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The folk concept of the good life: neither happiness nor well-being

Markus Kneer[1] · **Dan Haybron**[2]

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Abstract
The concept of a good life is usually assumed by philosophers to be equivalent to that of well-being, or perhaps of a morally good life, and hence has received little attention as a potentially distinct subject matter. In a series of experiments participants were presented with vignettes involving socially sanctioned wrongdoing toward outgroup members. Findings indicated that, for a large majority, judgments of bad character strongly reduce ascriptions of the good life, while having no impact at all on ascriptions of happiness or well-being. Taken together with earlier findings these results suggest that the lay concept of a good life is clearly distinct from those of happiness, well-being, or morality, likely encompassing both morality and well-being, and perhaps other values as well: whatever matters in a person's life. Importantly, morality appears not to play a fundamental role in either happiness or well-being among the folk.

Keywords Good life · Happiness · Well-being · Welfare · Eudaimonia · Flourishing · Morality · Virtue · Moral psychology

1 Introduction

Consider someone you know who has passed away. Did they have a good life? How would you go about answering that question? That depends on what is meant by 'good life'. Here are three credible possibilities:

✉ Markus Kneer
Markus.kneer@gmail.com

Dan Haybron
haybron@gmail.com

[1] IDea_Lab, University of Graz, Graz, Austria

[2] Department of Philosophy, Saint Louis University, St. Louis, USA

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1. A morally good life
2. A prudentially good life, where the person is high in well-being or welfare, thrives, flourishes, is *eudaimon* or, in one sense, leads a happy life[1]
3. Something broader: a choiceworthy or desirable life, taking account of whatever matters in life; the sort of life one should want. For example, perhaps a good life is just a life that merits an overall positive evaluation: being morally good, doing well, etc.

Given the obvious importance of having a good life, philosophers have naturally had a good deal to say about the good life, and the term frequently appears on book covers in large print. It resonates. However, the literature mostly discusses only the second meaning, where 'good life' just refers to well-being; whereas the first, moralized definition is typically mentioned only to be set aside.[2]

In either case, the idea of a good life is not regarded as a distinct concept from other familiar notions already widely discussed in the literature, so that there is no significant body of work distinctively concerned with the good life, as opposed to well-being or virtue.[3] Consequently the third option, that 'good life' takes a broad meaning encompassing whatever values matter in a person's life, has largely gone unrecognized and is rarely suggested as a possible meaning of the term let alone employed in philosophical argument.[4]

This might seem an odd state of affairs. If asked, about a recently departed acquaintance, whether they had a good life, it might seem very natural to employ the broader meaning: a life of either immorality or unrelenting misery may suffice to motivate a negative answer. Neither sort of life is comfortably deemed "good." And this might be the case even if one rejects Aristotle's view that morality is ultimately *part* of well-being and believes, with Kant, that morality and well-being are fundamentally distinct and often conflicting aspects of a good life.

There is no obvious reason to think that when people cite Grandma's virtues as grounds for thinking her life a good one that they would consider it irrelevant whether she suffered or enjoyed it. Nor, if her cheerful mindset was given as a reason for deeming her life good that they would deny it also mattered if she was a terrible person.

Uncontroversially, people tend to think well-being and morality are both important in their lives, and it seems to be commonsensical that they should take account

[1] These terms may or may not be exactly equivalent, but all are commonly employed in the philosophical literature as rough equivalents for what we'll usually call "well-being" here. Theories framed in all these terms are standardly taken as competing accounts of prudential value: benefit, self-interest, etc.

[2] E.g., Annas (1993); Besser (2021); Bishop (2015); Bloomfield (2014); Bradley (2009); Fletcher (2013); Foot (2001); Heathwood (2010); Hursthouse (1999); Kraut (2007); MacIntyre (1981); Russell (2013); Tiberius (2013). For discussion of different possible senses of 'good life', with only passing or no mention of the third possibility, see Campbell (2015); Feldman, 2004.

[3] For convenience we focus only on moral virtue here, though many virtue theorists would add nonmoral virtues to the picture.

