna, Andreas suspects, is that, by fixing their gaze on smaller pieces of the problems of living, these philosophers have failed adequately to consider various questions that only emerge when examining how the various parts of a life fit together, and whether there might be other elements to a good life beyond virtue and well-being. Had someone asked him, before cracking the philosophy text, what ultimately matters in life, "beauty," or the kind of excellence he seeks to embody in his craft, would have been among the first things to come to mind. Indeed they are, perhaps, the animating principles of his life. And they matter in their own right, not merely as constituents of his flourishing. Of such plain ideas, Andreas sees little in the writings of these philosophers.

Andreas is tired, and has spent time enough pondering these questions. Without much ability to say why, he settles into a contended state of mind about his days of mortal existence. He lived well enough, and fared well enough. He picks up a weathered old book, passed down from his great-grandmother, and reads from the Psalms.

2. The concept of the good life

It is odd that the philosophical canon seems to have so little to say about the fundamental question animating Andreas's reflections: *what does it mean to have a good life?* So odd, in fact, that it seems incredible. Perhaps I have badly misread the literature. Some philosophers seem to have written on the question, notably Thomas Hurka, whose *The Best Things in Life* appears to be the clearest example of an extended treatment of the good life, in something like the sense that concerns us here.[6] In general, such discussions have not been prominent in the field. Of course, most of ethical theory bears on the question of the good life in some fashion or other. Moral theory addresses one facet of good lives, for instance, and the systematic ethical theories like the Big Three can be seen as offering what amount *de facto* to accounts of the good life, at least in the minimal sense of identifying its basic components. But the concept of a good life itself, at least the concept that concerns us here, seems not to figure explicitly in any of them.

Just what is this concept? 'Good life' has varied meanings in the literature, but here I mean it in the plainest and most literal sense, where 'good' serves as a generic term of approbation. In this bland sense, 'good' encompasses not just matters of axiology—intrinsic and instrumental value, for instance—but also deontic notions like rightness (as when one says, of a shopkeeper who gave the correct change to a child, "it was good that she did that," meaning nothing more than "she did the right thing"). We can also get a fix on the notion by thinking of what makes a life *better or worse*. Indeed, such comparatives are more important from a practical

[6] (Hurka 2010) However, he does not regard well-being as a genuine value, so some central questions that concern me in this volume do not arise for him. (Tiberius 2008) offers an account of the subjectively good life, as I read it. [Other possible examples to check: Kupperman 2006, Mulnix (Swanton 2003, Kazez 2007), Mike Martin, Holmer Steinfath, Ursula Wolf, Susan Wolf, Ross, Raibley, Kraut…]

standpoint, since normally we are concerned with particular choices or features of our lives rather than making a final judgment about a life, or reflecting on some ideal of life.

Crucially, our question is not what makes a life good *for* someone. That is a narrower question, having to do with what is ordinarily called well-being, welfare, flourishing: *prudential value*. Prudential value concerns self-interest: what benefits or harms a person, makes her life go well or badly *for* her, or serves or thwarts her interests. 'Good life' is sometimes used by philosophers for well-being, and indeed features in the titles of several recent books on well-being.[7] This usage has some hold in common parlance, as when someone relaxes in the sun and remarks, "Now this is the good life." Because philosophical terms like 'well-being' tend not to be well-entrenched in ordinary language, and plausible alternatives like 'happiness' tend to take a different meaning—notably, and in my own work, as a psychological term—it can be useful to employ 'good life' when discussing well-being with non-philosophers. But that is not how Andreas uses the term, or how it is used in many other practical contexts, perhaps most, for instance when eulogizing the dead. (I return to this example later.) And it is not how the term features in this book.

Nor does our question merely concern what makes a life *morally* good, or good in any other particular respect. Again, a good life, as it concerns us, is just a life that is good in the broadest sense, including whatever values ultimately matter in a person's life. *A good life is the sort of life one should want to have*, and we can think of the concept of a good life as a placeholder for whatever sort of life we should want to have (Annas 1993). We will refine the definition later, but for now the following will do as a first approximation:

> *Good life =df a life that is desirable on the whole, taking account of all values that count in the assessment of a person's life.*

We could replace 'desirable' with 'choiceworthy' with little loss of meaning. I will sometimes speak of the good life in terms of choiceworthiness, though we will see later that this is probably not quite the same thing. This, note, is an analysis of the *concept* of the good life, not a substantive *conception* of the good life. Developing a substantive theory will occupy most of this book.[8] Note also that there might be values that don't figure in the assessment of lives, or at least the sort of assessment that concerns us, and Andreas. Indeed, there probably are, and there are interesting questions about how to decide which values count. It may further turn out that we need to distinguish multiple concepts of the good life, even in the broad sense we've been discussing. We will set aside these matters for later as well.

Turning to the comparative notion, we could also ask: *in virtue of what is one life better than another?* Would a given choice make for a better life than some alternative course of action? Was one's life better for having made a certain choice? One might wonder whether the absolute notion of a good life has little practical import—perhaps it is neither possible nor desirable to make all-in assessments of lives.[9] But it seems hard to doubt the significance of the comparative question. If Benthamite utilitarianism is true, for instance, then we can say: it is better to be happy than to be unhappy; but so too is it better to promote happiness in the world than to spread unhappiness. We should want our lives to rate better, rather than worse, on both counts. (Put it this way: Andreas should have been less pleased with his life, in reflecting on it, if he'd been

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[7] (Carson 2000, Feldman 2004, Bishop 2015) [also? Sam Clark, forthcoming…]

[8] For a helpful discussion of the conceptual/substantive distinction, see (Darwall 2002). As in earlier work, I don't take the task to be conceptual analysis in the traditional sense, but "reconstructive analysis": reconstructing the ordinary concept, which may be somewhat confused or ill-defined, to capture the phenomenon that interests us.

[9] I am grateful to Sam Clark for pressing me on this question.

miserable throughout, or if his actions consistently made the world a worse place.[10]) We should wish the same for our children. Even if this were all the aspiration for a good life amounted to, it would be enough to make it a live practical concern.

Moral philosophers may find the last few sentences jarring: one does not often see those two values, well-being and the principle of utility, juxtaposed as the joint desiderata of a person's life. If so, good: that is my point. While much of philosophical ethics probes various aspects of the good life, little of it seems to tackle the question head-on. That is what I mean to do in this book.

3. Are the concepts of well-being and the good life really distinct?

Some readers, particularly those sympathetic with the ancient canon, might object that, properly understood, the notion of well-being just *is* the concept of a good life. That they should seem distinct owes to an overly narrow understanding of well-being that tends to afflict modern moralists. These moderns seize on the immediate appeal of certain subjective goods like pleasure or desire fulfillment, and assume that that's all self-interest can really be about. Whereas the ancients favored a broader notion of self-interest, more akin perhaps to success in achieving the sort of life one ought to want. And *this* notion, it might be argued, just is what I'm calling the concept of a good life. Perhaps the objector would favor some other broader understanding of the concept of well-being. The key point is that, once these notions are properly understood, there's really no difference between the concepts of well-being and the good life.

