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Filomena Maggino
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# Encyclopedia of Quality of Life and Well-Being Research

*Second Edition*

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# Encyclopedia of Quality of Life and Well-Being Research

Second Edition

With 739 Figures and 606 Tables

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## Life Situation Index

► SCP Life Situation Index

## Life Strains

► Stressful Life Events

## Life Transitions

► Life Events

## Life Worth Living

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### Synonyms

Worthwhile life

### Definition

Although a contested matter among philosophers, many would agree that a life is worth living roughly insofar as it has enough goods to outweigh the bads in it to warrant exhibiting positive orientations toward the life such as being grateful for it or wanting it to exist.

### Description

The concept of a life worth living is closely related to ideas of happiness and meaning in life, but can also be seen to be distinct from them. This entry first discusses the contexts in which the idea of a life worth living is salient, after which it differentiates this idea from other value-theoretic concepts. Then, it lays out competing philosophical accounts of what in fact makes a life worth living and concludes by discussing "nihilist" or "pessimist" positions according to which virtually no one's life is worth living.

We often think about whether a life is worth living or not when making major bioethical decisions about whether to allow a life to end, if not to end it (e.g., Brick et al. 2020; Wilkinson 2011). For example, healthcare professionals and families typically do so when considering whether it would be right to keep a severely disabled infant alive, whether to provide a "do not resuscitate order" for an elderly patient, or whether it makes sense to direct a critically ill patient toward hospice care.

Judgments of whether a life is worthwhile ground decisions not only about whether to keep another alive, but also about whether to stay alive oneself. Many believe that suicide would be prudentially rational, and perhaps even moral, if one's life were not worth living.

In addition to figuring prominently in reflection about ending life, we often invoke the value of a life worth living (and its companion disvalue) when thinking about creating life. When deciding whether to have a child or not, one invariably considers whether its life would be worth living, with most agreeing that it would be wrong to create a child whom one knew would suffer from a disease that would lead to a certain, early death after a life exhausted by extreme debilitation and pain (e.g., DeGrazia 2014; Weinberg 2015). Similarly, when considering more large-scale, population issues, such as how many people should be on the planet and what institutions should do to influence that, it is again common for ethicists and policy-makers to think about the extent to which future people would have lives worth living (e.g., Parfit 1984, Chapter 17).

These two contexts, of ending life and creating it, occasion awareness of ambiguity in the way many people use the phrase *life worth living*. On the one hand, if one says that life counts as worth living, one might mean that it is worth starting, while, on the other hand, one might instead mean that it is worth continuing. It could be that these two ideas amount to the same thing, so that if a life is worth starting, then it will be worth continuing, and if a life is worth continuing, then it was worth starting. However, there are ethicists who have recently cast interesting doubt on that view; for instance, perhaps a life without a limb would not be worth starting but, once born, would be worth continuing (Benatar 2006, pp. 20–28, 212–218).

Additional distinctions merit reflection. For instance, more than a few believe that a happy life and a worthwhile life are equivalent (e.g., Tännsjö 1998, pp. 63–95), but this can reasonably be questioned. Suppose, for example, that happiness is hedonic, merely a matter of pleasure, and then imagine that a person could spend her/his life in a machine appropriately called the *orgasmatron* (see Woody Allen's movie *Sleeper*). Such a life might well be happy, but one could fairly doubt that it would be worth living – after all, would you create a child who you knew would be a wholehearted orgasmatron addict for his entire life? For a different sort of case, consider the suggestion that "a supremely happy Hitler does not live a life worth living" (Smuts 2013, p. 440).

Similarly, many likely assume that a meaningful life and a worthwhile life are equivalent, but there are also reasons to doubt this. Presuming that substantial meaning can arise from making sacrifices for the sake of others, now imagine a person who volunteers to undergo intense suffering, or even death, so that others can avoid such. Such a person's life could have great meaning in it, but it may fairly be denied that it would be worth living, at least in the sense of worth continuing (Metz 2012a, pp. 443–444).

