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Judging Life and Its Value  
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## JUDGING LIFE AND ITS VALUE

Brooke Alan Trisel

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We could live life — perhaps as animals do — without judging whether it is good or bad, meaningful or meaningless, or worthwhile or not. However, we do not. We make judgements about the value<sup>1</sup> of life, concluding that life has no value or great value, and then may attempt to convince each other that we have placed the proper value on life.

It is not just philosophers who perform these evaluations. Many people, whether they realize it or not, compare their own lives, or life in general, to their expectations or desires, and then render a judgement about whether life, as they have experienced and view it, measures up to the standard they have adopted to judge it. There is a wide range of sophistication with these evaluations and judgements. At one extreme are simple, commonly uttered statements such as «life is good» or «life is terrible,» where it may be unclear how the person reached the conclusion they did. At the other extreme are the differing judgements of philosophers — often carefully thought out and based on elaborate arguments. Between these two extremes are the evaluations and judgements of poets and playwrights, including Shakespeare's famous words that life is «full of sound and fury, Signifying nothing.»<sup>2</sup>

Different methods and standards have been and can be used to judge the value of life. Furthermore, our judgements about whether or not life has value depend, in large part, on which method is used, as will be shown. Therefore, it is important that attention be given to examining the methods used to make this judgement.

There has been a great deal of work done by normative theorists in evaluating various methods, such as utilitarianism, for helping us to decide among different courses of action. In contrast, there has been little attention paid to examining the methods used to make judgements about the value of life. Rather, attention has been concentrated, for many years, on assessing whether life can be meaningful without God and immortality. In this essay, I will explore and compare the various ways of judging whether life has value with the ultimate aim of identifying the best method for making this judgement.

### Purposefulness Versus Worthwhileness

When people first begin to reflect on philosophic questions, they often start with purpose related questions such as «What is the purpose of life?» and «Why are we here?» After reflecting on these questions for a while, some people eventually realize that these questions presuppose that life was created for a reason and so they then strip the question of

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<sup>1</sup>. Value will be used to mean worth.

<sup>2</sup>. William Shakespeare, *Macbeth*, 5.5.27-28 (Arden edition), ed. Kenneth Muir (London: Methuen, 1951), 154.

its assumption and ask themselves «Is there a purpose of life?» Although people may ponder the famed question about the meaning of life, many of those who do never ask themselves the distinct question «Is life worth living?» which is unfortunate for reasons I will explain.

Based on the amount of literature on the question «Is there a meaning or purpose of life?»<sup>3</sup> relative to the question «Is life worth living?»<sup>4</sup> one might be led to believe that the purpose related question is more important. However, as I will attempt to demonstrate, I believe that the reverse is true.

In disputing the claim made by some that life is not worth living if it has no meaning, Kurt Baier convincingly argues that one can find life worth living even if one's life is not «meaningful,» regardless of whether meaningfulness is thought of as a «hidden,» universal meaning or simply as valuable or important. Referring to the second sense of meaningfulness, he writes: «Now, many lives are not valuable or important and are not, in this sense, meaningful. But, again, this need not imply that they are not worth living.»<sup>5</sup> The opposite is also true. A person may lead a successful and purposeful life and yet may find life not worth living and may even commit suicide.

Albert Camus had earlier argued a similar point to Baier when he writes: «Hitherto ... people have played on words and pretended to believe that refusing to grant a meaning to life necessarily leads to declaring that it is not worth living. In truth, there is no necessary common measure between these two judgements.»<sup>6</sup> However, Camus, earlier in the same essay, makes a common mistake of failing to distinguish between these questions, which leads him to give undue importance to the question about the meaning of life. In a famous statement, he indicates:

Judging whether life is or is not worth living amounts to answering the fundamental question of philosophy. All the rest, whether or not the world has three dimensions, whether the mind has nine or twelve categories — comes afterwards. ... I have never seen anyone die for the ontological argument. ... On the other hand, I see many people die because they judge that life is not worth living. ... I therefore conclude that the meaning of life is the most urgent of questions.<sup>7</sup>

I believe that Camus was correct in asserting that judging whether life is or is not worth living is the most important philosophic question. However, he is incorrect to conclude that the meaning of life is the most urgent of questions.

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<sup>3</sup>. For a discussion and bibliography of recent (since 1980) works on the meaning of life, see Thaddeus Metz, «Recent Work on the Meaning of Life,» *Ethics* 112 (July 2002): 781-814. Earlier works on the meaning of life can be found in E.D. Klemke, *The Meaning of Life*, ed. E.D. Klemke (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000).

<sup>4</sup>. For discussion on the question of whether life is worth living, see Kurt Baier, «Threats of Futility: Is Life Worth Living?» *Free Inquiry*, 8 (Summer 1988): 47-52; Kurt Baier, *Problems of Life and Death: A Humanist Perspective* (Amherst, N.Y.: Prometheus Books, 1997), 67-70; Richard Wollheim, *The Thread of Life* (London: Yale University Press, 1984), 244-48; John McDermott, «Why Bother: Is Life Worth Living?» *Journal of Philosophy* 88 (1991): 677-83; and Karsten Harries, «Questioning the Question of the Worth of Life,» *Journal of Philosophy* 88 (1991): 684-90.