I have taken up this question in the context of ancient eudaimonism elsewhere and will briefly revisit it in Section 4, but for the moment will simply note that ancient views of eudaimonia were indeed theories of well-being in just the sense that today's theories are, which is why those theories continue to inform the contemporary debate about well-being. The difference is that theorists took it to be obvious that well-being exhausted the content of a good life: the choiceworthy life must be a life that ultimately benefits you or serves your interests. So the concept of well-being, expressed by 'eudaimonia', was put to service in the *role* of the concept of a good life.

But these are different concepts nonetheless. Since the issues may be clouded by differing linguistic intuitions, and since I'm prepared to stipulate a definition of the good life if need be, let's illustrate by inventing two terms. These are not put forward as adequate analyses of the concepts at issue, such as WELL-BEING, but are intended as simplified analogues.

1. A-life =*df* a life that is desirable all things considered, such that generic attitudes of being pleased regarding that life are *pro tanto* fitting.

By 'desirable all things considered' I mean the life is choiceworthy taking into account all ways or respects in which the life might merit some sort of pro- or con-attitude, where this is not limited to species of benevolent concern like sympathy but might include contempt, admiration, etc.: one should be pleased with the life, and it is an open question in what specific ways one should be pleased. I say '*pro tanto'* because other factors might override the presumption of fittingness (D'Arms and Jacobson 2000). It might be desirable to index the definition to a certain sort of

[10] Actually, there's a wrinkle here for the utilitarian, in that what Andreas should think about his life will presumably itself be governed by the principle of utility. This makes trouble for the theory, as I'll explain shortly.

observer, e.g. one that cares for the individual, but the added complication does not seem necessary. Even disinterested observers might fittingly be pleased about someone's leading a good life.

2. B-life =*df* a life that is desirable in one respect, namely in being beneficial to its possessor, such that attitudes of envy regarding that life are *pro tanto* fitting.

By 'beneficial' I mean the life serves one's interests, goes well for one, and is good for one. In the current lingo, the life is high in prudential value. The invocation of "envy" may raise eyebrows, partly because it may never seem a fitting emotion; it is, after all, one of the seven deadly sins. Nonetheless, it is one of the clearer examples of an attitude with conceptual ties to matters of positive benefit—'rejoicing' or 'sympathetic joy' or 'delight' being less obvious in meaning. Moreover, it may nonetheless be *pro tanto* a fitting response to high levels of well-being even when it is deplorable all things considered. However base envy as an emotion might be, there is nothing untoward about characterizing a flourishing individual's condition as "enviable," which is just to say that envy would in some sense be a fitting response. At any rate, this is not intended as a strictly correct analysis of any ordinary concept, but merely an illustrative analogue. One could run the definition instead with the more familiar notion of sympathy, but it is convenient to keep the valence consistent in each example.

These are loose definitions, open to refinement. For instance, it might be useful to allow that the specified attitudes are only fitting in relatively pronounced cases. If one objects to this feature or that, then one is welcome to tweak them to remove the infelicity, so long as the result is some approximation of what I've stipulated.

I take it to be uncontroversial that there could be such concepts as A-LIFE and B-LIFE, and that one could perfectly well employ terms expressing them. One might doubt the utility of such concepts: perhaps they don't refer to anything real, or for some other reason we can get by just fine without them. But there could be such concepts, and at least now, there are. Moreover, I take it to be obvious that these concepts are not equivalent. One could coherently say of a person, "she has a B-life but not an A-life." At the end of the day, we may find that only B-ness is desirable in life, indeed that the sets of A- and B-lives are necessarily coextensive. This would be a substantive discovery about the nature of desirable lives, however, not a conceptual truth, and the supposition of B-ness without A-ness would be false, not incoherent. The concepts are distinct, and the inclusion of evaluative attitudes in their definition ensures it: even if one were somehow to deny that benefit and desirability-all-things-considered involve different concepts, one could hardly say the same of, say, sympathy and being displeased.

To make this still clearer, let's add a third term:

3. C-life =*df* a life that is desirable in one respect, namely in being well-lived, such that attitudes of admiration are *pro tanto* fitting.

By 'well-lived' I mean the person conducted herself well, excellently, or virtuously, so that the way she led her life is *pro tanto* a fitting object of admiration or praise (as opposed to contempt, disapproval, disesteem, etc.). As we normally think about such matters, this will include both moral and non-moral excellences such as wit, fortitude, athleticism or musicianship. This too seems clearly to be a distinct concept from the others, yielding a suite of three concepts. In saying someone has an A-, B-, or C-life, respectively, one expresses three different thoughts.

It seems to me that the case for the distinctness of these concepts is overdetermined, but here I summarize an argument based on the distinctness of the attitude concepts they involve:

A1. If two putative concepts contain different constituent concepts, then they are in fact distinct concepts.
A2. The concepts ENVY, PLEASED and ADMIRATION are distinct concepts.
A3. The concepts A-LIFE, B-LIFE and C-LIFE each essentially includes attitude concepts that are distinct from the attitude concepts included in the others.
A4. Therefore, the concepts A-LIFE, B-LIFE and C-LIFE are distinct concepts.

We now have all the conceptual apparatus we need to distinguish the subject matter of this book: namely, more or less, A-lives. What is it for a life to be an A-life? And again, this is a different question from that of what it means for a life to be a B-life or, again differently, a C-life. (To sharpen the issues I stipulated simplified definitions of these terms that may need refinement.) These questions do not cease to be distinct if we posit necessary connections among them. In these terms, Aristotle believed roughly that B-ness is all there could be to A-ness, and that B-ness in turn consists in C-ness. This is not mere definition-mongering, but the lodging of substantive, indeed quite interesting, claims about the nature of desirable, beneficial and virtuous lives.

If you grant me the distinctness of these three concepts then perhaps you will indulge my draping them in less awkward verbiage: 'good life', 'well-being' and 'virtuous life'. I suspect there is little to indulge: 'well-being' may not be everyone's favorite term for prudential value—some prefer 'flourishing', 'happiness' or 'welfare'—but every competent scholar in this area can recognize that 'well-being' is a standard label for a more or less coherent body of literature discussing various answers to the question, "what ultimately benefits us?"[11] Likewise, 'virtue' and cognate terms are standardly used to denote matters pertaining to the excellent or admirable conduct of life. 'Good life', of course, does not have such a standardized meaning in the literature; hence the present discussion. As noted earlier, commentators often use the term as an equivalent to 'well-being'. Let's grant that 'good life' takes more than one meaning both in ordinary language and in the philosophical lexicon. I submit that there is nothing strange about using it in the present sense: as a generic term for a life that is, on the whole, desirable or choiceworthy. It is another question, and largely the topic of this chapter, whether it is profitable to theorize about this notion, or to employ it in ordinary thinking about our lives. But there is nothing recherche or bizarre about using 'good life' for the idea of a life that is, on balance, desirable. Let's make this explicit:

> *It is possible, within the bounds of conventional English usage, to use 'good life' to mean "a life that is desirable on the whole."*

This is plainly true, either because 'good life' is in fact conventionally used to refer to a desirable life or because the meanings of 'good' and 'life' license a novel usage of this sort. Even if your intuitions favor a "well-being" interpretation of 'good life', it must be admitted that the term can legitimately be used in the broad manner I am proposing. I would go further and claim that the broad usage is in fact the more natural one: you might consider a moral monster like Hannibal

[11] Kraut's Aristotelian work under the rubric of "well-being" is particularly helpful in making this clear (Kraut 2007, 2018)

Lecter to be an example of evil flourishing, happy, thriving, doing well, yet it would be odd to go on and say that he had a good life. A good life, yet not a desirable or choiceworthy life? One wonders what 'good' could signify in that event. Similarly, many of us would balk at deeming good the life of a virtuous person who suffered so relentlessly that, in our estimation, they'd have been better off dead. Be that as it may, my arguments require only that we are indeed talking about the good life here, in one legitimate sense of the term. I will henceforth designate the associated concept with 'GOOD LIFE'. And if for some reason even that modest proposal offends certain sensibilities, one can substitute any term one likes to talk about our subject matter.