If the ideas of a happy and a meaningful life are not equivalent to the notion of a life worth living, then what is essentially involved when we think about the latter? Suggestions from the philosophical literature include that the life is: such that one is willing to originate oneself, supposing one had that odd ability (Trisel 2007); one that a benevolent caretaker with foreknowledge of the life would allow (Smuts 2013); and one with enough internal goods, such as pleasures, virtues, and achievements, to outweigh the bad in it so as to make it sensible to exhibit positive attitudes such as being grateful for it or glad about it (Metz 2012a). One might combine these suggestions to contend that a life is worth living insofar as it has enough goods to outweigh the bads in it to warrant exhibiting positive orientations toward the life such as being grateful for it or wanting it to exist. One skeptic maintains that these and other

analyses of the concept of a life worth living are either overly vague or, upon being made less so, reducible to other concepts (Fumagalli 2017).

Supposing, though, that the category of a life worth living is theoretically useful, what substantively might make a life worth either starting or continuing? Pleasure is surely relevant in some respect, but, as above, it might not even be sufficient to make a life worth living and is in any event unlikely to be the only thing that does. Philosophers, ethicists, and related thinkers have made quite a variety of suggestions about what in fact does or would make life worth living, ranging from undertaking certain kinds of labor (Danaher 2017) to having faith in a supernatural realm (James 1896) to engaging in meaningful relationships with animals (Matthews 2007). Examples of goods that are probably not relevant to whether a life is worthwhile include having beneficial but unintended posthumous effects on others and pleasing a God in whom one never believed.

There is substantial debate among philosophers about not just *which* goods make a life worth living, but also *how* a life must include them in order to be worth living. Until recently, the dominant view was that a worthwhile life is one with a certain *sum* of atomistic conditions, roughly where there is a high enough amount of good parts that outweighs the degree of bad ones (Baier 1997, pp. 67–69). The popular view has been that a life is worth living just insofar as the amount of pleasure, productive labor, relationships, and so on in it is more than (or perhaps much more than) the amount of the opposites of pain, passivity, isolation, etc.

However, lately there have been several objections to this aggregative conception of worthwhileness that appeal to the idea that whether a life is worthwhile is to some degree a function of its *pattern*. It is not merely the sum a life's parts that matters, but also roughly the way its parts are ordered or otherwise relate to one another. For example, some have argued that a life is more worth living insofar as its bad parts cause its good parts to come about (Velleman 1991). Others have held that a life is at least somewhat more worthwhile insofar as it ends on a high note, rather than peters out (Kamm 2003). Still others have contended that a life's worthwhileness is a function of whether it has *narrative unity*, that is, more or less admits of a good story (Brännmark 2003). Finally, others have maintained that a repetitive life, even one with lots of pleasure and other goods, would not be worth living (Blumenfeld 2009).

Probably most people believe their life is worth living, whether in virtue of its parts or their pattern (or both), but there are theorists who argue that their beliefs smack of a *Pollyannaism* that is a product of natural selection (Benatar 2006, pp. 64–69). The human race would not have been evolutionarily successful if it had had a tendency to think that life is not worth living. Now, even though it is plausible to maintain that those who have judged life to be worth living have tended to pass on their genes to a much greater extent than those who have judged otherwise, it does not necessarily follow that the former have been incorrect to positively appraise life. Why should one think that they have been deluded, failing to recognize that whatever good is typical of a life does not justify the bad in it?

There are several arguments for nihilism or pessimism that philosophers critically explore. One springs from Arthur Schopenhauer's (1851) work, according to which we are invariably dissatisfied: either we have not yet obtained what we seek or we have obtained it and are then bored (for a recent statement, see Martin 1993, pp. 593–595). Another argument, also present in the work of Schopenhauer (1851) as well as in that of Leo Tolstoy (1884), is that from the *sub specie aeternitatis* (*point of view of eternity*), our lives are pitiful. Since our lives are so limited and so far from a perfect state, which would include eternal bliss, no life is worth creating and many may even be worth ending. As Prince Bismarck is reported to have said, "Without the hope of an afterlife this life is not even worth the effort of getting dressed in the morning."