<sup>5</sup>. Kurt Baier, «Threats of Futility,» 49.

<sup>6</sup>. Albert Camus, *The Myth of Sisyphus and Other Essays*, trans. Justin O'Brien (New York: Vintage Books, 1955), 6.

<sup>7</sup>. Camus, 3-4.

Regarding the questions «Is there a purpose of life?» and «Is life worth living?» the fact that a person may answer one question negatively, and the other question affirmatively, demonstrates that these two questions are different. Some have explicitly noted that these are distinct concepts. For example, Thaddeus Metz writes: «The concept of what makes a life worth living is distinct from the concept of what makes a life meaningful.»<sup>8</sup>

Although some philosophers have noted that there is a difference between a «meaningful life» and a «life worth living,» what it is that makes these concepts different has not been explored. How do these concepts differ? The principal difference between these concepts is that the latter concept has a much *broader* scope than the former concept. One who asks about the purpose of life generally seeks to know whether we were created for a purpose or have some role to play in carrying out a divine or cosmic purpose or plan. It is a narrow question about goal-directed activity. In contrast, the question regarding whether life is worth living is a broad question. Addressing this question has often been thought of as a process of weighing benefits against costs, good against bad, or pleasure against pain<sup>9</sup> to determine if, in one's life, the former outweighs the latter. Hereinafter, the terminology of benefits and costs will be used.

Granted, one benefit of being alive is the satisfaction obtained from having and pursuing goals or purposes. However, there are other benefits associated with life, including interacting with family and friends, music and art appreciation, and adventure, that may have little or nothing to do with goal-directed or achievement-oriented activity. If we ask ourselves the question «Is life worth living?» these other benefits would be taken into account when judging life. But this will not occur if we only reflect on the question «Is there a purpose of life?» and never ask ourselves the more encompassing and important question «Is life worth living?»

An evaluation of whether life is worth living takes into account, not only whether one has a «purpose» or «purposes,» in whatever way one interprets these words, but other experiences that do not involve pursuing goals. Because an evaluation of worthwhileness is more comprehensive than an evaluation of purposefulness, this explains how it is possible that one could live a life that is not goal-driven or purposeful and yet find life worth living or could have a purposeful life and yet find life not worth living.

In a cross cultural study, the anthropologist Gordon Mathews asked various people in Japan and the United States the question of what makes life worth living.<sup>10</sup> Mathews indicates that there is a term used by Japanese called «ikigai» which means «that which most makes one's life seem worth living.»<sup>11</sup> When he asked the Japanese participants the question of what it is that most makes them feel that life is worth living, they responded with answers such as family, work, and leisure activities. Because there are few references in the print media in the United States to the phrase «life worth living,» but many references to the phrase

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<sup>8</sup>. Metz, «Recent Work,» from footnote on p. 788.

<sup>9</sup>. See, for example, Wollheim, «The Thread of Life,» 244.

<sup>10</sup>. Gordon Mathews, *What Makes Life Worth Living: How Japanese and Americans Make Sense of Their Worlds* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1996).

<sup>11</sup>. *Ibid.*, 5.

«meaning of life,» and because there is no cultural equivalent to the term «*ikigai*» in the United States, he initially asked American participants the following question: «What, for you, is the meaning of your life?» Mathews indicates that the participants in the study were perplexed by the question and were unable to answer it. However, when Mathews later asked them the question «What most makes your life seem worth living?» he indicates that the «Americans responded to these questions almost exactly as the Japanese responded to «What's your *ikigai*?»<sup>12</sup> This study supports two points that are being made in this essay. First, questions about whether life is worth living are intelligible whereas questions about the meaning of life are not. Second, when people are asked whether life is worth living, they will take into account benefits that are disregarded when they reflect on whether there is a purpose of life.

«Life,» as it is used in the questions «Is there a purpose of life?» and «Is life worth living?» could refer to life in general or to our individual lives. Therefore, when discussing these questions, it is necessary to define «life» to avoid misunderstanding. In this essay the word «life,» in the question «Is life worth living?» will refer to our individual lives. This is the important question. The question of whether life in general is worth living is peculiar and almost as unclear as the question «Is there a purpose of life?» — which is notorious for being obscure.

Of course, life in general does not live. It is individuals who live and so it is individuals, not life in general, who may or may not find life worth living. Thus, the question «Is life (in general) worth living?» is unclear. With the question, one could be asking whether the life of every individual who makes up the human species is worth living. One might also be asking whether the life of a typical or average person is worth living, even though no one individual may actually have the characteristics of this imaginary individual.

Judging whether life in general is worth living has no practical value. If one decides that one's own life is not worth living, one can act upon this judgement by attempting to engage in certain activities or form relationships with other people that will make life worthwhile.<sup>13</sup> One may also act upon this judgement by ending one's life. However, if a person concludes that life in general is not worth living, there is not much that this person can do with this judgement, except perhaps for engaging in a futile attempt to try and convince the entire population of the world to commit mass suicide.