[4] However, see Haybron (2007), (2008), (2013). Other apparent exceptions include (Carson, 1978; Hassoun, 2013; Hill, 1999; Kekes, 1993; Swanton, 2003). Kant, discussed by Hill, may be the most notable historical exception.

of both sorts of value in making overall judgments about a person's life, regardless of their philosophical views. It is better to live well than badly, and better to fare well than badly. That is, one's life is better in either case. And if either makes for a *better* life, it would be peculiar to suppose that only one bears on the question of a *good* life. So the third definition of 'good life' appears to be commonsensical, raising the question why it has largely been absent from the philosophical literature on these matters.

Perhaps it is not commonsensical, however; that depends on what the folk actually think about the good life. Regrettably, we know of no empirical studies that clearly address the question at hand. There has in recent years been a substantial amount of research on the folk concept of happiness, and some as well on the notion of well-being.[5] Psychologists have done some empirical work on folk conceptions of the good life, some of it suggesting that multiple values, including prudential goods like subjective well-being and moral factors, play a role in lay thinking about the good life. But that research is inconclusive regarding the folk concept, leaving it open whether definition 2, 3 or some other is at issue.[6] Here we present studies designed to test whether the lay concept of a good life may in fact be identical to that of well-being or perhaps happiness, or whether it is a broader concept encompassing morality and other values.

In earlier studies we found that 'good life' exhibited a sensitivity to the external conditions of a person's life—e.g., being deceived about betrayal—similarly to standard well-being terms like 'doing well' and 'enviable life', while ascriptions of 'is happy' tended only to be sensitive to internal psychological factors, not external conditions (Kneer & Haybron, 2024a). Because the vignettes tested were morally neutral, this result is compatible with either a "well-being" meaning for 'good life' or the third, broader definition.

In later studies we tested the role of morality in ascriptions of 'is happy', finding no effect for most individuals, consistently with that term usually taking a purely psychological meaning (Kneer & Haybron, 2024b). This result differs from the well-known findings of Phillips et al.,[7] likely because we employed examples of socially sanctioned immorality directed at out-group members, such as slavery and tribal warfare, whereas the earlier research involved socially prohibited immorality of extreme sorts like child abuse that participants might have assumed signaled some deep manner of psychological illness or distress. Whereas people might find it easier to reconcile immoral conduct with happiness when it is directed at outsiders and socially approved.

[5] See Brigard (2010); Bronsteen et al., 2024; Carlquist et al. (2017); Díaz and Reuter (2021); Hindriks and Douven (2018); Joshanloo (2013), (2014); Mogilner et al. (2011); Oishi et al. (2013); Olivola et al. (2013); Pflug (2009); Phillips et al. (2011), (2014), (2017); Prinzing et al. (2022); Prinzing and Fredrickson (2022); Reuter (2022); Sotgiu (2016); Weijers (2014); Yang et al. (2021).

[6] King and Napa (1998); Scollon and King (2004), (2011). See also Bonn and Tafarodi (2013); Carlquist et al. (2017); Kho (2019); Wierzbicka, (2009).

[7] Díaz and Reuter (2021); Phillips et al. (2011), (2014), (2017); Prinzing et al. (2022); Prinzing and Fredrickson (2022); Reuter, 2022; Yang et al. (2021).

1.1 The present studies

In the present studies, we test the effect of morality on lay judgments of the good life, as well as happiness and well-being. As in our previous study of morality and happiness, we employ examples of slavery and tribal warfare, adding to the mix a businessman whose work harms individuals in a distant country. If two individuals are described identically in terms of their mental states and other factors commonly associated with well-being, but differ only in the moral goodness of their conduct, do lay ascriptions of the good life differ from those of happiness and well-being? Based on the commonsense conjecture above, we hypothesized that they would: happiness ascriptions should be relatively unaffected by immorality, while ascriptions of the good life would be strongly impacted. We expected that well-being ascriptions would, like those for happiness, show a modest impact of immorality. But given that many philosophical accounts of well-being, like those of Plato and Aristotle, take morality to be a basic part of well-being, it seemed likely that some portion of the folk would share that view, so that well-being ascriptions would be more strongly affected by immorality than those for happiness.

