‘How Should I Live?’

IN SEARCH OF THE GOOD LIFE

There is a question in life that at some point is likely to acquire urgency for many reflective people – including therapists and their clients. This question is: ‘How should I live?’ It can also be expressed as: ‘What is worth pursuing in life? How can I live a worthwhile life? How can I avoid wasting my time in this world?’ This distinctly philosophical set of concerns often ends up being explored in a psychotherapist’s consulting room.

Aristotle, among other philosophers, thought that there was an answer to this question. Not just a range of answers, varying indefinitely across individuals and/or cultures, but an answer common to all human beings by virtue of their being human. He was among the first philosophers to treat the good life as a defined topic of enquiry, and although he wrote a long time ago much of what he had to say is still relevant to our own search for a worthwhile life. Aristotle assumed that there was a universal aim in life and that this was *eudaimonia* – the good life, human flourishing. But, as he himself acknowledged, to say that people want to flourish and have a good life does not take us very far in finding out what that means in practice. His method for ascertaining this was to begin with common views about the good life and put them through critical scrutiny. I will follow him and consider pleasure and happiness, wealth, success and relationships – all common topics in counselling and psychotherapy – before turning to such central issues as reason and the virtues.

**Happiness**

Happiness is big business nowadays. It is commonly assumed that our aim in life is to be happy. Gurus, workshops, self-help books and thera-
Reputable techniques jostle in the marketplace to sell us happiness. Scores of people seek some kind of therapy because they want to be happy. But what is happiness?

Our terminology is confused and confusing. Our ordinary concept of happiness is entangled with that of pleasure, and both are vague. The word ‘pleasure’, for instance, can suggest a physical sensation, such as what we may associate with a massage, but can also refer to the more diffuse sense of enjoyment we could get from walking in the woods in the autumn, learning the tango, looking at a Vermeer, listening to the *adagio* from Schubert’s String Quintet or talking with a friend. ‘Enjoyment’ covers a similar area but is broader, with weaker physical connotations. ‘Happiness’ is even more unspecific, and while we could talk of being happy when enjoying any of those things, the term is often used to refer to a generalised sense of well-being and contentment.

But the main characteristic of this happiness–pleasure cluster is that it refers to a subjective feeling or mood. The view that this feeling or mood is the most important ingredient of the good life is a common one and is known as *hedonism*, from the Greek word for ‘pleasure’. From the dawn of philosophy, some form of hedonism has often been held to be the truth about the good life.

The idea that happiness as subjective experience could be the most valuable thing in life is challenged by a widely quoted thought-experiment known as ‘the experience machine’:

Imagine a machine that could give you any experience (or sequence of experiences) you might desire. When connected to this experience machine, you can have the experience of writing a great poem or bringing about world peace or loving someone and being loved in return. You can experience the felt pleasure of these things, how they feel ‘from the inside.’ You can program your experiences for tomorrow, or this week, or this year, or even for the rest of your life . . . . Would you choose to do this for the rest of your life? If not, why not?

(Nozick, 1989, pp. 104–5)

We would not remember entering the programme once we were in it, and we might even program in uncertainty in order to provide variety and prevent boredom. Could this be a good life, the best possible life? Most people do not think so. This shows that on reflection most people do not consider pleasant experiences the most important thing in life. What matters more than how experiences *feel* is that they are *real*: we do not want to just *feel* that we have climbed Everest or written a great symphony; we want to have actually done so. Achieving these things
may not always be pleasant, but may nevertheless be worthwhile and give meaning to our lives.

Aristotle’s discussion of pleasure as a potential candidate for the role of the main ingredient of the good life hinges on the distinction between being pleasant and being worthwhile. His views about pleasure of the physical sort seem damning at first: people whose main interest lies in bodily pleasures live lives that are ‘fit only for cattle’ (*Nicomachean Ethics* [hereafter cited as *NE*], Book I, Ch. 5). We might therefore be excused for thinking that Aristotle is advocating a life of self-denial. But this could not be further from the truth.

Aristotle’s defence of pleasure takes mainly two forms:

1. *There are different types of pleasure, and they are good or bad in different degrees.* The word ‘pleasure’ can be applied to a range of experiences, only some of which are to do with satisfying bodily appetites, while others may instead result from being absorbed in study or other worthwhile activities. This is a distinction that has tended to recur in the history of philosophy and reappears, for instance, in J. S. Mill’s distinction between higher and lower pleasures.

2. *Even purely bodily pleasures are good in moderation.* We are embodied creatures, and Aristotle recognises that a certain number of ‘goods of the body’ are important for a good life: ‘for everyone enjoys fine food and wine and sexual intercourse in some way, but not everyone in the way he ought’ (*NE*, Book VII, Ch. 14). Bodily pleasures can be harmful and distract us from more worthwhile pursuits, but it is only excessive indulgence that is damaging, not the pleasures themselves. Too little appreciation of these can also hinder our pursuit of the good life.

Bodily pleasures are therefore acceptable and even good within reason, but we can also redefine our understanding of ‘pleasure’ to mean the kind of enjoyment that is an intrinsic part of being involved in any worthwhile activity. Here it is not the attainment or otherwise of pleasure that determines whether an activity is worthwhile; on the contrary, pleasure results from the value of the activity. Although both kinds of pleasure have a place in the good life, the latter is the better and more lasting. According to Aristotle, it just is pleasant to, say, study philosophy.

We can probably think of several counterexamples to this: activities that we value but do not particularly enjoy at the time, such as studying
for an exam, helping a friend through a depression, running a marathon for charity. We may be glad to have done these things, but that is different from enjoying them at the time. Aristotle occasionally admits that enjoyable or pleasant experiences and worthwhile ones do not always coincide. Of course there is no reason why things should not be pleasant and worthwhile, but the point here is that when the two do not coincide it is by no means a foregone conclusion that enjoyment should trump other kinds of value.

The Greek word eudaimonia – the good life, human flourishing – was traditionally and still is mostly translated as ‘happiness’. But it is widely acknowledged that this translation is misleading, since our notion of happiness as a momentary and subjective feeling is miles away from the Greek ideal of eudaimonia as applying to a whole life and based on what that life was actually like rather than what it felt like.