Some readers may doubt that my ABC concepts correspond to the concepts at issue. For instance, perhaps well-being has no essential connection to attitudes like envy: B-LIFE isn't relevantly similar to WELL-BEING. Now it might reasonably be doubted whether well-being can fruitfully be *analyzed* in terms of envy, say because one thinks the notion of well-being is conceptually prior to that of envy. But that would only undermine the idea that B-LIFE offers an informative analysis of well-being, as it contains a circularity. If envy rather is to be explicated in terms of well-being, then an essential connection between the two remains. Still, perhaps there is no essential connection between well-being and envy: maybe a culture could have a concept with enough of the features associated with well-being, yet entailing nothing about the aptness, even *pro tanto*, of envy. This might in fact seem common enough; as noted, envy has a dubious reputation in the author's own culture, and perhaps in most. A deadly sin is perhaps never to be indulged. Yet the mere fact that envy is deemed worthy of disapproval itself reinforces the notion's ties with well-being: people single it out for censure precisely because it is a natural, yet socially corrosive, response to another's good fortune. If a culture truly regarded envy as having no greater relevance to well-being than admiration, finding displays of envy in response to another's successes not deplorable but downright unintelligible, we should doubt that they really have the concept of well-being.[12]

Even if the attitudes that are constitutive of the ABC concepts aren't strictly constitutive of the concepts of the good life, well-being or the virtuous life, they must at least bear *some* special connection with those concepts, even if only a contingent one. Envy plainly has more to do with well-being than with virtuous living. Differences in those connections can be used to establish that we are indeed talking about three different concepts, as follows:

- B1. WELL-BEING bears a closer relationship with attitudes of envy than with attitudes of admiration.[13] A concept that lacks any substantial connection to attitudes of envy would presumptively not be a concept of well-being, whereas the same could not be said regarding admiration.
- B2. VIRTUOUS LIFE bears a closer relationship with attitudes of admiration than with attitudes of envy. A concept that lacks any substantial connection to attitudes of admiration would presumptively not be a concept of the virtuous life, whereas the same could not be said regarding envy.
- B3. GOOD LIFE bears a closer relationship with non-specific evaluative attitudes such as being pleased or displeased than with more specific sorts of attitudes such as envy or admiration. A concept that lacks any substantial connection with generic attitudes like being pleased or judging favorably would presumptively not be a concept of the good

[12] [This section originally used the example of sympathy rather than envy but it seemed wise to keep the valence the same in all examples. But it is possible that in revising for this draft I introduced some errors.]

[13] Again, we could if desired replace envy with sympathy, *mutatis mutandis*.

life, whereas the same could not be said regarding specific attitudes like envy or admiration.

B4. If what are ostensibly two concepts bear different relationships to other concepts, then they are in fact distinct concepts.

B5. WELL-BEING, VIRTUOUS LIFE, and GOOD LIFE bear different relationships to other concepts.

B6. Therefore, the concepts of well-being, the virtuous life, and the good life are distinct.

Summing up: we have good reason to think that there is indeed a broad notion of the good life, concerning lives that are desirable on the whole, and that this concept is distinct from those of well-being and the virtuous life, which are in turn distinct from each other. To motivate our inquiry, all that remains is to show that this concept has some utility, and that theorizing about the good life is a worthwhile enterprise.

4. Eudaimonist objections

Perhaps some of my eudaimonist friends will remain unconvinced on these points. As noted in the previous section, it has been objected that I am assuming a narrow, peculiarly modern notion of well-being—a concept well at home in utilitarian moralizing, perhaps, but not suited to the broader questions that animated the ancients. But the concept of well-being is nothing more than the concept of benefit or self-interest. And that notion is clearly present in the ancient literature, indeed forming an essential element of the animating question of the *Republic*: does the moral life benefit us? Ancients debated what was ultimately good for us, just as we do today, and common answers ranged from the elevated to the philistine, just as they do today. Thus do today's Aristotelians engage with hedonists, desire theorists, and objective list theorists about the character of well-being; all are tussling over questions of ultimate benefit, or prudential value. Now it may turn out that the concept of well-being varies somewhat across populations, or needs to be distinguished into multiple concepts. But any variant of the concept must have this character: it isn't simply concerned with desirability, period, but with a particular species of desirability, namely benefit—what is desirable for someone for her sake, meriting sympathy or pity when lacking; what benevolence aims to promote; and so forth.

Now if you conjoin your inquiries into well-being with an assumption of egoism—specifically, that a manner of living can only be desirable, worth aiming at, if it benefits you or promises to serve your interests—then it will be natural so forge a very tight connection between well-being and a good life. Indeed, the notion of well-being will take on a role in your ethical theory equivalent to that of the good life, and there will be no need—so long as starting assumptions remain unquestioned—to distinguish well-being from a good life. And it is a common reading of ancient eudaimonism that *eudaimonia* functions in those theories as a generic placeholder for whatever sort of life is choiceworthy (Annas 1993).

If you take it to be obvious and beyond question that the choiceworthy life must be equivalent to the beneficial life, then it should not be surprising if you make no distinction between the idea of well-being and that of a good life. The distinction will do no work in your theorizing. But that of course has no bearing on whether such a distinction exists—or on whether the term you take as the measure of a good life nonetheless expresses the concept of well-being. There is no reason to think that, broadly speaking, '*eudaimonia*' meant anything other what 'well-being' means in the contemporary literature. (Of course, there may well be minor differences and distinct connotations that can be set aside for philosophical purposes.) And a good thing, too: the

ancients continue to command a well-deserved place at the table in today's debates about well-being. This would not be the case if '*eudaimonia'* expressed a concept quite different from 'well-being' as contemporary scholars use the term.

In fact it is not at all clear what it could mean for the ancients to have had a concept of well-being very different from our own, particularly one that somehow managed simultaneously to embody the notions of self-interest and choiceworthiness at once, without simply being a grue-some conjunction of those concepts, or worse their disjunction. Should one figure out how to square that circle, there would still be a need to un-square it and separate out the two simpler notions of benefit (as we know it) and choiceworthiness so that we can entertain a question that, I'd wager, would be perfectly intelligible to a good many Athenian grandmothers: why think that self-interest must be the measure of all action?[14] Why, indeed, take the likes of reprobates like Thrasymachus seriously at all? There's right and there's wrong, period; what's in it for you is neither here nor there, and if your friends are putting questions like that to you, maybe you need some new friends. Anyway, why don't you make yourself useful and fix that leak in the roof?