The question «Is there a purpose of life?» has two possible responses: yes and no. Neither of these responses says anything about the value of our lives. However, some venture beyond addressing the question and claim that if there is no purpose of life that life has little or no value. For example, William Lane Craig asserts: «Without God the universe is the result of a cosmic accident, a chance explosion. There is no reason for which it exists. As for man, he is a freak of nature — a blind product of matter plus time plus chance. Man is just a lump

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<sup>12</sup>. Ibid., 28.

<sup>13</sup>. I do not believe that there is a difference between finding life worth living and finding life worthwhile. Wollheim («The Thread of Life,» 244) uses «worthwhile» to mean satisfying one's desires and plans, whereas most people would use the term «meaningful» or «purposeful» instead. Because he uses «worthwhile» synonymously with «meaningful,» he concludes that there is a distinction between finding life worth living and finding life worthwhile. Although there is a difference between finding life meaningful and finding life worth living, if he had used «worthwhile» in the conventional sense to mean worth the effort, then he likely would not have concluded that there is a difference between finding life worth living and finding life worthwhile.

of slime that evolved into rationality.»<sup>14</sup> Craig and others who make similar arguments assume that there is a relation between whether there is a purpose of life and whether our lives have value. In claiming that life has no «real» significance or value if it has no purpose, they have, in effect, adopted a purpose-based standard to judge whether life has value.

What criterion or standard should be used to judge whether our lives have value? Should it be a purpose-based standard or a worthwhileness standard? The two standards are as follows:

- (a) My life has value only if human life has a purpose.
- (b) My life has value only if the benefits of being alive outweigh the costs.

The first standard will be referred to as the «cosmic standard.»

If we are going to judge life, then the standard that we use for making this judgement should be clear and take into account a broad range, if not all, of our experiences. As I have argued, the purpose-based standard fails to take into account experiences that do not involve pursuing goals. Furthermore, the notion of «purpose,» as reflected in the claim that life has value only if it has a purpose, is unclear as many have argued. Because there are different types of purposes, this is one source of confusion with the claim. Having a purpose could mean that human life was created for a reason (to serve a function) by a god or an intelligent cosmos. Alternatively, having a purpose could mean that we were not created by a superior being to serve a function, but that we have self-chosen goals or that we some role, either self-chosen or externally imposed, in carrying out the goal(s) of a superior being.

Because the notion of having a purpose is obscure and the purpose-based standard disregards many of our experiences — some of which we may cherish the most — it is an inadequate standard to use to judge whether our lives have value. Furthermore, this standard is based on the assumption, as mentioned, that there is a direct relation between whether there is a divine or cosmic purpose and whether our lives have value, but is there such a relation? If the cosmos were intelligent and had a self-chosen purpose, such as to expand forever, but human beings were unintended and simply a byproduct of this expansion, then the fact that the cosmos has a purpose in no way adds value to our lives. Some have asked the question of whether we would be satisfied if we learned that we had a purpose, but that this purpose was to serve as a food source for another entity.<sup>15</sup> Of course the answer would be «no,» which provides further support that there is no direct relation between whether human life was created for a reason and whether our lives have value.

A now commonly used way of responding to those who maintain that life is purposeless without God and immortality, is to point out, as Baier<sup>16</sup> did in 1957, that there are two different senses of the word «purpose» and that one can create purpose in one's life, by pursuing certain goals, regardless of whether life was created for a purpose. In pointing out

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<sup>14</sup>. William Lane Craig, «The Absurdity of Life Without God,» in *The Meaning of Life*, ed. E.D. Klemke (New York: Oxford University Press, 2000), 45. Originally published in *Reasonable Faith: Christian Truth and Apologies*, 1994.

<sup>15</sup>. See, for example, Robert Nozick, *Philosophical Explanations* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1981), 586.

<sup>16</sup>. Kurt Baier, «The Meaning of Life,» in *The Meaning of Life*, ed. E.D. Klemke (New York: Oxford University Press, 2000), 101-132. Inaugural Lecture delivered at Canberra University College, 1957.

this other sense of the word «purpose,» and by arguing that it is sufficient to make life meaningful, these philosophers indirectly propose an alternative, lower standard for judging whether life has value. For one's life to have value, there does not have to be a grand cosmic or divine purpose of which we play a central part. Instead, they suggest that one can create value in one's life if one has nontrivial, achievable goals and pursues them with passion. Although this latter standard is clear and much more reasonable than the cosmic standard, it fails, as does the cosmic standard, to take into account experiences that do not involve goal-directed activity — experiences that would be factored into a worthwhileness evaluation.

When the separate concepts of «worth» and «while» are combined into the word «worthwhile,» it creates a powerful and elegant concept. In using this concept, one takes into account benefits and effort, placing them in a side-by-side comparison so that one can determine whether the benefits justify the expenditure of effort. Because we arose in an imperfect natural world, where there is competition among the creatures of this world for limited resources, which can result in hunger, disease, and suffering, it is unrealistic to expect that there would only be benefits associated with living. The worthwhileness standard acknowledges that there are, and will always be, costs associated with living whereas the purpose-based standards do not. Therefore, the worthwhileness standard is a more realistic way of judging whether life has value than are the purpose-based, benefit-focused standards.