1.2 The import of these questions

These questions are significant because, if we are correct, then ‘good life’ likely takes the third meaning, as a broad term for a life that is positively valenced both morally and prudentially (and perhaps otherwise). That would mean that philosophers’ abundant writings about “the good life,” mostly assuming it to be identical with well-being, are not talking about the good life as the folk know it, but something narrower and perhaps considerably less important. Or, at best, they are employing the term in a sense other than the dominant meaning employed in ordinary contexts like those studied here.[8] Given that more than a few textbooks and other volumes tout the weightiness of their contents by emblazoning “The Good Life” on their covers, such a result would seem to be of considerable philosophical interest.[9]

One of the central debates in ethics, for instance, concerns whether the ancient eudaimonists were correct that well-being *consists* in morality, so that a life of wrongdoing necessarily harms an individual. One standard argument to this effect notes that intuitively, a seriously immoral person does not seem to lead a good life;

[8] It is not implausible, for instance, that when a person utters, “Ahh, this is the good life” while sipping a margarita on the beach, a well-being meaning is intended. Though even here one could be playing with the broader meaning, hyperbolically emphasizing the significance of small pleasures in life. In fairness, the language of well-being is remarkably awkward, and it may not be hard to get people to accept a prudential reading of ‘good life’ even if it is not the primary or most important sense of the term.

[9] We consider appeal to folk intuitions helpful in this context. Some philosophers might disagree (see e.g. Kauppinen, 2007; Ludwig, 2007; Williamson, 2008). This debate has been going on for some time now, but we think the doubts have been answered convincingly. See, e.g., (Alexander, 2012, 2016; Alexander & Weinberg, 2007; Kneer et al., 2021; Horvath, 2010; Machery, 2011, 2017; Schwitzgebel & Cushman, 2012, 2015; Weinberg, Gonnerman, Buckner, & Alexander, 2010).

therefore, well-being necessarily rules out such a life. Or at least, commonsense intuition supports that conclusion. Yet such arguments are fallacious if the intuitions in question are about some broader notion than that of well-being, on which morality is taken to be crucial no matter what one thinks of well-being.[10]

2 Experiments

2.1 Participants

Participants. We recruited participants from the US on Prolific for three experiments, of which 286 passed the attention checks. In line with the preregistered criteria,[11] 3 participants who were not native English speakers or took less than 20 s to answer the main questions (including reading the prompt) were excluded, leaving a sample of 283 participants (female: 64%; age M = 36.2 years, SD = 13 years, range: 19–78 years).

2.2 Methods and materials

The experiment took a 3 scenario (between-subjects: *Plantation, Warrior, Businessmen*) × 2 moral character (within-subjects: good v. bad) mixed design.[12] The scenarios all describe two characters who enjoy a high level of subjective well-being yet differ in their moral behavior (scenarios and questions are stated in the Online Appendix, Sect. 1). Participants who received the *Plantation* scenario, for instance, were presented with the following materials on a single screen:

> **Simon the plantation owner**
> It is the early 1800s, and Simon is a wealthy plantation owner in the Southern United States. He owns many slaves, who live in harsh conditions and are often treated cruelly. But this is typical of the region and Simon pays little attention to their fate.
> Simon enjoys a rich social life, a close family, and a leisurely lifestyle with interesting hobbies to engage his time. He is very satisfied with his life, takes great pleasure in everyday activities, and is generally cheerful and relaxed. He is untroubled, and sleeps well at night.

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[10] See Haybron (2007), (2008).

[11] See https://aspredicted.org/FFZ_H15 and https://aspredicted.org/DP8_FKN. The Qualtrics survey files, data and Online Appendix are available on the project's Open Science Framework page at https://osf.io/86tmj/.

[12] In fact, we ran the vignette *Plantation* in one experiment, and then *Warrior* and *Businessmen* in a second, joint experiment. Since the results are near-identical across scenarios, we ran a single analysis with scenario as a random factor in the linear mixed effects model.