Whatever one thinks of such homely thoughts, I suspect they would be at home among grandmothers in virtually any culture, whatever its philosophical class fancies. And it's a fair question: what justifies the egoism at the heart of eudaimonistic ethics?[15] Why think that benefit or self-interest *must* be the ultimate measure of a good life, the standard by which we should determine how to live? Never mind your grandmothers; does not Kant merit a reply? Come to think of it, doesn't it make the eudaimonist thesis less interesting to deny that there's any substantive claim being made in saying that well-being is the sole measure of a good life, that the two concepts are in fact one? It certainly makes it less intelligible. In fact the egoism grounding eudaimonistic ethics is not at all trivial; it is a substantive, interesting position that deserves serious consideration. If we collapse the distinction between well-being and a good life then we mask an important point of controversy, shielding it from scrutiny—and perhaps vindication.

Confusion on these points likely owes to a range of factors, but two bear mention here. First—as I've discussed before[16] and will elaborate further in the next chapter—the ancients were concerned to articulate ideals of living that should guide our deliberations regarding our own lives: what should one aim at in life? This is quite a different perspective from, say, Bentham's interest in guiding legislation. And from this perspective, there may not be a clear difference in practice between the notions of well-being and the good life. If you're a Kantian asked what sort of life you hope to lead, your answer will likely include moral ends—leading a life of moral worth, for instance. Your ideal life will be a happy life, but also a moral life. But in fact you aren't likely to deem a life of moral failure happy: should you betray your family, say, that will be a failure to achieve your own ends, making you worse off. It may only be when looking at other people's lives, or non-ideal situations like sacrificing your interests for a political cause, that your thinking about well-being and the good life are liable to come apart.

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[14] It is hard to know how to justify this sort of assertion, and I'm certainly no scholar of ancient history or culture. But I can't think of any contemporary culture I know of, from hunter-gatherer Amazon to urban Beijing, where it does not seem to be the case, and it is questionable that Plato's Athens should be more exotic in this regard than, say, the Pirahãs. That the philosophers in a culture should be given to exotic thoughts, by contrast, seems far more plausible. (I can find no trace, for instance, of rural American morality, at least as I know it, in contemporary political philosophy.)

[15] There is some sensitivity that such complaints register a misunderstanding of the kind of egoism at issue, but I'm taking as obvious that eudaimonistic ethics is meant to be egoistic only at the foundational level, not recommending that self-interest be the criterion by which we make everyday choices.

[16] Haybron 2008.

Second, there is some confusion in the ethics literature about the nature of conceptual claims. It is common, for instance, to see Aristotle's theory of well-being, among others, couched as a conceptual thesis: "well-being is a life of virtuous activity," for example, is thus presented as a conceptual truth. If this is right, then of course Aristotle is working with a different concept than we moderns are. In fact, no two well-being theorists have the same concept on this line, making it difficult to see what we could all be arguing about. Or why anyone should care: concepts are simply vehicles for thought, and you can take them or leave them. You can make them up: let FRUNGBO be the concept of a flea on Chim Chim's left elbow, and there you go.

If the identification of well-being with virtuous activity is merely a conceptual claim then we can settle this right now: I don't care for that concept, thank you very much, so I'll use another one. But of course, that's not what Aristotle is doing: he's making a substantive ethical claim about what sort of life is best for us. You can eschew disagreeable concepts all you like, but if his claim is true then you are making a mistake if you lead a life of mediocrity: you are undermining your own well-being.

Since Aristotle's claim about the nature of well-being appears to express some kind of necessity, it is an excellent question what manner of necessity if not conceptual, and how there could be such truths. Maybe there aren't any. But whatever they are, they aren't conceptual truths.[17] If he's right, then parents looking out for their children's best interests will raise them to lead lives of excellence. That's an interesting claim about the nature of reality, well worth closer scrutiny, and quite possibly true. It's not like telling us bachelors are unmarried.

5. The concept of a good life in ordinary thinking: six practical contexts

I began this chapter with a deathbed reflection, and in earlier work introduced the question of a good life with a eulogy scenario. In fact there are a number of distinct practical contexts in which the notion of a good life may be important, and it is worth distinguishing several basic options. This is partly to dissuade readers from focusing too much on the specific cases I've highlighted, and partly to ensure that our subsequent discussion is responsive enough to the practical issues at stake. We may find, for instance, that we need different notions of the good life, corresponding to different standpoints we might occupy in assessing lives (In fact I will suggest that we do.) It should suffice to distinguish six basic contexts, according to whether we are assessing lives retrospectively, in prospect, or in midstream, and whether the life in question is another's or our own. I will illustrate each with a canonical example.

1. *Deathbed*. You are at the end of life, reflecting on it. Does your life "bear your reflective survey," as Tiberius puts it, channeling Hume?[18] This is the scenario sketched out with the case of Andreas. It is an interesting question why we—or most folks, presumably—should care so much about this sort of judgment. But it does seem important that one be able to come to a favorable view of one's life when all is said and done. One limitation to this sort of case is that, insofar as your own values are misguided, you are liable to come to the wrong answer. A dictator might die a satisfied man when in fact he should be ashamed. There may also be pragmatic considerations driving the sorts of attitudes one might fittingly take toward one's own life, particularly as such attitudes are themselves

[17] Again, Darwall is helpful on this distinction. I've discussed it further in (Haybron 2008)
[18] (Tiberius 2008)

part of the life being assessed, and may influence its course. You might reasonably come to some range of different verdicts about how to view the various incommensurables in your life taken together, for instance, and opt for one of the more positive judgments simply for the peace of mind it will bring. Or, particularly at earlier stages of life, you might choose a more negative assessment in order to avoid complacency.[19]