### **Methods for Determining Whether Life is Worth Living**

#### **Method 1: Weighing Benefits and Costs**

Although the worthwhileness standard has significant advantages over the purpose-based standards for judging whether life has value, how can one determine whether one's life is worth living? One can attempt to weigh the benefits of being alive against the costs, as has been discussed. However, there are well-known limitations with a cost-benefit analysis, including it can be difficult to determine what counts as a benefit or a cost. It also can be difficult to quantify benefits and costs. Consequently, one may be unable to determine whether there is a net benefit associated with living one's life. Because of the limitations of a cost-benefit analysis, it is important to explore alternative methods for judging whether life is worth living.

Baier contends that addressing the question of whether life is worth living has generally been misconceived.<sup>17</sup> Instead of being the outcome of an investigation such as finding out whether a thing is worth its price, he asserts that one can determine whether one's life is worth living without having first determined whether the good things outweigh the bad. He suggests that one can infer whether one's life is worth living based on the following method: «I assume, without argument, that we can say a person really is finding his life worth living if, and only if, supposing it were up to him to live his life over again, exactly as it was, he would be prepared, or even glad or eager, to do so.»<sup>18</sup>

Others have used different inferential methods to determine if life is worth living. I will evaluate the various methods that have or could be used to make this determination. Because one might question whether we really can infer whether life is worth living, as suggested by Baier, I will explain why I believe this is possible before evaluating the methods.

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<sup>17</sup>. Baier, «Threats of Futility,» 49.

<sup>18</sup>. Ibid., 49.

We are continually faced with decisions about how best to use the limited time that we have available as finite creatures. We could perform activities impulsively, starting and stopping them without reflecting on whether the activities are worthwhile, but generally we do not. We evaluate the worth of activities — before, during, and after we do them.

Before we commit ourselves to doing one activity of the many that we could be doing, we consider whether it will be worth our effort. And if we choose to begin the activity, we do not just keep doing it without giving it any further thought. Rather, we periodically question whether the activity continues to be worth the effort, and if it is found not to be worthwhile, then we cease performing the activity, unless we are forced to continue or fear what might occur if we stop. Finally, before we repeat an activity, we consider whether we found the original activity worthwhile. If we found that the original activity was a «waste of time,» then it would not be repeated. However, if we found the original activity worthwhile, then it may be repeated.

As explained above, we do not generally make decisions about whether to begin, continue, or repeat an activity impulsively or without any rational thought. Rather, we evaluate whether the activity is worth *beginning, continuing, or repeating*. Therefore, if we begin or continue an activity, it may be possible to infer from this that we found the activity worthwhile. And if we repeat an activity, then this suggests that we found the original activity worthwhile. But how can we tell if we find our individual lives, as a whole, worthwhile? Can we adopt the methods discussed above for inferring whether an activity is worthwhile and use them to infer whether our lives are worth living? As will be shown, this has been the approach that some people have taken.

We did not decide whether to be born into this world (a point emphasized by many existentialists),<sup>19</sup> nor can we repeat our lives. Consequently, we cannot infer whether we find life worth living based on these decisions. However, we can imagine whether we would have chosen to *begin* life and live our lives, if this choice had been ours to make. In addition, one can imagine whether one would, if it were possible, *repeat* one's life. Finally, it might be thought that we can infer whether life is worth living based on whether or not we choose to *continue* living, but can we? These methods will be considered below, in an attempt to identify the best method for judging whether life is worth living.

In a previous section, the two purpose-based methods and the worthwhileness method, and the standards derived from these methods, were evaluated. They were judged based on whether they were clear and took into account a broad range of our experiences. The five inferential methods that will be discussed (methods two through six) are all relatively clear and broad in scope. Two additional criteria will be considered in judging them, including: (1) whether, using the method, one can validly infer whether one's life is worth living and (2) whether the standard associated with the method is reasonable. The best method for judging if life is worth living will be revealed in the concluding section.

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<sup>19</sup>. Martin Heidegger is perhaps the best known example, referring to our facticity, which would include the fact that we did not choose to be born, as has having been «thrown» into existence. See Heidegger, *Being and Time*, trans. John Macquarrie and Edward Robinson (New York: Harper & Row, 1962), 174, 321.

## Method 2: Continuing to Live

The fact that pessimists continue to live their lives and engage in projects such as writing suggests, it might be argued, that they really do find life worth living despite their claims otherwise. But does the fact that one has not ended one's life demonstrate that one finds life worth living? Human beings do not die easily, as evidenced by the drastic measures that people use to commit suicide, such as leaping off tall buildings. People may continue living at a miserable level rather than ending their lives because of a fear of death, as Baier points out.<sup>20</sup> Schopenhauer makes a similar observation when he writes: «It will generally be found that where the terrors of life come to outweigh the terrors of death a man will put an end to his life. But the terrors of death offer considerable resistance: they stand like a sentinel at the exit gate.»<sup>21</sup> In other words, people may continue living, not because they find life worth living, but for other reasons — because they fear death and the pain that would come from killing themselves or perhaps because they hold out hope that, at some point, their lives may become worth living. If true, then we cannot validly infer that we find life worth living just because we continue to live our lives.