Bernard the doctor
It is the early 1800s, and Bernard is a wealthy doctor in the Southern United States. He practices general medicine, and has cured many people in town and from other cities in the region who came to visit him.
Bernard enjoys a rich social life, a close family, and a leisurely lifestyle with interesting hobbies to engage his time. He is very satisfied with his life, takes pleasure in many everyday activities, and is generally cheerful and relaxed. He is untroubled, and sleeps well at night.

To what extent do you agree or disagree with the following claims? [1: completely disagree, 7: completely agree]
[Morality] "[A] is a morally good person." (manipulation check)
[Happiness] "[A] is happy."
[Doing well] "[A] is doing well."
[Good life] "[A] leads a good life."

Having completed the main task, participants responded to a brief demographic questionnaire.

2.3 Results

2.3.1 General results

The manipulation check shows that people rated the moral character of the good and bad protagonists very differently (planned contrasts, all $ps < 0.001$) and the effect sizes for all three scenarios were very large (all Cohen's $d > 1.65$, see Fig. 1).[13]

We estimated a linear mixed-effects model with the "lme4" package in R (Bates et al., 2015), regressing the dependent variables on the moral characteristics as a fixed factor and scenario as a random factor to test the main effect of moral character on the DVs. We found a significant main effect on *happiness* ($\chi^2(1) = 14.76$, $p < 0.001$), *doing well* ($\chi^2(1) = 24.54$, $p < 0.001$), and leading a *good life* ($\chi^2(1) = 195.35$, $p < 0.001$). Planned contrasts revealed small or medium-small effects of morality on judgment of happiness (across scenarios, Cohen's $d = 0.36$) and doing well ($d = 0.43$), and large effects on judgments of leading a good life ($d = 1.02$), see Fig. 1. Mean ratings for happiness and doing well significantly exceeded the midpoint of the scale both for the good and bad characters in each scenario and overall (one sample t-tests, two-tailed, all $ps < 0.001$; all analyses and results can be found in Sect. 2 of the Online Appendix). As regards the good life, mean ratings significantly exceeded the midpoint for the good character (all $ps < 0.001$), yet for each scenario, and overall, did not differ significantly from the midpoint for the bad character (all $ps > 0.131$).

[13] This is an interesting finding in itself, as it calls into doubt the view that the folk has a subjectivist or relativist view of moral value (for discussion and a review of the empirical literature, see Pölzler, 2018, and Pölzler & Wright, 2019). If the folk did indeed have a non-objectivist conception of moral value, we would presumably not find such a strong difference across agents in scenarios where both act in ways consistent with norms that are viewed as socially acceptable at the time and context in question.

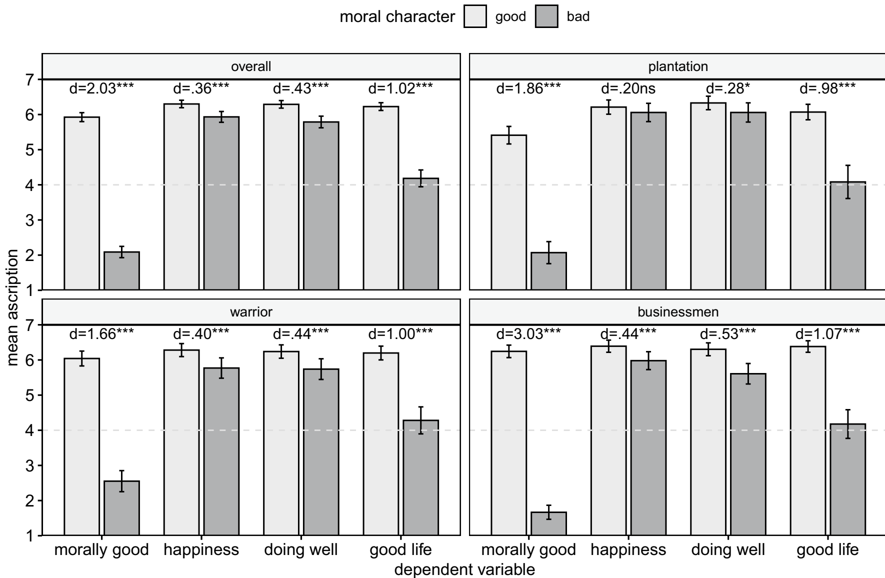

Fig. 1 Mean ratings for each DV across moral character (light bars: good, dark bars: bad), overall and for each scenario. Error bars denote 95% confidence intervals. * = $p<0.05$; ** = $p<0.01$; *** = $p<0.001$