The thinness of our concept of happiness as compared to the richness of eudaimonia has been recognised by a number of authors. Grayling (2003, pp. 27–8), for instance, writes that by eudaimonia Aristotle meant ‘an active kind of well-being and well-doing. . . . The English word “happiness” . . . embodies a very pallid conception in comparison: one could make everybody happy by putting suitable medications in the water supply, but that would scarcely convey what Aristotle had in mind.’

Similarly, Marar (2003, p. 8) condemns our concept of happiness in vivid terms: ‘The very idea seems untextured, toothless, “happy clappy”. The concept belongs in some virginal fairyland, bleached of nuances and subtlety. The terrain of real life, criss-crossed by pain and beauty and smells and tears and dignity and ideas and eroticism, simply cannot have its contours reflected by such a shapeless notion.’ He also points out that the ancient concern about how we should live has nowadays been replaced by a narrower focus on what we really want, in what he calls ‘the subjective turn’: instead of a comprehensive question about a whole life, we have adopted a much more limited question about self-fulfilment and self-expression.

Feelings of happiness are part of what we want in life, but other things may be both more important and unrelated to the felt quality of the experience we are having. As Nozick (1989, p. 106) points out, ‘there is more to life than being happy’. That enjoyment is not always the most important value is corroborated by stories about individuals who choose to devote themselves to something worthwhile and absorbing – research, say, or human rights – that entails making
sacrifices and foregoing the pleasant experiences that they could otherwise have had. After what was by all accounts a tormented existence, the philosopher Wittgenstein’s last words were: ‘Tell them I had a wonderful life.’

If this is the case, to which should we give priority? Should we fill our life with pleasant episodes or sacrifice immediate enjoyment for the sake of worthwhile achievement? Ideally a good life should contain a balance of both: a life that has had many worthy achievements but hardly any enjoyment seems a bit grim, and conversely a life that has seen many enjoyable times but has not been guided by some worthwhile goal seems vacuous and superficial.

Another conclusion that has been drawn is that happiness should be a ‘side-effect’ of living a good life rather than something that we seek for its own sake. According to Nozick (1989, p. 113), happiness ‘rides piggyback on other things that are positively evaluated correctly’. He also writes that, ‘We want experiences, fitting ones, of profound connection with others, of deep understanding of natural phenomena, of love, of being profoundly moved by music or tragedy, or doing something new and innovative, experiences very different from the bounce and rosiness of the happy moments. What we want, in short, is a life and a self that happiness is a fitting response to’ (p. 117).

**WEALTH**

Wealth is another ubiquitous aim for human beings. And yet we have no trouble thinking of examples of people who are very rich and very unhappy. It is a cliché that money cannot buy happiness (although perhaps it can make unhappiness less uncomfortable). What is the proper place of wealth in the good life? Since most people adopt this as a goal, it needs to be at least considered as a candidate.

Aristotle has no time for this, and dismisses this claim briskly by saying (*NE*, Book I, Ch. 5) that, important though money is, it is only a means to an end: ‘wealth is clearly not the good we are seeking, since it is merely useful, for getting something else.’ It follows from this that a life devoted exclusively to the accumulation of money would not, for Aristotle, qualify as good. This seems right. It is almost always what money can give us that we want, rather than the money itself. What it can give us is leisure time, opportunities, comfort. What we (wrongly) think it can give us is self-esteem and freedom from worry.

There are a number of problems with making the value of our lives depend excessively on the acquisition of material goods:
1. Spending our life in the pursuit of material goods (bigger cars, houses, designer clothes) is likely to prevent us from devoting our time and energy to more important and worthwhile things. Thoreau (1983, p. 73) expressed a similar sentiment when he wrote that ‘the cost of a thing is the amount of what I will call life which is required to be exchanged for it, immediately or in the long run’.

2. These goods are flimsy, in the sense that their retention is not always up to us, and we could never absolutely insure against their loss; therefore it seems unwise to rely on them for our well-being.

3. It is a well-known fact about human beings that as soon as a desire is satisfied another will take its place, so that pursuing the good life in this way could end up as a wild goose chase.

At the other extreme are those who renounce their wealth. The philosopher Wittgenstein, for instance, chose to give away his family fortune. An even more extreme choice is to abandon a life of luxury for a life of renunciation. According to the legend, Prince Siddhartha Gautama, later to be known as the Buddha, walked away from his father’s palace in the depth of the night – leaving behind wife and son, renouncing all worldly goods – and took himself off to live a life of contemplation and self-denial in the forest. He spent a few years as a wandering ascetic, meditating and fasting. He did not allow himself to have sufficient food, clothing, shelter – all things that we normally consider fundamental to a good life.

Is it possible to have a good life if we are cold and hungry? Perhaps it is not impossible, but it would certainly be a challenge for most of us. Aristotle (NE, Book X, Ch. 8) thought that a certain number of basic goods\(^1\) was necessary: ‘because the happy person is human, he will also need external prosperity; for human nature is not self-sufficient for contemplation, but the body must be healthy and provided with food and other care’.

Even the Buddha arrived at the conclusion that extreme renunciation was not the right way to enlightenment, and that a more moderate path was a better way. However, Aristotle warns us that this is not the ingredient that makes a life flourishing:

we should not think that someone who is going to be happy will need many substantial things, just because one cannot be blessed without external goods. For neither self-sufficiency nor action depends on excess,

\(^1\)Basic goods include, but are not confined to, material goods: reasonable health, for instance, is an important prerequisite for a good life.
and we can do noble actions without ruling over land and sea, because we can act in accordance with virtue even from modest resources.

\textit{(NE, Book X, Ch. 8)}

Although a moderate quantity of material goods is a prerequisite for a good life, and great misfortune will prevent someone from having a truly blessed life, even in very unfortunate circumstances what really determines our quality of life is not the circumstances themselves but what we make of them:

For the truly good and wise person, we believe, bears all the fortunes of life with dignity and always does the noblest thing in the circumstances, as a good general does the most strategically appropriate thing with the army at his disposal, and a shoemaker makes the noblest shoe out of the leather he is given, and so on with other practitioners of skills.

\textit{(NE, Book I, Ch. 10)}

\textbf{SUCCESS}

Other things that many people want are fame and recognition, so we need to consider the possibility that it might be these that make a life good. Aristotle is wary of this, since they are too dependent on the whims of fortune:

Honour, however, seems too shallow to be an object of our inquiry, since honour appears to depend more on those who honour than on the person honoured, whereas we surmise the good to be something of one’s own that cannot easily be taken away.