2. *Eulogy*. An old friend dies, and you are asked to deliver the eulogy. The final product may be edited for the sake of propriety and a good story, but first you want to determine the unvarnished truth. Did she have a good life? (We could, if we wished, adapt Andreas's case to view his life from a third-person perspective.) This scenario brings us closer to the philosophical issues that interest us, since the verdict in question is meant to be impartial.[20] In earlier work this was in fact the prime example used.[21] I dropped that case for the deathbed scenario here because the first-person judgment is more compelling as a matter of practical significance, and intuitions are less susceptible to contamination by irrelevant cultural norms, which can vary enormously in regards to speaking of the dead. (In some cultures, one mustn't speak of the dead at all.)
3. *Vocational choice*. You are a young adult trying to decide between two occupations, each likely to result in a very different sort of life. (Again, we could envision a young Andreas here, deciding which vocational path to take.) Which is the better life? Which is preferable, all things considered? Which more clearly counts as a good life? The question here, again, is neither narrowly prudential nor moral. Indeed, which sorts of values need to be considered may itself be part of the question. Could beauty itself be a fundamental reason to live in certain ways? Or should you care only about what affects someone's well-being, or is morally better? Suppose you have two options, both morally acceptable but one morally better, while the other would yield greater happiness: which to choose?
4. *Crib*. You are a new parent, standing by your baby's crib, reflecting on the sort of life you want for him.[22] A good life, but what does that entail? The standard script for such moments tends to focus on prudential goods—"happiness," for example. But of course, that doesn't entail that that's *all* you wish for the child, any more than wishing someone "many more" on their birthday means you'd be indifferent to those birthdays being spent in a prison cell. There's no attorney taking notes at such moments, and your partner isn't likely to turn and grill you over why you aren't wishing that he'll be a decent person. "Don't you want him to be a decent person? What if he becomes a happy gangster, honey; would that be ok?" Of course it wouldn't—whatever your notion of happiness, being a good person is part of the sort of life you want for him: your idea of a good life. But it kind of spoils the moment to raise the possibility that Junior might grow into a sociopath.
5. *Midlife crisis*. You are in your mid-forties, and questioning whether you aren't entirely on the wrong track. Is this really the sort of life you want? Have you gotten your

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[19] (Haybron 2007, 2008, 2011)

[20] Of course, a friend or anyone else in position to deliver a eulogy is unlikely to be fully impartial in fact. But there seems no barrier in principle to impartiality, as there is for a first-person judgment. The answer being sought in this case appears to be exactly the same answer we, as theorists, seek. If the obligations of friendship seem to call this into question, we could imagine that the eulogist has no relationship with the departed.

[21] (Haybron 2013).

[22] This scenario has been fairly prominent in the well-being literature, notably in (Feldman 2004, Kraut 2007).

priorities backwards? By the nature of the case, you probably aren't happy at the moment, but that needn't be what vexes you. Perhaps you're bothered to be unhappy. But maybe you're also not sure you've been a good enough parent, spending too much time at work. Perhaps your job strikes you as pointless and trivial, a shameful waste of the opportunities you've been given. Again, whatever you think matters in life is apt to come up for review here: the question is not simply whether you're happy, or good, or whether your life measure up on any other particular scorecard. It is, more generally, whether you're leading a good life.

6. *Wayward friend*. Perhaps your friend could do with a midlife crisis. Though she seems contented enough with her situation, you believe she's lost her way: fixated on materialistic goals, neglecting her relationships, and generally being self-indulgent. Nor, unsurprisingly, does she seem particularly happy, certainly not thriving. This isn't who she really is, and at any rate isn't a sensible way to live, neither admirable nor enviable. This is not a good life, and she needs to get her priorities in order. Once again, the fundamental worry is not specifically moral, prudential, aesthetic or whatever: it is just the general concern that she have a good life. That same concern may arise when a friend is merely unhappy, or when a family member is acting badly. In all cases, the prospects for a good life are threatened. Even if our immediate attention is drawn only to the particular shortcoming, our reflections on its gravity and how to address it may need to be situated in our sense of how it fits in the broader scheme of the person's life. A friend's lack of happiness may be fitting, say if she is caring for a dying parent. Perhaps she is living as well as her circumstances and nature allow.

The differences among these scenarios are noteworthy, yet they all recognizably involve the same core notion: the idea of a good life—a life that is good, not just in this or that respect, but all things considered, taking account of whatever values matter in a life. I hope it is clear as well that we aren't simply talking about well-being, flourishing, or a happy life, still less a merely virtuous or morally righteous life. It would be singularly weird, for instance, to suppose that the deathbed question can be rendered, without loss of meaning, as "did I flourish?" Or, "did I profit from my shuffle through this mortal coil?" This reading yields strange results in the third-person retrospective case as well. Did Lincoln have a good life? Did Mandela? Quite plausibly, yes—these are probably among the first names that come to mind when people are asked to give examples of good lives. They are paradigms of good lives. Yet they would not be quick to roll off the tongue of anyone asked to name some truly lucky ducks. (Who would wish such lives for their children?) Extended spells of depression and imprisonment tend not to be associated with happy lives. At the same time, it matters that these individuals did not lead lives of unrelenting misery and self-sacrifice; while not particularly enviable, perhaps, neither are they pitiable. And however good their lives were, surely those lives would have been better still had the accomplishments been attended with less suffering—a bit less time in prison, or a bit less depression, say. The temptation to equate the good life with well-being may be mistaken, but it is not *that* far off the mark. At any rate, the common understanding of good lives, at least in these parts, seems pretty clearly to involve both moral and prudential values.[23]

[23] I assume, without argument, that the average person on the street is not a closet Stoic.

6. Do we need a theory of the good life?

While there are interesting questions about just how important it is, and why, to have a clear notion of the good life in ordinary practical contexts, I take it to be clear that reflection on the good life is not idle. For one thing, it is useful to be able to assess lives in generic terms without committing to any particular mode of value being at stake. In the case of the wayward friend, for instance, you might have a strong sense that they are not living in a sensible, reasonable manner, without being clear about whether the deficiency is prudential, moral, or of some other sort. They just have their priorities wrong, and are putting too much weight (say) on material goals. This is already a perfectly intelligible worry, and may need no philosophical elucidation for you to press it. Indeed, it may be just when we start talking about "morality" or "well-being" that we start losing our grip on commonsense valuing. Ordinary people tend not to talk about well-being in the sense that philosophers study, likewise morality, as one frequently notices when trying to teach an introductory ethics course.[24] Perhaps many languages don't even have terms corresponding to these notions. But probably all cultures have the resources to think about whether someone's life is on the right track—whether they are leading good lives.[25]

Even if commonsense did not include the broad notion of a good life, or alternatively that little of practical import would be lost without it, we would still need it for the purposes of philosophical theory. As should become clear over the course of this volume, there are important theoretical questions that only come into view when thinking about the character of a good life. And theoretical options as well: a chief motivation for undertaking this study, for instance, has been the errors that seem to me to arise when theorizing about well-being is not mindful of the distinction between well-being and a good life: if you think there's no difference then it can be tempting to try to force additional values into one's theory of well-being. It is plausible, for instance, that a life is made better by virtue of containing greater excellence. Some take that as reason to conclude that well-being consists in excellence, which makes sense if that's the only place to include it. But perhaps excellence is actually another element of the good life, distinct from well-being; indeed, I will argue for precisely that claim in Chapter [7]. If you lack the conceptual apparatus even to entertain that thought, then your theorizing about well-being will be artificially constrained, and perhaps incapable of getting a plausible answer.

As well, we cannot assume that philosophical theories developed for other purposes, such as to guide action, will yield plausible or helpful answers about the nature of good lives, or how lives are to be assessed. Notoriously, theories tend to work best in dealing with the problems they were designed to solve—for instance, offering clear action guidance in the realm of typical adult humans—and not so well in other contexts, like the cases of children, other animals, or the environment. When your starting point is an attempt to build a moral theory, as is the usual approach in normative ethics, then we should not be surprised if your labors eventuate in a theory centered on the moral aspects of life, with attention given to other elements of a good life only to the extent needed to make sense of the most obvious moral demands—for instance, at least passing mention of some account of well-being given the centrality of beneficence to the moral life. If there are other values, such as beauty, they can be dealt with later—perhaps after you've gotten around to dealing with the children and the rest of creation. (But first, those wretched counterexamples about killing innocent bystanders….)