Suppose, however, that we were equipped with an inborn switch, whereby we could painlessly and irrevocably turn off life when we wished and we somehow knew for certain that death was nothing to fear. Could we then validly infer that we find our lives worth living if we do not flip the switch to end our lives? Even under these circumstances, we could not validly make this inference. Some may go on living in misery, rather than committing suicide, because they do not want to inflict suffering on people who care about them. Due to the interpersonal attachments they have formed, the only way that they may ever flip the switch to end their lives is if the switch had the power to make it as if they had never been born, which would be the only way of assuring that their nonexistence would hurt no one.

## Method 3: Choosing to Live

Although we did not choose whether we would be born into this world, to determine whether life is worth living, one can imagine whether one would have chosen to live the life that one is living, taking into account everything that one has experienced. If one would have chosen to live one's life, then this suggests that one finds life worth living.

If we do not believe that an activity, such as attending a conference, will be worth the effort or if we think that undertaking the activity will make us miserable, then we avoid it. But we had no control over whether we would be born into this world and some may feel resentment or dismay over this. This method under discussion places one in a position to decide whether to live one's life. It allows one to judge whether living would be worthwhile and then to decide for oneself whether to remain nonexistent or to come into existence and live the life that one has known.

This method requires that one imagine that one is a nonexistent thinker who knows in advance what one's life will be like if one chooses to live life, and who has control over the decision whether to remain nonexistent or to be born into this world. Stretching one's imagination to this extent, and accepting the contradiction of a nonexistent thinker, may be

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<sup>20</sup>. Baier, «Threats of Futility,» 49.

<sup>21</sup>. Arthur Schopenhauer, «On Suicide,» in *Essays and Aphorisms*, trans. R.J. Hollingdale (London: Penguin Books, 1970), 78-79.



difficult for some people to do. There is, however, a similar method of evaluating whether life is worth living that does not require that one engage in a thought experiment and imagine that one is a nonexistent thinker. With this method, you ask yourself whether you «wish that you had never been born.» When these words are uttered, it expresses a feeling of regret about being alive. For example, in the Old Testament, Job, who is apparently suffering greatly, professes: «Let the day perish in which I was born ....»<sup>22</sup> He continues: «Or why was I not buried like a stillborn child, like an infant that never sees the light? There the wicked cease from troubling, and there the weary are at rest.»<sup>23</sup> To give another example, in Goethe's *Faust*, Faust proclaims «I wish I had never been born!»<sup>24</sup>

With this method, in contrast to the prior method, one does not advance to the step of putting oneself in the imaginary position of deciding whether or not to be born into this world and live the life that one has experienced. However, the judgements reached using the two methods would likely be consistent. People who regret that they were born would also choose not to live life, but to remain nonexistent, if this decision had been theirs to make. And people, who are satisfied or grateful that they were born into this world, would also choose to live the life they have experienced rather than remaining nonexistent, if the choice had been theirs to make.

Although the judgements will generally be the same using either of the methods discussed above, putting oneself in the imaginary position of deciding whether to be born into this world will give a better indication of whether one finds life worth living than simply asking oneself whether one regrets that one was born. Because there is no easy way to cease living this life that we did not choose to live without hurting others, one may feel trapped in this world. To cope with this, one may try to convince oneself, in an act of self-deception, that one does not regret that one was born into this world, though deep down one may feel otherwise. By giving oneself control over whether or not to be born into this world, by forcing oneself to make this potentially difficult decision, and by providing one with a painless way to escape life (deciding to remain nonexistent) that will not make others suffer, this method better reveals whether one truly finds life worth living than the method of surveying one's life from the time of entry into this world to the present, but not going the extra step of deciding whether one would have chosen to enter the world in the first place.

#### **Method 4: Choosing to Bring Others into the World**

Although we had no control over whether we would be born into this world, we do decide whether to bring future generations into this world. It could be argued that, as creatures who are capable of feeling empathy for others, we would not bring others into this world unless we found our own lives worth living. Stated differently, if we are miserable, then, because of empathy, we would spare potential persons from having potentially miserable lives by not bringing them into existence. For these reasons, it might be thought that one could infer whether one's life is worth living based on whether one has brought or wants to bring children into the world. Is this a valid inference to make?

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<sup>22</sup>. Job 3.3. New Revised Standard Version (Nashville: Thomas Nelson Publishers, 1989), 307.

<sup>23</sup>. Job., 3.16-17, 307.

<sup>24</sup>. Johann Wolfgang von Goethe, *Faust*, trans. Louis MacNeice (New York: Oxford University Press, 1961), 152.