\textit{(NE, Book I, Ch. 5)}

The relationship between our own excellence in whatever field and our being so recognised by the outside world is by no means direct. People get to the top for all sorts of reasons, and being excellent is not necessarily the most important one: an engaging personality might count for more, or even a Machiavellian one, for that matter. Conversely, people may fail to get to the top for reasons unrelated to lack of talent: again, personality characteristics could get in the way, as could simple lack of opportunity, or being ‘in the wrong place at the wrong time’.

It is also possible to \textit{choose} not to climb the dizzy heights of success, in the awareness that there is always a price to pay, perhaps in sheer time, or having to make compromises, or having one’s privacy invaded. Despite having the opportunity to be a university professor, the philosopher Spinoza chose to make a living grinding lenses, devoting his
spare time to philosophy. On the other hand, the pages of magazines are full of the exploits of celebrities who are famous only for being famous. Could this be what we mean by the good life?

Furthermore, success itself is not the point: we do not just want to be recognised, we want to be recognised by people we admire and for a good reason:

Again, they seem to pursue honour in order to convince themselves of their goodness; at least, they seek to be honoured by people with practical wisdom, among those who are familiar with them, and for their virtue. So it is clear that, to these people at least, virtue is superior.

(NE, Book I, Ch. 5)

We could say that what is important is our talent, but according to Aristotle that is not quite it either, since great misfortunes or inactivity can prevent someone from having a good life despite their great gifts or talents. Talent has to be actualised in some way.

And what should we make of cases of posthumous recognition? Did Mozart’s and Van Gogh’s lives fail to be good while they were alive but suddenly became good when their fortune turned, though too late for them to enjoy it? Aristotle thought that this kind of view would be absurd. Yes, the possible future effects of our actions matter, but they should not matter excessively.

Bertrand Russell’s (1975, p. 39) assessment in this respect seems right: ‘Success can only be one ingredient in happiness, and is too dearly purchased if all the other ingredients have been sacrificed to obtain it.’

RELATIONSHIPS

Aristotle recognises that human beings are inherently social, and that therefore a good life should include human relationships of various sorts. He thought that we would be hard pushed to describe someone who is totally solitary as having a good life: ‘No one would choose to live without friends, even if he had all the other goods’ (NE, Book VIII, Ch. 1). He devoted many pages to this topic. There are three types of relationships, according to Aristotle:

\[\text{RELATIONSHIPS}\]

\[\text{Aristotle uses, philia, is traditionally translated as ‘friendship’ but is much broader in meaning, and covers a range of social interactions – from casual ones with the local shopkeepers or friends we meet at the pub, to romantic and family relationships.}\]
(1) the useful (e.g. business associates);
(2) the pleasant (e.g. people who entertain us with funny stories); and
(3) the ones based on mutual admiration.

Of these, the last kind is the most important, since it is the most solid. The first two are

... incidental, since the person is loved not in so far as who he is, but in so far as he provides some good or pleasure. Such friendships are thus easily dissolved, when the parties to them do not remain unchanged; for if one party is no longer pleasant or useful, the other stops loving him.

\((NE, \text{Book VIII, Ch. 3})\)

A good life may dispense with business associates and jokers, but it may not easily dispense with the mutual disinterested love and care that distinguishes genuine relationships. These are likely to be few, since an essential aspect of this kind of relationship is sharing joys and sorrows, and it is simply not possible to allocate that amount of attention to many people.

To what extent should we stand by people we genuinely care for if they reveal themselves to be morally other than we thought, or if their behaviour takes a turn for the worse? Should we dump them if they suddenly switch political allegiances, or have an affair, or embezzle money from the charity they work for? What if they commit some hideous crime? Aristotle thought that we should give up on them if the crime were truly vicious, but otherwise we should try to help them to see the error of their ways, even though this would be likely to change the nature of the relationship. Genuine relationships entail a certain amount of agreement on important matters.

When it comes to our attitude towards ourselves, we should cultivate the same feelings of friendliness and warmth that we display towards people we care for. This involves being undivided in our feelings and thoughts, wishing ourselves good things, enjoying spending time with ourselves and generally being kind to ourselves.

How can we disagree with all this? Of course we need people who care for us and whom we care for in order to have a good life. Of course all sorts of other things and achievements may seem empty and futile in the absence of important others with whom to share them. But solitude has its place too. In his writings on *flow*, the psychologist
Csikszentmihalyi (1992) says that solitude can be enjoyed so long as we learn how to structure our attention. He writes that it is important for a well-rounded life to be able to do that, since if we regard solitude as something that should be avoided at all costs we will end up resorting to distracting activities of limited worth in order to fill the gaps. Being alone can be enjoyable and fruitful.

In a similar vein, the psychiatrist Anthony Storr (1989) writes that, important though love and friendships are, they are not the only source of happiness, and they should not be burdened with that responsibility. In fact, many people of genius spent very solitary lives. He mentions the following: Descartes, Newton, Locke, Pascal, Spinoza, Kant, Leibniz, Schopenhauer, Nietzsche, Kierkegaard, Wittgenstein. Creative pursuits and impersonal interests, ‘whether in writing history, breeding carrier pigeons, speculating in stocks and shares, designing aircraft, playing the piano, or gardening’ (p. xii) can make a life happy and valuable even in the absence of satisfactory human relationships.

In his solitary hut by Walden Pond, Thoreau (1983, p. 180) found that at times of loneliness nature was a better companion than any human being:

In the midst of a gentle rain while these thoughts prevailed, I was suddenly sensible of such sweet and beneficent society in Nature, in the very pattering of the drops, and in every sound and sight around my house, an infinite and unaccountable friendliness all at once like an atmosphere sustaining me, as made the fancied advantages of human neighborhood insignificant.

Personal relationships are important to a good life and therefore deserve a substantial investment of time and energy. But we should also cultivate impersonal interests and develop the capacity to be alone. We must remember too that it is possible for some individuals to choose solitude and isolation for the sake of other pursuits, such as contemplation.

**REASON**

Aristotle believed that the main ingredient of a human life is reason, since this is the defining characteristic of human beings. We share growth and reproduction with plants and movement and sense-perception with animals, but reason is what distinguishes us from other
known forms of life. While all the things discussed so far are part of the good life, reason is key to it. There are different interpretations of Aristotle on this, but it is plausible to read him as saying that a good life should include the best possible use of all human capacities, reason being the central one among them.