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[24] In some recent studies of lay intuitions, 'well-being' indeed comes out as a dubious term for expressing the concept of well-being in ordinary English [Kneer and Haybron ms].

[25] [Native Americans, Aztecs—more focused on GL than WB? E.g., "balanced life," "life out of balance," etc.]

Increasing the temptations in this regard is the fact that so much of our experience of value is not easily grasped or articulated, and is barely registered or out of focus; the "fixed points" that we obviously have to get right, like putting limits on the killing of innocents, fall well short of the range of phenomena an ethical theory needs to encompass. An additional motivation for this inquiry is in fact a suspicion that an ethics driven by moral theory will tend to discount crucial matters like beauty and the value of the natural world, because such values are unlikely to be seen as among the primary data points to be explained. But you cannot explain what is important in a life like Andreas' without reference to beauty: for him, as for many others, beauty is not a peripheral concern, but absolutely central. Likewise, for many, life would be badly impoverished without a deep sense that the natural world has value independently of human welfare. Think also of our reaction to the burning of Notre Dame: it should strike one as bad as the loss of an exemplar of beauty and excellence, not merely as a blow to consumer satisfaction; indeed it calls on us to be saddened. Utilitarians and Kantians already have enough problems just dealing with the most obvious stuff of everyday morality like justice and beneficence; if that's the first item on your agenda, concerns like beauty and nature are liable to wind up on the shelf, gathering dust. Perhaps not coincidentally, such goods have not fared well in the age of moral theory—an era, arguably, of uglification and despoliation. They have no place in our ethics—save, that is, as sources of amusement and gratification.

In attending overmuch to the obvious targets, then, we may find ourselves with a distorted view of the nonobvious targets. Worse, we may get even those fixed points wrong. If, for example, our theorizing begins with the goal of articulating a plausible vision of the sort of life we ought to lead, leaving open at the outset what sort of morality that might involve, we might feel little inclination to distill the moral life to a set of rules, instead seeing a range of considerations that need to be balanced, in an unformulaic way, in the course of building a good life. If on the other hand we proceed from the notion that we need some clear specification of the moral principles that should guide deliberation, as Bentham did in contrast to Aristotle, we may condemn ourselves to getting the wrong view of morality: the request itself may be misguided, which is not to say we won't concoct answers to it. The best route to a correct moral theory may be not to try giving a moral theory. In short, ethical theorizing may suffer from a kind of "looking under the streetlight" effect, except that we chose where to put the streetlight. Perhaps it is time we moved the light.

7. What is a theory of the good life?

But what exactly is an account of the good life? Judging by the titles of some ethics textbooks, one might have thought most ethical theorists were already offering exactly that. Perhaps not explicitly, if I am correct that there is little literature directly addressing the broad notion of the good life that concerns us here. But at least implicitly, correct? To some extent, yes, and I will take up that matter in the next section.

There are at least three questions that a full-blooded theory of the good life needs to answer:

1. *The composition question*: what are the fundamental constituents of a good life, and how are they related? What ultimately matters in a person's life?
2. *The summative question:* how may the elements of a life be compared so that we can make overall judgments about the goodness of a life, ranking some lives as better than others?

3. *The threshold question*: how good must a life be to count as a good life?

Many comprehensive ethical theories implicitly contain answers to the first question, as I will discuss in the next section: insofar as they aim to specify all the values that matter, one may be able to extract a view of the constituents of a good life. This may not be the case if a theory posits intrinsic values that do not themselves form part of a person's life, or should not be the basis for assessing a life. Aesthetic value may be like this: the mere existence of beauty somewhere may not affect anyone's life even if it has intrinsic value. And where aesthetic value might be attributed to a life, it may not be relevant to the goodness of that life, say if it makes for a good story but is tragic for the person leading it. So there is a *demarcation problem* that a theory of the good life needs to resolve: which sorts of value count, and when, in determining the desirability of a life? I will take this matter up in Chapter [9], where I suggest that a value must be normative for the person whose life it is to count in assessing how good that life is.

Even if an ethical theory posits the elements of a good life and explains their relationship, thus implicitly answering the composition question, it risks giving an unconvincing portrayal of the good life if it does not set out explicitly to do so. Beginning with the query, "what are the criteria that should guide our actions?", one might settle on a moral theory that seems to work well enough given one's starting point. But, as noted in the preceding section, the result may not be attractive from the standpoint of thinking about what ultimately matters in life: asking that question may naturally lead us in a different direction, for instance taking greater account of goods that are serendipitous or otherwise don't result from our actions.

The summative and threshold questions are less familiar and more problematic: forming all-in judgments about lives requires comparisons among values that may be radically different, and are likely incommensurable. And it is far from trivial to say how high we should set the bar for a life to qualify as a good life. Perhaps the exercise is incoherent. One may also wonder whether we even need to engage in it: what's the point of rating a life as a whole? Ultimately, I think the proof is in the pudding: the best reply to such concerns is to give a theory that resolves them. But we can say a few things at the outset.

First, we seem to have little trouble making summary judgments and comparisons about many lives: Haydn's life was better than Caligula's. It may indeed be absurd to think we can assign precise cardinal values to lives, but that doesn't mean we can't make meaningful judgments about such matters at all. If there is some rational basis for making such judgments, it would be good to know about it. Second, it seems reasonable to care about being able to make such judgments in the different practical contexts discussed earlier. In choosing an occupation one may in fact need to juggle radically different values, for instance moral and prudential values, and getting it right amounts to choosing the better life. This seems an entirely intelligible aspiration. When raising children, one wants to know further how high to set the bar: what counts as getting it right, so that you can rest content that their lives have turned out well. And both in planning and in retrospect, it seems reasonable to care that your life will, or does, bear your reflective survey: you can be glad about how it went. In general, a sense of the big picture of what matters in life can be helpful in setting priorities. If the account I defend in this book is correct, for instance, then a great many people are too concerned with their own well-being, as excellence or virtue is far more important for a good life, and one is much more likely to fall short in that department. If one fails to have a good life this will more likely be due to having not lived well than to not having fared well. That seems a non-trivial conclusion.

Philosophers have not been wholly unaware of something like the need for an account of the good life, and variants of the good life question are rife in the literature, dating back at least to Socrates and doubtless before. It is odd, then, that one rarely if ever encounters any sort of explicit theory of the good life. The textbooks abound with claims of the form "P iff Q," and no doubt some are equivalent to "S has a good life iff Q." But I don't recall ever encountering one, and cannot think of any to cite. Nor is it common to see theories that aim merely to enumerate the elements of a good life, at least where this project is made explicit. Ethical theory, ostensibly the theory of the good life, appears to be remarkably uncontaminated by explicit theories of the good life.