2.3.2 Proportions

Whereas at the level of the mean, the results seem to suggest a noteworthy, although moderate influence of moral character on judgments of happiness and doing well, these results can be misleading: They are, in fact, driven by a small minority of participants. We calculated the proportions of participants who rated the two characters (good and bad) *identically*, so as to get a better grasp on how prevalent the alleged influence on morality is on happiness and the other dependent variables.

As illustrated by Fig. 2, the vast majority of participants held that the bad character was deemed just as happy as the good one and as doing just as well. For both DVs, the proportions of identical responses significantly exceed chance (binomial tests, $ps<0.001$), and they do not differ from one another (overall, $p=0.076$). By contrast, only a small minority of participants held that the two characters lead similarly good lives (significantly below chance, binomial test, $p<0.001$), a proportion which significantly differed from the one for being happy and doing well ($ps<0.001$).

2.4 Discussion

Our results in these studies find a clear difference between the lay concept of the good life and those of happiness and well-being, with judgments of bad

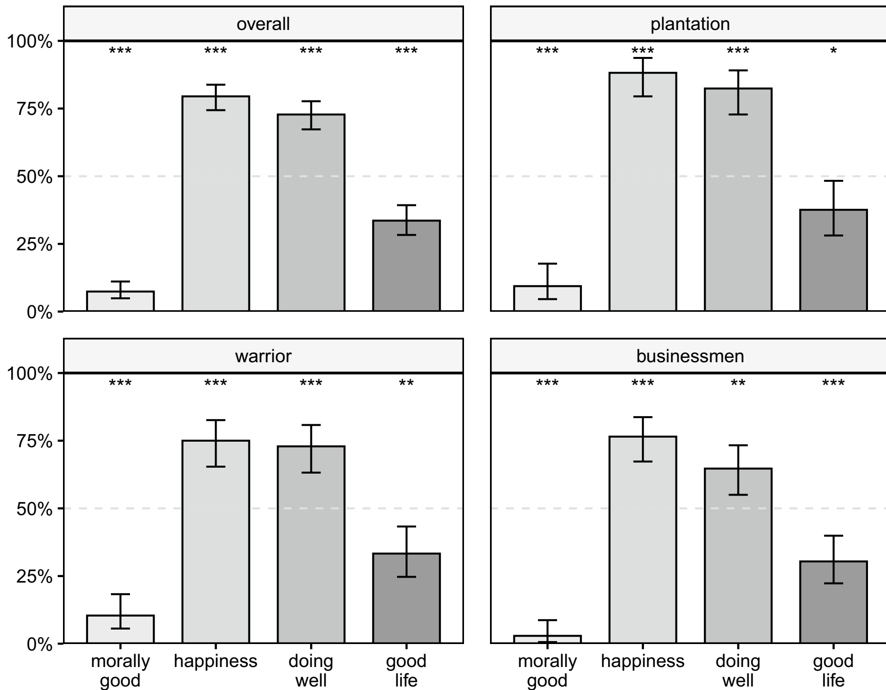

Fig. 2 Proportions of identical assessment of the two characters in terms of each DV, overall and for each scenario. Error bars denote 95% confidence intervals. * = $p < 0.05$; ** = $p < 0.01$; *** = $p < 0.001$

character sharply reducing ascriptions of the good life but only modestly affecting judgments of happiness and well-being. (At least, assuming that 'doing well' expresses the concept of well-being.) And that modest effect is driven entirely by a decided minority of participants, roughly a quarter; for a strong majority, even extreme forms of immorality like slavery had no effect at all on judgments of happiness and well-being, even as they strongly influenced assessments of the goodness of the agent's life among a similarly large majority.