A mindless life, one that is not in some way ordered by reason, would barely count as a human life: if reason is what makes us distinctively human, a fully human life must include it. But a good human life could not fail to include ‘at least some of the satisfactions which arise from our inescapably biological nature’ (Cottingham, 1998, p. 40). And our capacity to feel deep emotions, to love, to be moved by music, art, nature is also unique, most certainly part of what makes us fully human. We should value and cultivate all aspects of our humanity (senses, emotions, reason) while realising that they need to be ordered by reason.

Aristotle divided reason into theoretical (sophia) and practical (phronèsis). Theoretical reason is about contemplating unchangeable truths. Practical reason (or practical wisdom) is to do with deliberation and choice in the sphere of things that can be changed. It is hotly debated which of these Aristotle considered most important. An interpretation that seems to make sense is that ideally – if we were more like the gods – we might want to devote our lives to contemplation, but given that we are mere mortals we need other things as well. As human beings, practical wisdom is perhaps the fundamental way in which our rational nature expresses itself.

It would be difficult to deny that some practical wisdom needs to underpin everything we do, whatever our chosen goals: we would be hard pressed to achieve anything at all without an ability to weigh up, assess, choose, plan, implement, monitor. On the other hand, could we really have a good life without some intellectual curiosity, without seeking to learn and understand? Both are ways of applying our unique capacity to reason, and as such essential ingredients of the good life. In addition, practical wisdom is a way to obtain the other things that make for a good life: it is therefore at the same time an end in itself and a means towards other ends.

A modern endorsement of some of these ideas comes from the literature on flow (Csikszentmihalyi, 1992, 1997), according to which we function at our best in situations where we have clear goals and immediate feedback, and skills and challenges are appropriately matched. At those times our attention is ordered, we become totally absorbed in our task and we lose track of time. This is the most valuable kind of
experience – more important than happiness, which suffers from being
both more passive and more vulnerable to external circumstances.
When we are in flow, we cannot be happy, because we are focusing on
the task at hand rather than on our state of mind. By learning to control
and direct our attention we can increase the amount of flow that we
experience in our life.

The idea that flow is active and leads to increased complexity in
consciousness seems particularly important. Hurka (1993, p. 123)
makes a similar point, albeit in a different context: the best life requires
being involved in complex and challenging activities that ‘stretch
our capacities, demanding more rationality than ones that are simple’.
While flow theory is clearly a product of modern psychology, it is
Aristotelian in the sense that it identifies a way of functioning that
universally makes for a better life, and it considers enjoyment to be
best generated by worthwhile activities that involve our cognitive abil-
ities. We should not aim for happiness: we would never reach it. Instead,
we should aim to do things that stretch us and help us to develop.
Happiness may be a by-product of that.

THE VIRTUES OF CHARACTER

Theoretical and practical reason are intellectual virtues, and they are
a central part of the good life. But they are not enough: in order to
flourish as human beings we also need to develop the virtues of char-
acter that allow us to feel and act according to reason. This is the other
requirement of a fully rational life. Aristotle suggests that in order to
live well we should adopt appropriate ideals, learn to identify the
appropriate course of action through rational deliberation and train
ourselves to feel and act accordingly.

Practical wisdom is about judgement, about deciding how to act in
each given situation: choosing goals, assessing them, deciding what is
feasible, appropriate, desirable, considering possible consequences,
selecting options, implementing, monitoring. Being virtuous, on the
other hand, is about training ourselves to develop the qualities and
character traits that will enable us to follow the dictates of practical
wisdom with ease.

There are spheres of life that we find it difficult to deal with, and
being virtuous is about becoming skilled at handling these, getting it
right in situations in which it is easiest to get it wrong. But what does
‘getting it right’ mean? This is how Aristotle puts it:
For example, fear, confidence, appetite, anger, pity, and in general pleasure and pain can be experienced too much or too little, and in both ways not well. But to have them at the right time, about the right things, towards the right people, for the right end, and in the right way, is the mean and best; and this is the business of virtue. Similarly, there is an excess, a deficiency and a mean in actions.

\textit{(NE, Book II, Ch. 6)}

Getting it right involves ‘hitting the mean’ in our feelings and actions, in everything we do. Excess and deficiency are opposite ways of getting it wrong. The right thing, which ‘hits the mean’, is determined by reason in decision-making. In order to develop a good character we need to encourage in ourselves the tendency to \textit{want} to follow reason, and cultivate the attitudes and habits that help us to have appropriate and balanced emotional responses to things and situations. The virtuous person enjoys acting virtuously and ‘is fully unified in motivation and deliberation. He does not have to summon up willpower to do what he sees to be the right thing, for he does not have to fight down countering desires’ (Hursthouse, 1999, p. 369). This attitude can be developed by training.

The term ‘virtue’ has recently been rescued from languishing in philosophy books and Victorian manuals, and been adopted as one of the buzz words of the Positive Psychology movement. Seligman (2003), the guru of Positive Psychology, draws a distinction between positive feelings due to ‘shortcuts’ (passive pleasures) and those arising from the exercise of strengths and virtues. The latter are more enduring and are the ones that produce ‘authentic happiness’.

\textit{MINDFULNESS}

‘Theoretical reason’ for Aristotle refers not to learning about the world but to the contemplation of unchanging truths. The boundaries he draws around this concept are somewhat different from those that seem natural to us. We may prefer to use this term in relation to learning and acquiring knowledge. But there is a yearning for transcendence that is also fundamental to human experience and that could perhaps be captured by what we could call ‘mindfulness’, an attitude of attentiveness and sensitivity to the world around us. This seems an important part of the good life.

One way to experience a connection with the mystery of life is through nature. Russell (1975, p. 191) wrote that it is in a ‘profound
instinctive union with the stream of life that the greatest joy is to be found: we are creatures of the Earth, and a connection with its rhythms gives us true and profound satisfaction. Our life seems to be enhanced by things that give us a sense of belonging and perspective, putting us in touch with the very big or the very small, and through that with the vast natural processes of which we are part. Referring to a similar concept that they call ‘transcendence’, Peterson and Seligman (2004, p. 39) write that it ‘is that which reminds us of how tiny we are but that simultaneously lifts us out of a sense of complete insignificance’.