8. Extracting what we can from the Big Three

Outrage likely ensues at this point, so it is worth a brief mention of what the best-known ethical theories do have to say about the good life. As we saw in the opening vignette, they are not entirely silent, and we can in fact extract partial, implicit theories of the good life from them. In general, one can roughly discern what a moral philosopher thinks about the good life, at least regarding the composition question, by examining the totality of the values that figure in her favored comprehensive ethical theory.

8.1. Benthamite utilitarianism

Bentham posits two fundamental values that presumably figure in a good life: the good—his hedonistic, welfarist axiology—and the right—his principle of utility. It is clearly desirable on his theory to be happy, as well as to act according to the principle of utility. When reflecting about the sorts of lives we should want for ourselves and our children, his utilitarian theory suggests that we should want both to be happy and to promote the general happiness. Of course, in deciding what to *do*, the principle of utility trumps personal happiness: we must always promote happiness impartially, treating our own as no more or less important than anyone else's. But when reflecting on what would be desirable *in someone's life*, that individual's happiness has a special significance: no one else's happiness is part of that life. Or, depending on how one individuates lives, only a special subset of individuals' happiness is part of it (theirs and their family's, for instance). Now notoriously, utilitarianism doesn't actually posit any fundamental role for individual persons,[26] so the notion of a good life is likewise dispensable.[27]

One might think this problematic in itself, but it is also worth noting some curious features of utilitarian thinking about the good life. Take the Crib scenario: what should you want for your child's life? You could form an idle wish that he both be happy and an efficient happiness-promoter. But in terms of the desires that should actually be operational in the rearing of your child, you should want only to raise him in whatever manner will best serve the greater good. That some bit of the happiness resulting from his life should be *his* is irrelevant. Indeed, that any happiness should eventuate from his own choices is equally beside the point. Were you able to brainwash him or put a "Benthamite maximizer" chip in his brain, or for that matter scatter his organs to the neediest cases, that might yield as good a life for him as you could reasonably aim for. These are variants of familiar complaints against utilitarianism—that it is overly demanding and impartial, regarding individuals as mere vessels of utility.

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[26] E.g., (Rawls 1971).

[27] [Suggestions for references on points made in this and the following sections would be welcome, as I suspect I'm overlooking or forgetting similar critiques on at least some of the points I'm making.]

But there is an additional wrinkle here. It may be that, ultimately, you should form the normal sort of human attachment to your child, as that's perhaps the best way to promote happiness given the way we are. But at this moment, gazing in astonishment at this noisy little blob of protoplasm, there need be no compelling reason for you to set aside utilitarian reasoning, and indeed this seems just the sort of reflective moment in which one should be explicit about the utilitarian calculus. (Set aside that you likely already erred in adding another voracious consumer to the world.) You will become plenty attached in due course. Right now, as a good utilitarian you cannot in any normal sense entertain the thought that your child should have a good life, or that you should endeavor to raise him so that he may do so. All that matters is that you do what you can to ensure that this creature somehow tilts the scales of world happiness favorably, to the maximum extent possible. True, such reflections might still perhaps need to be tempered by certain general dispositions that normally conduce to happiness, such as an aversion to cannibalism. But those broad limits appear to leave it the case that, in the utilitarian mode of reasoning, the question of your child's having a good life, in any remotely conventional sense, does not even arise for you. From this perspective, his life is not a meaningful unit of assessment, merely an emanation in the global field of hedons and dolors.

Perhaps you could think of it thus: his life will be good just in case it makes a positive contribution to the sum of happiness in the world. But that's just to deny that it matters how the story of his *life*, as *his* life and not merely as a vehicle for hedonic optimization, goes. (Good lives thus understood, note, would include the tormented child's existence in "The Ones Who Walk Away from Omelas."[28])

Now consider the utilitarian approach to retrospective assessment. Should Andreas regard his life as a good one? Regarding itself being an act subject to the principle of utility, he should presumably regard it in whatever manner would best promote happiness—probably favorably, since little happiness would likely issue from a thumbs-down. Setting that matter aside, we see that the forward-looking, action-guiding mission of utilitarianism leaves us without much guidance about how to look back on our lives, at least if our aim is simply to know the truth. Did Andreas in fact have a good life? As we've seen, this requires making two judgments: first, was he happy? Second, did his actions make the world a better place, given the options before him? (Note the difference from Crib: there it didn't matter, for your purposes as a parent, whether Junior improved the world through his choices, or simply by being an implement for utility-promotion. But when assessing a life in retrospect, we should presumably give special attention to the agent's actions, and whether they conform to utilitarian morality.)

Here the austerity of the utilitarian framework comes to the fore: there seems no grounds supplied by the theory for making this sort of judgment. Any attempt to make an overall judgment about a life, encompassing both its moral and prudential qualities, seems to venture beyond the resources available to a utilitarian. Or rather, no specification of the truth of the matter seems possible within the bounds of the theory, beyond this: there can be no fact of the matter about whether someone has led a good life, or for that matter a bad life. There is a fact about how well the person fared, and a distinct fact about the righteousness of her actions. But there is no saying how it all adds up. All the theory can advise is: whatever the fact of the matter, form your *judgments* about lives in whatever manner will boost the quantity of happiness. This stems from the action-guiding focus of the theory and its claims to comprehensiveness. The problem, note, is not that the theory doesn't already contain an account of the good life; it is, rather, that utilitarianism seems insistent that no such account is possible. It has given us a comprehensive normative

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[28] (Guin 1975).

framework, and the notion of a good life seems not to be among the possible fruits of this framework. It can perhaps say that Andreas's life was prudentially middling, and morally mediocre. But whether that result might nonetheless add up to a good life, or merit affirmation—there seems to be nothing within classical utilitarianism that might allow us to conjure the materials for answering that question, unless it is to say: you can't add it up at all. There is no fact of the matter whether Andreas had a good life. Nor Stalin, Pol Pot, Haydn, or Rosa Parks. Nor even, perhaps, whether the saint's life was better than the tyrant's.[29]

A further oddity of the utilitarian approach to retrospective assessment is that, even if we restrict our purview only to the moral dimensions of a life, we seem to lose the usual grounds for avoiding bizarre and counterintuitive results about how one should act. The standard advice for making decisions is to promote utility indirectly, for the most part: follow commonsense moral rules, form typical human attachments, etc., as one will tend better to promote utility that way.[30] In most circumstances, the principle of utility serves merely as a *criterion* of right action, not as a decision procedure. This seems plausible to a point, setting aside scruples about the extremely bold empirical claims it embodies, with little evidence to support them. (At least, if it is to be of service in keeping the usual swarm of counterexamples in check.)