The inference discussed above is based on the false premise that people make decisions about whether to have children in a rational manner. Granted, some people do take into account the state of the world and reflect on the value of life when deciding whether to have children. For example, occasionally someone will make a statement such as «I would not want to bring a child into this world.» However, nearly half of all pregnancies are unintended<sup>25</sup> and so, quite often, people give no thought at all to whether life is worth living before bringing a newborn into this world.

Another problem with this method is that some people have children to make their lives worth living. Thus, in this situation, the fact that they want to have children does not indicate that they find life worth living. On the contrary, it suggests that they currently do not find life worth living and are searching for something that will give meaning to their lives. For the preceding reasons, we cannot validly infer whether we find our lives worth living based on whether we have brought or want to bring others into this world.

### **Method 5: Wanting to Live Again and Again**

Nietzsche attached great importance to eternal recurrence, the ancient idea that the history of the world, including each human life, recurs again and again without end. In introducing this idea, he writes:

What, if some day or night a demon were to steal after you ... and say to you: 'This life as you now live it and have lived it, you will have to live once more and innumerable times more; and there will be nothing new in it, but every pain and every joy and every thought and sigh and everything unutterably small or great in your life will have to return to you, all in the same succession and sequence ....' ... Would you not throw yourself down and gnash your teeth ... Or ... would [you] have answered him: 'You are a god and never have I heard anything more divine.'<sup>26</sup>

Various interpretations have been given of Nietzsche's doctrine of eternal recurrence. Maudemarie Clark contends that Nietzsche was not advancing a cosmological theory or proposing the following practical directive about how to live our lives: live them in such a way that we would want to live them innumerable times. Rather, she suggests, as follows, that Nietzsche was proposing a test to judge our attitude toward our lives:

I interpret Nietzsche as taking our hypothetical reaction to the demon's message — how we would react if we accepted the message uncritically — to reflect our actual attitude towards ourselves and our lives. A joyful reaction would indicate a fully affirmative attitude towards one's (presumably, nonrecurring) life, whereas gnashing of teeth ... would indicate a negative attitude.<sup>27</sup>

To use eternal recurrence as a test of affirmation, Clark maintains we must «imagine eternal recurrence in an uncritical or preanalytical manner, suspending all doubts concerning its truth or conceivability.»<sup>28</sup>

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<sup>25</sup> Sarah Brown and Leon Eisenberg, ed., *The Best Intentions: Unintended Pregnancy and the Well-Being of Children and Families* (Washington: National Academy Press, 1995), 2. According to the study, 44% of all births in the United States in 1990 were unintended.

<sup>26</sup> Friedrich Nietzsche, *The Gay Science*, trans. Walter Kaufmann (New York: Vintage Books), 273-74.

<sup>27</sup> Maudemarie Clark, *Nietzsche on Truth and Philosophy* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1990), 251.

<sup>28</sup> *Ibid.*, 270.

If eternal recurrence is thought of as a possible method and standard for judging whether one finds life worth living, regardless of how Nietzsche thought of it, would it be a good method to use? With this method, in contrast to a cost-benefit analysis, there is no direct weighing of benefits and costs. Rather, Clark's interpretation suggests that one can infer whether one finds life worth living based on whether or not one would want to repeat one's same life an infinite number of times.

In the literature debating Nietzsche's idea of eternal recurrence, one main point of contention is whether there would be a continuity of consciousness and an accumulation of what we remember from one life to the next.<sup>29</sup> If one had no memory of one's prior<sup>30</sup> lives, and thus each life was independent of each other, then there would be no reason to be horrified with this idea as Nietzsche thought some people might be. Therefore, with this idea, Nietzsche must have envisioned that one would remember one's prior lives. Clark writes: «I can only imagine recurrence as it would appear to a continuing consciousness ....»<sup>31</sup>

For the sake of argument, let us suppose, not that we have lived innumerable times before, but that each of us has a first life and that it is the life we are currently living. Let us also suppose that our lives will repeat forever after our first life and that what we remember would accumulate from one life to the next. The first time we live life, we experience the novelty, adventure, and excitement associated with being alive. We look around and see brilliantly colored flowers, flowing rivers, and majestic mountains. We also experience costs associated with living such as suffering, pain, and having loved ones die.

The second time we live life, we have the same experiences of our first life. However, this time there is less novelty and excitement because we have experienced everything, in the exact same way, once before. The benefits have lessened, but there has not been an offsetting reduction in costs. If our mother and father died before us in our first life, then we experience their deaths for the second time. We may not suffer as much emotional distress with their second death, as with their first, if we have reason to believe that they will live again. However, we experience the same physical pain as we did in our first life. Indeed, the pain may be intensified if we realize that we will experience this pain, not just during one life, but each time that we live one of our countless lives. The third time we live life, there is even less novelty and excitement than the second time. As we continue to repeat life, there is less and

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<sup>29</sup>. Like Clark, Julian Young interprets eternal recurrence as a test. However, Young's view of the test differs from Clark's in two ways. First, Young conceives of it, not as a test to judge one's attitude toward one's life, but to determine «whether one is living as successfully as possible.» Second, Young envisions that one would be unaware of one's prior lives with eternal recurrence. See Young, *The Death of God and the Meaning of Life*, (London, Routledge, 2003), 89-90.