We can also experience moments of discontinuity and insight through aesthetic appreciation. Referring to Japanese aesthetics, Grayling (2003, p. 2) writes about ‘an attitude of appreciation and mindfulness, especially mindfulness of beauty, as central to a life lived well’. This celebrates ordinary things like ‘the patterns of grain in wood emerging after many years, the sound of rain dripping from eaves and trees, or washing over the footing of a stone lantern in a garden and refreshing the moss that grows about it’.

The concept of an ‘agnostic spirituality’ is less contradictory than it may seem (Batchelor, 1998), and mindfulness is its foundation. Nozick (1989) points out that paying attention to our breathing is a way of breaking down the boundaries between us and the external world, making us feel less like a separate entity and more aware of the web of interconnections in which we exist.

There can be a thin dividing line between a mindful attitude and a religious one, but it could be argued that the difference is great. From an agnostic point of view, the value we can find in life is to be found within it, ‘exploring and responding, relating and creating’ (Nozick, 1989, p. 110); religious perspectives, on the other hand, often place the value of life outside life itself, in some future realm or divine purposes. But does this really work? According to Baggini (2004, p. 19), looking to God and an afterlife to add meaning to our life is a misguided policy, entailing as it does a leap of faith ‘that a God we cannot know to exist has a purpose we cannot discern for an afterlife we have no evidence is to come. Further, we would also be trusting that this purpose is one we would be pleased with’.

It could also be said that any belief that fundamentally clashes with reason should, no matter how consoling, be disqualified from being part of the good life. It may indeed be the case that religion makes people happier, as is often reported, but the price of happiness would be too high if it required lowering our standards of reasoning
and evidence. According to Grayling (2003, p. 203): “fulfilment” could never be understood as meaning some thin, vacuous species of “happiness” that could be produced by . . . acceptance of a system of falsehoods and illusions’, and is something that can be achieved ‘without the aid of belief in supernatural agencies or adherence to an organised religion’.

THE GOOD LIFE: ONE OR MANY?

Aristotle’s account of eudaimonia involves ‘the full range of human life and action, in accordance with the broader excellences of moral virtue and practical wisdom. This view connects eudaimonia with the conception of human nature as composite, that is, as involving the interaction of reason, emotion, perception, and action in an ensouled body’ (Nagel, 1980, p. 7).

Since Aristotle, many others have tried their hand at sifting the essential ingredients of the good life. One such list is: knowledge, rational activity, close personal relations, appreciation of beauty, development of personal potential, moral goodness3 (cited in Guignon, 1999). And another: accomplishment, basics of human existence (autonomy, enough health and material goods, liberty and so on), understanding (both practical rationality and knowledge of oneself and the world), enjoyment (beauty, nature, ‘textures of life’), deep personal relations (love and friendship) (Griffin, 1986). For Grayling, the essential ingredients are: ‘individual liberty, the pursuit of knowledge, the cultivation of pleasures that do not harm others; the satisfactions of art, personal relationships, and a sense of belonging to the human community’ (2003, p. 203).

Taking inspiration from Aristotle we could say that the good life will tend to involve basic goods (sufficient health and material comforts, liberty and autonomy), some enjoyment, achievement and meaningful relationships with people. But the main ingredients are reason, in the shape of practical wisdom as well as learning and understanding, and the virtues of character. What is important to note here is that what really makes for a good life is activity involving reason rather than possession of some good or other. And we must not forget that

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3This presupposes the split between the moral and the prudential that is common in modern ethics. But, given the focus on the overall question of how to live, this split is redundant in virtue ethics.
this activity may include imagination, appreciation of beauty, creativity, humour.

Many people will feel that this is too prescriptive. An assumption engrained in our outlook on life is that it is a purely individual matter to determine what the good life is. We might feel that everything is up for grabs, that we create our own values single-handedly, and that there are few or no constraints on how we might choose to live. We are the ultimate judges: any choice is as good as any other so long as it pleases us. If we decided that the good life for us consists of eating chips in front of the television, this would not be open to challenge. According to Taylor (1991), this kind of view can be traced back to three eighteenth- and nineteenth-century ideas: (1) that human beings have an intuitive sense of what’s right and wrong, and we therefore need to trust our inner voice to reveal to us the right thing to do; (2) that we are free when we decide for ourselves, instead of being influenced by external agencies or authorities; and (3) that each of us is called upon to develop his or her own distinct way to be human.

Taylor (1991) recognises the value of the ideal that he calls ‘authenticity’ in potentially leading us towards a more responsible way to live. But he also suggests that, in order to perform this function, this ideal needs to be rescued from the extreme subjectivism that we have become used to. In particular, we need to separate it from the false view that moral positions need no justification other than in terms of how we feel. Moral judgements are just the sorts of things that, unlike tastes in food or fashion, do require to be justified in relation to reason and matters of fact. So ideas of what is or is not a good life can be fruitfully discussed with no need for excessive use of the conversation stopper ‘Well, that’s just your opinion’ (Blackburn, 2001, p. 27).

What are the implications of having a theory of the good life? It is by no means the case that having a ‘template’ needs to result in a uniform recipe for every individual. While it can serve as a rough guide to the good life, such a list is clearly a general one, based on features that human beings share. There are indeed some fairly universal constraints: they are rare people, for instance, who are able to live a good life in the absence of the basics. But people differ in their inclinations, talents and circumstances, and there cannot be a particular balance or unique combination of ingredients that is appropriate for everyone. Both the relative balance of ingredients and the particular way of realising each ingredient may vary between individuals. Not everybody has to fulfil each item, or fulfil it to the same degree. Different individuals could realise each item on the list in different ways. Through the
application of practical wisdom we can make the blueprint more concrete by identifying what for us is the correct way to fulfil each of the goods and the correct balance of goods.

The next section takes a slight detour from the matter of searching for the ingredients of a flourishing life and considers the vexed issue of the foundations of the good life. Finding a sound way of conceptualising this is important to ground the more practical concerns.

THE FOUNDATIONS OF THE GOOD LIFE

Aristotle’s theory that the main purpose for human beings should be to develop their rational nature was grounded in a more general worldview. It was a common belief in the Greece of his time that the universe was rationally ordered and that human beings had a precise place within it. Once this order was understood, the recipe for the good life would follow. This was particularly so in the later Hellenistic philosophy, which was conceived of as a complete system linking scientific and ethical understanding, thus generating a recipe for how to live.