But notice that the rationale largely dissipates when we turn to retrospective assessment. In prospect, we might allow that someone with Andreas's circumstances could be justified in following his passion and creating objects of great beauty and excellence; such license makes for a happier world, perhaps. (Likely not all utilitarians would grant this, given the immense humanitarian needs he could instead have devoted his life to addressing, but I set that position aside here.) But looking back on his life, the situation is different for Andreas. With so little living ahead of him, he might achieve some measure of detachment from his earlier concerns and be able to assess his life directly in terms of utilitarian morality. Perhaps utilitarianism would counsel him not to think too much, as it will accomplish nothing except to make him sad. Suppose it does; he could still do the wrong thing and try to discern the truth about his life. From this vantage point, it may well turn out that he should have lived a very different life, more directly in line with utilitarian principles: devoting himself overtime to philanthropy, sacrificing others as needed to serve the overall good (perhaps it would have been for the best had he snuffed his child at birth, sparing the world another management consultant). The usual arguments for not thinking like a utilitarian don't generally seem to apply from the deathbed. And as a result, the deathbed verdicts issuing from the theory are apt to be massively in conflict with the practical advice it gave at the time of action. Living well, as utilitarianism counsels us to do, is liable to result in a life that, looking back, we cannot honestly sanction, and indeed may sorely regret. (Of course, we might choose not to blame our earlier selves, much as the truck driver consumed with regret over a pedestrian she accidentally killed might not blame herself.) There is thus a kind of temporal schizophrenia to the theory.[31] It advises us to live in ways we should later wish we hadn't. Or, more exactly, it advises us to live in ways that we could later endorse only through self-deception.

One might take these concerns to signal fatal problems for utilitarianism, and I would not disagree. But similarly counterintuitive features of the theory have been noted enough times that

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[29] It seems that a utilitarian could at least rank lives when one life is better on both moral and prudential counts than another. But if the tyrant was happier than the saint, then there's no saying who had the better life on a utilitarian view.

[30] E.g., (Railton 1984).

[31] Cf. (Stocker 1976).

there is little reason to expect much movement in the dialectic. Arguably, the point of the theory is not to be intuitively plausible, but to discipline practical reasoning with a theoretical insight so compelling that it matters little whether we can live with it, directly at least, or must for the most part proceed as if we don't believe it. I simply observe that utilitarianism seems incapable of yielding credible answers to the present question: what it means to have a good life.

8.2. Kantian ethics

Of the Big Three, Kant's theory comes the closest to an explicit account of the good life, and arguably contains one. Like Bentham, Kant posits two fundamental values, the right and the good, but reverses their priority and makes the good conditional on the right; one's happiness has value, but only if one merits it. But unlike Bentham, he also posits a notion of the good life, or *summum bonum*, encompassing both: he argues that the highest good for a person is complete happiness accompanied by perfect virtue. In broad outline this view seems fairly close to the standard commonsense understanding of the good life, as being some combination of well-being and virtue, where these are distinct values that sometimes come into conflict. (I will argue for this point, and defend a similar view, in Chapter [9].)

While Kant does not explicitly develop a full-blooded account of the good life—no answer to the threshold question, for instance—he does convey some notion of how the elements of a good life add up: namely, virtue is primary, and well-being doesn't even have value unless accompanied by virtue. But this is a fairly thin gruel: virtue is conceived in narrowly moralistic terms that omits the excellences exhibited in Andreas' craftsmanship, and well-being or "happiness" is barely conceived at all, possibly being equivalent to pleasure but more likely a matter of getting whatever you happen to want, about which there is little Kant thinks we can say. And that's the sum total of what matters in life: treating people as ends in themselves, and getting what you want, consistently with the moral injunction.

As well, Kant offers little guidance on the moral life once you've fulfilled your basic requirements. Should you choose a morally adequate vocation that will make you happy, or a morally exemplary vocation that will be stressful and difficult? Or perhaps an occupation like Andreas', involving a high degree of nonmoral excellence, but again somewhat stressful and difficult? The Kantian framework seems not to have much to say about these questions, and indeed seems incapable even of comprehending the rationale for pursuing nonmoral excellence. (His argument for developing your talents arguably falls well short of explaining what there is to admire in Andreas: if anything, his labors seem pointlessly obsessive if their only purpose is to serve his and others' ends.) It is not that Kant's theory fails to give clear advice on such choices; that may be too much to ask of any theory. It's that his theory goes dark well before that point, leaving us without even a plausible notion of what factors we ought to be weighing. The theory likewise offers meager counsel on how to process the fabric of one's life in retrospect. In practice, these shortcomings are liable to seem even more pronounced, since people don't typically see their lives as moral failures. The interesting questions about how to live, and how we have lived, tend to arise within the broad expanse of morally acceptable options, about which the Kantian framework seems to have little to say.

8.3. Aristotelian ethics

As noted earlier, the Aristotelian approach offers the most coherent vision of the good life, but suffers from a failure to recognize itself as such: it is strictly a theory of well-being. But because Aristotle effectively put it into service as an account of the good life, he had good reason

to ensure that it would include all the elements needed to make for a good life. Remarkably, he very nearly, perhaps actually, pulled it off: the resulting theory has much to recommend it, even as an account of well-being. Even if you clearly have the distinction between well-being and a good life in mind, you might well arrive at a theory along the lines of his. It is hardly madness to suppose that we thrive through the excellent exercise of our human capacities—that well-being consists in virtuous living.

So while strictly a theory of well-being, Aristotle's account might reasonably be considered effectively to be a theory of the good life, even if only implicitly. I will take up this theory in greater depth in Chapter [3], but for now wish to note a pair of difficulties for an Aristotelian treatment of the good life. First, it obscures important features of human life, namely the tradeoffs we must navigate among well-being and other values. We sometimes must choose whether to pursue a life that would make us better off or one that would be superior in some other respect, for instance resisting an oppressive government or struggling to achieve the highest reaches of excellence in one's trade. Second, it is not clear how to make sense of Aristotelian virtue unless we suppose there are values independent of our own flourishing: part of living virtuously is engaging appreciatively with excellence in others, and with beauty.[32] To make sense of this picture without supposing that the virtuous agent is laboring under an illusion we need to posit values apart from the agent's flourishing: the value of excellence, and likely also the value of beauty, perhaps among others. But if excellence in others has value independently of the agent's own well-being, then presumably it has the same value in the agent herself. And if this is right, then the Aristotelian picture of the good life is at best incomplete: excellence figures as part of one's own well-being, but also enhances one's life as a further aspect of the good life—it is valuable not simply *qua* constituent of eudaimonia, but also as an instantiation of a different sort of value: an intrinsic good, excellence, or what is sometimes called perfectionist value. This is a problem, if only because eudaimonia is supposed to encompass all that matters in life, and that appears not to be the case on this view. But it is also a problem because it raises the question whether we should accept this view of eudaimonia or well-being in the first place: we don't need to incorporate virtue into well-being to make it an important aspect of the good life. It's already part of a good life.

I do not expect this brief treatment of the historical views to be fully convincing. The point is not to prove any major ethical theory wrong, but merely to show that there is good reason for discontent about how the notion of a good life has been handled in the most prominent parts of the field. At this stage in the game, it is enough if we can agree that there is indeed a broad notion of the good life, distinct from that of well-being, that is worth learning about, and that the chief ethical frameworks have not adequately treated. In the chapters to follow I will attempt to sketch the outlines of such a treatment. We begin, in the next chapter, with the theory of well-being, specifically the eudaimonistic attempt to chart the contours of the good life through the theory of well-being, taking Aristotle as our chief example.

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[32] Cf. (Hirji 2018).

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