<sup>30</sup>. For explanatory purposes the word «prior» will be used, but it is a point of contention whether one's various lives would occur at different times. If a person has an infinite number of lives, and this person's lives are the «same,» then one could argue that they must occur at the same time and thus there would be no «prior» lives. If there are an infinite number of lives, then in what respect do they differ? According to Clark («Nietzsche on Truth,» 267): «Only a difference in temporal position fits the bill — the recurrence of my life must be part of an earlier or later cycle of cosmic history than my present life ....»

<sup>31</sup>. Clark, «Nietzsche on Truth,» 269.

less benefit derived from living until we reach a point where all the novelty and excitement have been drained from life and we are left with nothing but drudgery, pain, and suffering.<sup>32</sup>

The following standards can be derived from methods three and five, respectively.

*Standard 3:* My life is worth living only if I would have chosen to live my life, if the choice had been mine to make.

*Standard 5:* My life is worth living only if I would want to live my same life over and over again without end.

Eternal recurrence is a much higher standard for judging whether life is worth living than the other worthwhileness standards that have been and will be discussed. People may have no regrets that they were born into this world, and if the choice had been theirs to make, may have chosen to live their lives. However, they may have no desire to live a second time, let alone an infinite number of times. Thus, if they judged life using standard three, they would find life worth living, but they would not find life worth living if they used the eternal recurrence standard to make this judgement.

The eternal recurrence standard for judging life is unreasonable. The following example shows how ridiculous this standard is: Suppose that you have just watched a movie with a friend and then ask your friend how they liked the movie. The friend replies that the movie «was not worthwhile.» You ask why and your friend replies «it was not worthwhile because I would not want to watch it an infinite number of times.» If this were the standard that this person uses to judge movies, then no movie would ever be considered worthwhile. We recognize from experience that we derive less and less benefit each additional time that we watch the same movie — an example of the well-known utilitarian and economic principle of diminishing marginal utility. We eventually reach a point where we are tired of the movie and may never want to watch it again. Because human beings abhor unending repetition, as reflected by the principle of diminishing marginal utility, it would be unreasonable to judge whether life is worth living based on whether or not one would want to repeat one's same life an infinite number of times.

To return to the movie example, if a movie is good we may want to watch it again. However, we do not judge a movie based on whether we would want to watch it repeatedly. Rather, we use other criteria such as whether the movie was exciting, funny, innovative, or moving. Alternatively, instead of judging the movie based on specific criteria, we may indirectly judge the movie based on an inferential standard, but this standard does not involve unending repetition. Rather, it typically involves reflecting on whether we felt satisfied that we decided to watch the movie in the first place. Because we never employ the idea of unending repetition to judge the worth of the activities in our lives, this should serve to caution us about using eternal recurrence to judge whether our lives, as a whole, are worth living.

The eternal recurrence standard for judging life has been found unreasonable. The second criterion that will be considered in evaluating this method is whether, using the method, one can validly infer whether one's life is worth living. As I argued earlier, if a

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<sup>32</sup>. Arthur Danto advances a similar argument against Nietzsche's version of eternal recurrence. He argues that it would involve «eternal monotony.» See Danto, *Nietzsche as Philosopher* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1965), 210.

person repeats an activity, then we may be able to infer from this that the person found the original activity worthwhile. It is important, however, to understand what it means for us to «repeat» an activity. When an activity is repeated, it is performed a second time, but the second time is never the «same» as the first. It occurs at a different time and perhaps at a different place as, for example, when people go to see their favorite entertainer repeatedly. Also, the second activity may be performed with a different group of friends than the first activity.

If we want to repeat an activity, realizing that the second activity will always be at least slightly different from the original, we can infer from this that the original activity was worthwhile. It would provide an even stronger indication that we found the original activity worthwhile if it were possible to repeat the «same» activity and if we would want to do so despite knowing that, because it is the same activity, we will not experience as much novelty and excitement as with the original activity. Analogously, if one would want to repeat one's same life, even if one's subsequent life or lives would lack some of the features (excitement, for example) of one's current life, then this strongly suggests that one finds one's current life worth living.

Because the eternal recurrence test is so demanding, hardly anyone would pass it. However, for that rare person who would want to live his or her same life innumerable times, in spite of having diminishing benefits with each successive life, this person can feel confident that he or she does truly find life worth living.

As noted earlier, people may continue living, not because they find life worth living, but for other reasons, such as not wanting to hurt others by committing suicide. Thus, the continuation standard, where it is presumed that people find life worth living just because they have not ended their lives, would in many cases falsely indicate that people find life worth living. In other words, it would yield false positives. This is also a significant problem for method four (inferring that life is worth living based on whether one has brought or wants to bring others into the world).