Aristotle’s views are encapsulated in the famous ‘function argument’, according to which everything in the universe has a purpose or function dictated by its essential nature. Just as the purpose of an acorn is to develop into an oak tree, that of human beings is to develop their unique human capacities, in particular their capacity to reason. The function of a thing or creature could be described as ‘what it does that makes it what it is’ (Nagel, 1980, p. 8), and the good of each thing is specified by its particular function. Human beings do many things, but many of these (nutrition, growth, reproduction, sense perception, movement) are also done by plants and animals, so they are not what makes us human. Since the capacity to reason is what makes us who we are, that is what we should develop in order to have a good life.

There are different interpretations of Aristotle on this. According to a plausible one, it is wrong to think that our distinguishing characteristics alone could be suitable ends for complex beings like us: if we removed from our life the features that we have in common with other creatures, we would no longer be describing a human life. The good life for us is more likely to be defined by a selective mixture of what we share with other animals and what is distinctive of us.

The function argument has had a bad press. If we are at all of a scientific persuasion (which Aristotle would strongly approve of) we will not be able to take it at face value. Cottingham (1998, p. 10) writes that
ever since the birth of science there has been a tension between a goal-
directed view of the world, in which everything can be explained in
terms of a final cause, and a scientific one, governed by impersonal laws
of physics. He reports that in the early seventeenth century Francis
Bacon was already asserting that the search for final causes ‘is sterile,
and, like a virgin consecrated to God, yields no fruit’.

Since then we have had to accept the sad truth that natural processes
do not happen for the sake of anything in particular, and goal-directed
explanations have been replaced by ones that had seemed counterintui-
tive before: our development, like that of any other creature, is ruled
by the quirks of natural selection and random mutation. In River out
of Eden (1996, p. 96), Dawkins writes that ‘nature is . . . pitilessly indif-
ferent. This is one of the hardest lessons for humans to learn. We
cannot admit that things might be neither good nor evil, neither cruel
nor kind, but simply callous – indifferent to all suffering, lacking all
purpose’.

But adopting a scientific world-view does not mean that our search
for the good life is doomed. Perhaps human nature is all we need to
support our understanding of human flourishing.

THE QUAGMIRE OF HUMAN NATURE

The concept of human nature could provide a foundation for the good
life by revealing that human beings have certain characteristic features
that entail that a good life for them must take a particular form (or one
of a number of specific forms). But there are some hurdles associated
with this kind of project.

The main question is whether there is such a thing as human nature
at all. We are very divided in our assessment of human nature. On the
one hand, we have become used to a postmodern, relativistic perspec-
tive according to which it is not possible to appeal to human nature as
a foundation for objective moral judgements because it does not exist.
There is no bedrock of humanity, only local practices, and every aspect
of human experience is almost entirely shaped by culture. If we took
this line, we would be hard pressed to justify any notion of human
flourishing or the good human life. At best we could adopt a concept
of the good life in relation to particular cultures.

While admitting that our common biology places certain constraints
on cultural possibilities, for instance, MacIntyre (1985, p. 161) writes
that ‘Man without culture is a myth’. He draws attention to the fact
that there have been clashing accounts of flourishing and well-being at
different times and in different cultures, and that there are ‘different and incompatible lists of the virtues; they give a different rank in order of importance to different virtues; and they have different and incompatible theories of the virtues’ (p. 181). But while cultural diversity is an important fact about us, there are also facts about us as humans that considerably overlap between cultures.

On the other hand, evolutionary psychology tells us that human nature is alive and well. This has become a fairly stable part of our mental landscape too. But the evolutionary understanding of human nature is open to misinterpretation, and often taken to endorse all sorts of conservative positions, from the fixity of gender roles to the wrongness of homosexuality to the justification of male aggressive and predatory instincts. These conclusions are unwarranted.

In her brilliant *Human Nature after Darwin* (2000), Radcliffe Richards grapples with the question of what the human nature revealed by evolution really implies in terms of what we should or should not do. She explains that evolutionary theory refers to tendencies within species rather than individual behaviour; moreover, it deals with how particular traits have developed, not whether we should welcome and develop these or hold them in check. The fact that love may have originated from some such mechanism as ‘I’ll scratch your back if you scratch mine’ by no means entails that love does not ‘really’ exist or has no ‘real’ worth or that we never ‘really’ love another person. To say that a characteristic is natural from an evolutionary point of view is not to say anything about how things should be: no normative conclusions ensue. Adopting an evolutionary account of human nature, therefore, has no greatly significant consequences for a theory of the good life.

One of the problems is how to decide which of our characteristic features are essential for a flourishing life. As Hurka (1993) points out, human properties are innumerable, and it is simply not possible to develop all of them; also, some of them could not possibly form part of our concept of the good life. ‘Humans may be uniquely rational, but they are also the only animals who make fires, despoil the environment, and kill things for fun’ (p. 11). Should we view these as important qualities for us to develop?

Indeed, the terrain of this debate is populated by dubious characters such as skilled thieves, gangsters and *mafioso* drug barons, illustrating the point that if we try to equate a good, flourishing life with the development of our distinctive abilities and qualities we do not always get the desired results. Lying and deception are distinctive human characteristics, but most of us would not see these as viable ingredients of the
good life. But on what basis do we decide that certain tendencies should be curbed and others encouraged? If we do select some for repression and others for development, we have smuggled values into a definition of human nature that was supposed to ground our values, not just express them.

**BETWEEN GODS AND BEASTS**

If science will not provide the answers, where does this leave us? Hursthouse (1999) reports that Foot begins one of her papers with the – seemingly surprising – remark that in moral philosophy it is useful to think about plants. The strategy adopted by Foot and endorsed by Hursthouse is to argue that, just as plants and animals can be evaluated as good or bad specimens of their kind, so must humans. Just as ‘“there is something wrong with a free-riding wolf, who eats but does not take part in the hunt” and “with a member of the species of dancing bees who finds a source of nectar but does not let other bees know where it is”, there is something wrong with a human being who lacks, for example, charity and justice’ (p. 196).