If these studies generalize, then the dominant folk conceptions of happiness and well-being are decidedly non-moralized. By contrast, moral virtue plays a prominent role in lay conceptions of the good life. At the very least, the ordinary concept of the good life is distinct from those of happiness and well-being. Moreover, the considerably smaller effect of immorality on ascriptions of the good life than on those of moral character suggests that the good life also includes familiar prudential goods like enjoyment. That is, the dominant concept of the good life plausibly takes the third form noted earlier, as a concept encompassing plural goods that matter in a person's life, including both morality and well-being.

3 General discussion

Our studies yielded two main results of note. First, a person's moral qualities appear to have no direct bearing on ordinary assessments of happiness and well-being among the great majority of individuals. This finding is consistent with an earlier study involving similar vignettes focusing just on happiness ascriptions (Kneer & Haybron, 2024b). These studies suggest that among the folk, the ancient and much-debated idea that happiness or well-being requires moral virtue seems to hold little currency: a bad person can perfectly well be happy and do just fine.

This of course does not settle the philosophical debate, as the folk may be wrong. Further studies may also reveal that these results do not generalize, or apply only among American English-speaking populations. But it does suggest that philosophers following Plato in claiming that serious immorality precludes flourishing are defending a less-than-intuitive position, despite the widespread use of intuition pumps in this literature.

Why might many philosophers' intuitions, and earlier research on the influence of morality on happiness ascriptions, have pointed to a different verdict? As the current paper focuses primarily on a different question, the concept of a good life, we refer the reader to Kneer and Haybron (2024b) for more extensive discussion of the differences between our findings and those of Phillips et al.

But one possibility is that the claims in question rest on the intuitions of a small but significant minority—roughly a quarter—whose judgments of happiness and well-being showed some impact of morality. But even among this group our studies here and in previous work found a modest impact of morality compared to the very strong philosophical claims at issue: not just that morality exacts *some* toll on the wrongdoer, but that such a person cannot do well at all. Indeed, establishing the latter claim is essentially the point of Plato's *Republic*.

A more salient explanation is that the philosophical arguments, and the earlier research that seems to support them, have often focused on cases of immorality that might ordinarily be taken to involve substantial psychological and other subjective costs: mob bosses and despots are not widely taken to enjoy a great deal of peace of mind or security however successful they might be, and men who rape their young nieces probably tend not to enjoy a deep sense of fulfillment, joy and tranquility. Stipulations to the contrary may be so far at odds with expectations that people simply can't accept them, and qualitative reports appear to confirm this hypothesis (Kneer & Haybron, 2024b).

It is hard to come up with convincing cases of grave immorality that do not conjure images of (perhaps deep or hidden) distress, insanity or other subjectively undesirable states. But this problem appears to be ameliorated considerably if, as in our studies here, the examples focus on forms of immorality that might seem to be relatively easy for ordinary human beings to live with: treating outsiders badly, for instance, particularly when doing so is approved of or even demanded by one's culture. Indeed, curmudgeons not infrequently allege that happy people *usually* are so despite their involvement in serious wrongs—cheerfully unbothered, for

instance, by the toll of their lifestyles or inaction on distant people. It is not especially contrarian to suppose that, as a species, we're pretty good at being bad toward outsiders.

Second, and more importantly still, we found clear evidence that the dominant folk concept of the good life is distinct from those of well-being and happiness. In stark contrast to the cases of happiness and well-being, judgments of immorality strongly influenced ascriptions of the good life, with a strong majority rating immoral individuals as having less good lives than their virtuous counterparts. Moreover, the mean effect of immorality on good life ascriptions was quite large.

But not, crucially, overwhelmingly large: while virtuous individuals were rated as having very good lives on average—near the top of the scale—morally bad individuals scored around the midpoint of the scale, not toward the bottom as one would expect if 'good life' simply meant "morally good life." Participants did offer character ratings near the bottom of the scale for immoral cases, indicating that they believed those individuals to be quite bad, though they gave much more positive ratings about whether they had good lives.