In addition to these two classic rationales for finding life not to be worthwhile, contemporary philosophers have proffered new ones. One influential rationale comes from David Benatar (2006), who has argued with sophistication for what is known as *anti-natalism*, the view that we morally should not create any new lives because they

would be on the whole bad for those who live them. Benatar invites us to compare our existence with a state in which we had never existed. With regard to bads in life, we undergo them only if we exist and not if we fail to exist. So far, then, nonexistence is preferable. And with regard to goods in life, Benatar argues that they are no real advantage relative to nonexistence, since if we had never been born, we would not have been *deprived* of the goods and so would not have missed out on anything. On the basis of these comparisons, Benatar concludes that it would be better never to have been. (Note that Benatar's rationale here does not entail the *pro-mortalist* view that we should all kill ourselves or one another, since then we would typically be depriving each other, who do now exist, of goods that we can expect in the future.)

Another interesting argument for a form of nihilism comes from Christopher Belshaw (2012), who maintains that, although adult lives are generally worth continuing, the lives of human babies are not. Although he also does not recommend killing infants, he does support the anti-natalist conclusion that we would be wrong to create them. The difference between a baby and an adult, for Belshaw, is a matter of the psychological connections over time that are available. When an adult undergoes pain, suffering, or some other bad, it need not undermine the worthwhileness of his/her life since he can see that doing so can be essential for more good down the road. Babies are incapable of such foresight; all they do is suffer in the moment. Such an existence, Belshaw contends, is not worthwhile.

Those unfamiliar with philosophical discussion might find it incredible that rationales for the view that life is generally not worth living are taken seriously. However, they are because they are often advanced on the basis of careful argumentation appealing to relatively uncontroversial premises. It can be a difficult and complex matter to tease out precisely where arguments for nihilism go wrong, if indeed they do (see, e.g., the essays in Metz 2012b). Even those who are resolutely optimistic I hope will have taken something useful from this entry, which has worked to clarify what it means to speak of life being worthwhile, as something distinct from a happy or meaningful life, and sketched a variety of plausible views of what might make it worth living.

## Cross-References


- ▶ Good Health Versus a Good Life
- ▶ Good Life


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## Lifelong Education

▶ Lifelong Learning

## Lifelong Learning

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### Synonyms

Continuing education; Lifelong education; Recurrent education

### Definition

Learning throughout the whole course of a person's life regarded as a continual and purposeful process of personal and social development in different settings aiming to develop and improve the knowledge, skills, and competencies.

### Description

The concept of lifelong learning was first introduced in the 1970s. In its early development, the concept was equated with giving adults access to formal courses at educational institutions. Later on, international organizations such as UNESCO, OECD, the European Commission, and the World Bank have adopted a more comprehensive approach.

UNESCO vision on lifelong learning was initially oriented more towards the development of individuals through learning, emphasizing the ▶ learning to learn side more than learning within an employment-related perspective. This was at least argued in a landmark document issued in 1972, which stated that "the aim of education was to enable man to be himself" (UNESCO 1972). A quarter-century later, with the Delors Report, UNESCO has introduced a new vision on lifelong learning as the key for building peace in the twenty-first century. This view, based on four pillars of ▶ education – learning to know, learning to do, learning to be, and learning to live together – has acknowledged the increasing role of lifelong learning in coping with the knowledge economy and with technological changes (UNESCO 1996).

The OECD view on lifelong learning was built from the very beginning on the rhetoric of ▶ human capital development. In choosing the goal of "lifelong learning for all" in 1996, OECD Education Ministers signaled a major departure by adopting a more comprehensive view. The goal covered all purposeful learning activity, from the cradle to the grave, that aims to improve ▶ knowledge and competencies for all individuals who wish to participate in learning activities. The approach has four key features: it takes a systemic view of learning, is treating the learner as central, is emphasizing the ▶ motivation to learn, and is recognizing education's multiple objectives (OECD 1996).

For the European Union, lifelong learning is defined as encompassing "all learning activity undertaken throughout life, with the aim of improving knowledge, skills and competences, within a personal, civic, social and or employment related perspective." Furthermore, education and lifelong learning should include the entire spectrum of formal, nonformal, and informal learning (European Commission 2001).

Finally, the World Bank vision on lifelong learning is that it should signify "education for