What might be the human equivalent of a free-riding wolf or a secretive bee? We have already seen that the answer is not to be found in the presence or absence of particular tendencies identified by evolutionary theory, since these would be non-normative. Hursthouse (1999) writes that, unlike other animals, we are not wholly constrained by our inherited past: apart from obvious physical and perhaps psychological limitations, we are able to assess the way we are and at least try to change it: if it is natural that female cheetahs have a worse life than male cheetahs, female human beings do not have to accept any such notions of what is ‘natural’.

She concludes that there is something characteristic of human beings, but not in the same way as other animals: while typical animal behaviours (such as food acquisition, mating, rearing the young) have to be described in detailed terms and are discovered by observation, the one truly characteristic feature of human beings is that we are able to act from reasons as opposed to slavishly following our instincts and desires. The fact that we are able to do this at all connects with the earlier suggestion that the good life for humans may consist mainly in activity according to reason. But clearly we do not always act from good reasons, and therefore proficient rational activity should be seen as an ethical ideal rather than as a value-free description.

Perhaps then the project should take a different form, dropping the scientific aim of justifying ethical principles on the basis of neutral
features and adopting instead the aim of producing a specification of the good life that is based on our most profound sense of what it means to be a human being. According to Nussbaum (1994, p. 61), for instance, the good human life ‘must, in the first place, be such that a human being can live it’.

Nussbaum has developed this normative account in a couple of important papers (1993, 1995). Her main point is that the good human life has to be defined in relation to what humans – not gods or beasts – would find plausible. The question of what a good human life is cannot be answered from an external, scientific perspective, since it necessarily has to connect with beliefs about aspects of our existence that are so central as to be defining of who we are, and without which our life could not be said to be human. According to Isaiah Berlin, ends ‘must be within the human horizon’ and ‘cannot be unlimited, for the nature of men, however various and subject to change, must possess some generic character if it is to be called human at all’ (cited in Rasmussen, 1999, p. 40).

Nussbaum’s (1993) ‘take’ on the Aristotelian virtues is that they are related to spheres of human experience that tend to occur in everybody’s life and that it is not really possible for us as human beings to avoid. Aristotle’s question then is: ‘What is it to choose and respond well in that sphere? And what is it to choose defectively?’ (p. 245). These spheres of experience are related to such fundamental issues as death, the body, pleasure and pain, and social interactions, and present most of us with difficult choices: ‘The question about virtue usually arises in areas in which human choice is both non-optional and somewhat problematic. Each family of virtue and vice . . . attaches to some such sphere’ (p. 248).

A MARRIAGE OF OBJECTIVITY AND PLURALISM

A scientific notion of human nature will not help us to construct an ideal of the good life because it will not tell us which characteristics to cultivate and which to curb. But there is still much that human nature can do for us by illuminating the boundaries of human flourishing, the areas of choice that as humans we cannot avoid negotiating, and the qualities and virtues required to do that well.

The constraints imposed by human nature stem from the fact that as a result of being particular kinds of creatures human beings have certain general needs – to do with food, shelter, community, freedom from extreme pain, and a certain amount of liberty and autonomy – in the absence of which flourishing is unlikely. Kekes (1988) identifies a
number of physiological, psychological and social facts that create minimum standards to which good lives must conform. A common criticism is that although we can in this way establish minimal qualifying constraints (entry qualifications, as it were) on the notion of a good life, beyond this things become a little more indeterminate.

But we are beings that can reflect and reason. If this capacity is removed from our life, it will no longer be the life of a human: ‘[t]he mindless life is not ruled out by external facts of nature; . . . what is established is the cost of the choice, and how deeply it is at odds with some of our firmest convictions concerning who we are’ (Nussbaum, 1995, p. 117). The conclusion that the good life for us has to involve the use of reason does not dictate any particular way of realising this, but it does reduce the number of possible good lives, eliminating for example a life given totally and exclusively to passive pleasures.

Practical wisdom is exercised in connection with the basic facts of human life. It is because of our mortality, bodily needs, dependence on the world outside us, pain and pleasure, desires and appetites that practical wisdom is called for. It is the whole package that defines our experience, creating commonality and overlap across the variety of human cultural expressions. But this does not give us anything like a precise recipe for how to conduct our life. As Rasmussen (1999, p. 6) puts it: ‘The generic goods and virtues of human flourishing are not like Recommended Daily Allowances for vitamins and minerals. Their weighting, balance, or proportion cannot be read off human nature like the back of a cereal box and applied equally across all individuals as if individuals were merely repositories for the generic goods and virtues. Rather, it is only when the individual’s particular talents, potentialities, and circumstances are jointly engaged that these goods and virtues become real or achieve determinacy.’

The fact that beyond basic requirements our recipe for the good life becomes vague does not mean that any judgements and evaluations are just as good as any others. It only means that we need to reflect on how the notion of the good life is to apply to our own case, given our particular temperament and circumstances. Nussbaum (1993, p. 257) uses an enlightening analogy with navigation: ‘Aristotelian particularism is fully compatible with Aristotelian objectivity. The fact that a good and virtuous decision is context-sensitive does not imply that it is right only relative to, or inside a limited context, any more than the fact that a good navigational judgement is sensitive to particular weather conditions shows that it is correct only in a local or relational sense.’
An ideal of the good life, then, can be objective in the sense of involving certain ingredients and ruling out others on the basis of the kind of creatures we are. At the same time, however, it can be agent-relative in the sense that there is no exact specification of the balance of ingredients or how each ingredient is to be realised. As Isaiah Berlin wrote: ‘The general parameters of human flourishing are provided by human nature. Their concrete form is not’ (cited in Rasmussen, 1999, p. 40). Concrete questions can be resolved only in relation to particular situations and individuals.

An Aristotelian approach allows the moral agent to determine the right course of action in relation to particular facts as well as general principles, foregoing rigid and inflexible rules such as ‘thou shalt’ and ‘thou shalt not’ (Grayling, 2003, p. 29). It is just because precision is not to be sought in the sphere of human affairs – as Aristotle always warned – that this is such a rich area to explore in counselling and psychotherapy.