Note, however, that a minority of roughly one-third evinced no influence of immorality on good life judgments, suggesting that the "well-being" meaning may have some currency among the folk. Philosophers employing 'good life' in the second, well-being sense may be drawing on one accepted use of the term even if it is not the primary usage.

Recall our earlier findings that good life ascriptions behave similarly to well-being ascriptions in morally neutral scenarios involving familiar internal and external goods and bads like cheerfulness or sadness, good or bad relationships or work, and so forth (Kneer & Haybron, 2024a). Taken together with the results of these studies, the natural conclusion is that 'good life' predominantly takes the third meaning noted at the beginning of this paper: it signifies a life that merits affirmation on the whole, taking account of whatever values matter in a life.[14] Or at least, it concerns a life that is good *both* morally and prudentially. And this appears to be the dominant view even in a population that largely deems morality to have no direct relevance for whether someone is happy or doing well.

4 Conclusion

The concept of a good life is quite distinct from those of happiness and well-being, and concerns something at least as important as either, if not *more* important: how a person's life goes regarding whatever matters in a person's life, whether in terms of well-being or morality. It may be that the concept of a good life embraces other goods as well, depending on what people take to be of fundamental importance. It is also possible that this concept specifically concerns well-being and morality, omitting other goods that might matter in life. But the simpler explanation is that

[14] Our results thus appear to support earlier contentions that 'good life' often takes this meaning in ordinary language (Haybron 2007; 2008; 2013).

the concept of the good life is not narrowly tied to those values, but rather serves to afford summary assessments of people's lives, all things considered.

It should not be surprising that the folk might employ such a concept in thinking about their lives. When considering what our priorities and aspirations should be, or how well our lives measure up, it would be odd to reduce such deliberations to one or another particular value—moral goodness, say, or benefit—rather than the whole panoply of goods that matter in a life, including goods we might have overlooked. If you want your children both to be good and do well, and generally to have the sorts of lives one should want, you might wish to have the ability to entertain that thought.

Socrates posed what many have taken to be the central question of ethics: roughly, "How should one live?"[15] As it has figured in philosophical ethics, this is arguably a call to get clear on what matters in life—not just morally, not just in terms of self-interest, but *period*. The broad concept of the good life that the folk appear to employ is not just a philosophically interesting concept: it may be *the* core concept at the heart of thinking about how to live, and how to regard the lives we've led. Yet few philosophers, at least in the Western tradition, seem to have recognized that such a concept exists at all, and perhaps none have engaged very deeply in theorizing about it.

An important question is how far the present good life concept turns up in other languages and cultures. For example, it may be that 'good life' among English speakers inherits its meaning partly from the use of this term in practices of speaking about the dead, as in eulogies; but such practices vary cross-culturally and the perceived need for all-in assessments of persons' lives may not be universal. Furthermore, 'good' is something of a protean term and cognates in other languages may take different meanings.[16] More generally, empirical studies in the social sciences are predominantly conducted with participants from WEIRD countries,[17] and US Americans in particular, and a more concerted effort to explore this and other topics across a broad variety of cultures and languages is urgently required.

If our results do hold up on further investigation then the folk, astonishingly, appear to find utterly natural a crucial distinction that philosophers seem almost universally to be oblivious to. Evidently the subtleties involved, so plain to most, have escaped the subtle minds of nearly all of some two millennia of philosophers, for whom any notion of the good life could be nothing more than a question of benefit, or of moral virtue. If there has been a larger failure of the philosophical literature to heed the voices of the folk whose intuitions are claimed as support, we do not know what it might be.

Supplementary Information The online version contains supplementary material available at https://doi.org/10.1007/s11098-024-02187-7.

[15] Plato (1992), Williams (1985).

[16] See, e.g., Wierzbicka (2009).

[17] WEIRD stands for western, educated, industrialized, rich and democratic countries. See Henrich (2010).

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