PRACTICAL APPLICATIONS

A basic fact of life is that we have ideals and desires – sometimes a wealth of them – and limited powers to achieve them during lives of limited duration. Given this, developing all our human abilities to the full is simply not an option. Devoting all our energies to one goal is likely to mean that others will suffer, and this may or may not be an acceptable outcome. According to Russell (1975), ‘In the good life there must be a balance between different activities, and no one of them must be carried so far as to make the others impossible’ (p. 128). But he qualifies this by saying that ‘[a]s a limitation upon the doctrine that has just been set forth, it ought to be admitted that some performances are considered so essentially noble as to justify the sacrifice of everything else on their behalf’ (p. 129).

Goals and ideals may clash, either intrinsically or because there are too many of them. In these imperfect circumstances, we need to think through which to adopt, to what extent to pursue them, and how to reconcile them with other goals and ideals. Doing this will make it less likely that we turn back at the end of our life and, like Tolstoy’s Ivan Ilyich, realise when it is too late that we have squandered our time on ultimately trivial or inappropriate activities. There is no right balance of ingredients that does not make reference to individuals. Most people have talents and skills in some areas but are lacking in others.
Depending on our particular combination of capacities and their relative importance, we may choose to devote substantial time and effort to developing the areas in which we are not well endowed, or instead accept our limitations and give greater emphasis to the areas in which we are.

There are many possible clashes of goals and ideals: deep personal relationships and family life, for instance, may clash with a life of contemplation or dedication to art, research or a social or political cause. These ideals are not intrinsically contradictory, but because of limitations of time and energy we may find ourselves in the position of having to choose between them or rank them in order of importance.

A tension that is often present in people’s lives is that between achievement and contentment. Both of these seem genuine goods, well worth developing: devoting time and energy to a well-chosen goal and seeing the results of our efforts is an important part of the good life, just as never straying from our comfort zone is likely to be ultimately unsatisfactory. At the same time, however, exclusive concentration on achievement can be hollow and make for a stressful life. And the capacity to accept our lot and be content with what we have is also a crucial part of the good life. It may be possible for us to have both, in which case we need to learn when to prioritise achievement and when instead well-being and a peaceful state of mind. Or it may be that one of these poles is so important to us that we are prepared to all intents and purposes to give the other up and to live with the consequences.

Similarly, there is a possible tension between the variety of a well-rounded life and dedication to one activity. The two horns of this dilemma have been called diletante’s disadvantage and costs of concentration (Hurka, 1993). On the one hand, it is often the case that the more we invest in an activity, the more we gain from it. Trying to do too many things may lead to ‘spreading ourselves thin’ and only skimming the surface of each. On the other hand, if we devote all our time and energy to one activity we run the risk of having a narrow life and missing out on richness of experience. Should we prioritise depth and high achievement or breadth and a well-rounded life? Each will entail a substantial sacrifice, but for most of us something has to give.

As has been discussed, while human nature may reveal a plurality of generic goods and virtues, this does nothing towards specifying the relative importance of these for particular individuals, or how any particular individual would be best advised to pursue any one of them. As Rasmussen (1999, p. 14) puts it, ‘what human flourishing amounts to in terms of concrete activities for any particular individual
is not something that can be simply read off human nature in some recipe-like manner. Similarly, Nussbaum (1994, p. 67) writes that: ‘Excellent ethical choice cannot be captured completely in general rules because – like medicine – it is a matter of fitting one’s choice to the complex requirements of a concrete situation, taking all of its contextual features into account.’ This is why practical wisdom is so crucial. Since there are no rules dictating the universal balance or weighting of goods and virtues, this task has to be carried out with reference to each situation. But there is no algorithm available to perform this calculation; so it is important to learn to balance general principles with an acute and accurate understanding of particular situations.

It is worth reiterating the point that practical wisdom is both a means to an end and an end in itself. Learning to negotiate and choose in all these dilemmas is, to the extent that it involves the use of practical wisdom, already a way of living by reason. Whether we choose to prioritise devotion to a worthy pursuit or family life, peace of mind or achievement, a life of balance or a single-minded pursuit of one ingredient, using practical wisdom in the process is part and parcel of the good life.

This thinking through should be done in the light of our knowledge of ourselves and the world, of what is possible and desirable for a particular individual in a particular corner of the world at a particular time. What should be considered in this respect is ‘the set of circumstances, talents, endowments, interests, beliefs, and histories that descriptively characterize the individual – what . . . [could be called] his or her “nexus” – as well as the individual’s community and culture’ (Rasmussen, 1999, p. 14).

But sometimes we run into difficulties and need extra help in clarifying, in identifying priorities or in disentangling limitations from possibilities. As has already been pointed out, many people end up in psychotherapists’ consulting rooms in the attempt to answer that fundamental question: ‘Am I satisfied with my life as a whole?’ – to find meaning and purpose, to live well. What a therapist can do then is to help clients to reflect on the good life in general and in particular, to assess the relative importance of goals and ideals, the appropriate balance of ingredients, or the best way to achieve any particular ingredient. This should be done in relation to the client’s temperament and abilities as well as to the circumstances and possibilities that the world offers.

The themes to reflect on at this stage are those that will help clients to gain insight into what matters in life and to make links between
values and ideals on the one hand and concrete goals on the other. The initial step in this process is to enquire about the clients’ world-view and actual values. There are many ways to pursue this line of enquiry, and many available resources (see, for instance, Crumbaugh, 1973, and LeBon, 2001). Here is a selection of questions that may prove useful in helping to elicit this information:

- What would you regret if looking back over your life from your deathbed?
- What are the main values that unreflectively come to mind?
- Whom do you admire, and why?
- What have been your most valuable experiences, and why?
- What is your ‘ideal life’ fantasy?
- Which daily activities are means to ends and which are ends in themselves?

Some forms of counselling and life coaching use similar exercises to clarify clients’ goals. But the answers to the above questions should be seen as providing only clues to value, and should be probed and examined rather than passively accepted. After generating initial values, clients should be helped to explore:

- whether those values withstand scrutiny
- the relative importance of values and ideals
- the extent to which these are currently being realised
- any clashes between values
- the reality of the circumstances
- talents, abilities and inclinations
- whether in practice life goals match values and ideals
- how conflicts can be resolved
- how choices can be made
- any gains and losses resulting from these.

Reflecting on ideals and connecting them to reality is the first step in helping clients in their search for the good life. Other essential pieces of the jigsaw are: cultivating practical wisdom and the virtues of character, managing emotions and developing self-control. These will be covered in the chapters that follow.