There is a relation between the level and the validity of the various inferential standards. If the standard for judging whether life is worth living is very low, such as the continuation standard, then everyone who uses this standard would find life worth living, but there would be many false positives. On the other hand, if the standard is extremely high, such as eternal recurrence, then the test — because it is so demanding — will not falsely indicate that people find life worth living. Although this is an advantage of the eternal recurrence test, very few people, if any, would find life worth living using this test. Furthermore, many of the people who would gnash their teeth at the thought of eternal recurrence would affirm life using a more reasonable standard, such as asking themselves if they would have chosen to be born into this world and live their lives.

### **Method 6: Wanting to Live One More Time**

As previously noted, Baier asserts that we can say a person finds his life worth living, if, and only if, this person would want to live his «same» life over again. The only difference between this standard and the eternal recurrence standard is the number of times that we are to imagine repeating life. With the standard proposed by Baier (hereinafter called «unirecurrence»), one imagines that one's same life recurs once whereas, with eternal recurrence, one imagines that one's same life recurs innumerable times. One may be willing to live one's same life over again once, but not willing to live one's same life an infinite

number of times. Thus, unirecurrence is not as demanding of a standard as is eternal recurrence. Nonetheless, because it involves repetition without variation, it is too high of a standard to use to judge whether life is worth living.

There are two ways to lower the unirecurrence standard, both of which involve preserving novelty or, in other words, of counteracting the boredom that would arise from living one's same life over again. The first way is to imagine that we live our second life anew and have no recollection of the events in our first life. To return to the movie example, a person would not likely want to watch the same movie two days in a row. However, if a period of ten years has elapsed from the time the person first watched the movie, such that the person will have forgotten many details of the movie, then this person may want to watch the movie a second time.

As evidenced by the earlier quote from Clark, it may be difficult for one to imagine recurrence without also imagining that one would have a continuing consciousness. Therefore, in developing a standard to judge whether life is worth living based on the idea of repetition, it will be useful to explore if there are other ways that novelty could be preserved. One such approach would be to allow some variation in our second life. Suppose, for example, that you would be born a second time. You would be born at the same time and place as your first birth, would have the same parents, and would remember your first life. However, your second life could unfold differently from your first life. Would you want to live this second life?

If a person would want to live a second life that is similar to his or her first life, then this suggests that this person finds life worth living. However, the second life cannot be too different from one's current life. If it is, then one could no longer validly infer whether one's current life is worth living. For example, suppose that a patient in a hospital who has suffered with lifelong pain and disability is in a state of despair and yet observes others who do find life worth living. If we ask him whether he would want to live again, and he imagines himself living as a joyful and healthy physician, then he may very well say that he would want to live again. The reverse situation could also occur. If a joyful physician is asked this question and imagines living a second life as a person who has severe functional limitations, he may decide that he would not want to live a second life. Consequently, if we imagine a second life that is too different from our own, then we can no longer validly infer whether our current life is worth living based on whether we would want to live again.

### Conclusion

At the beginning of this essay, I noted that we could live our lives without evaluating whether they are good or bad, but that we do not. Evaluations are often performed to help us make decisions. For example, a committee may do a cost-benefit analysis to help determine whether to construct a new facility. To give another example, clinicians or medical ethics committees may perform an evaluation as a way to help guide medical decision making. They may try to determine, using various methods, whether a patient, who is unable to judge for himself, finds life worth living.<sup>33</sup> If they conclude that the patient, under the circumstances, would not find life worth living, then a decision may be made on economic or moral grounds to withdraw treatment from the patient.

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<sup>33</sup>. For further discussion, see Bobbie Farsides and Robert Dunlop, «Measuring Quality of Life: Is there Such a Thing as a Life Not Worth Living?» *British Medical Journal* 322 (June 16, 2001): 1481-1483.

Because evaluations provide us with a basis for making decisions, it is understandable why they would be used to judge whether *someone else*, such as an incompetent patient, finds life worth living. But why do we judge the worth of our *own* lives, instead of living them without judging them? Are these evaluations undertaken for the purpose of helping us to decide whether or not to continue living, as might be thought? If this was the reason that we judged the worth of our lives, then some difficult questions would arise, including when should the evaluation be performed. If people perform the evaluation when they are young, then their judgement about life would be based on incomplete information. It is possible that based on their short experience they may conclude that life is not worth living, yet if they waited until they have had more experiences before judging life, then they may conclude otherwise, and vice versa. If one's judges one's life when one is very young, for example 20 years old, then one's evaluation will be incomplete. But if one waits too long before doing an evaluation, such as performing the evaluation when one's life is almost over, then the evaluation would no longer be relevant if the purpose of the evaluation is to help us decide whether to continue living beyond adolescence.

Some people judge that life is not worth living, but continue to live their lives. Therefore, if it is true that the reason that we perform these evaluations is to help us decide whether to continue living, then of what practical value are these evaluations if some people will continue to live despite concluding that life is not worth living? However, I do not believe that we undertake these evaluations to help us decide whether to continue living. Why, then, do we judge the worth of our lives?

Oftentimes, the evaluations are prompted by a question, such as when people ask themselves «Is there a meaning of life?» They may long to know whether life has value and may assume that there is a relation between whether life has a purpose and whether our lives have value. As a result, they attempt to address the question of whether life has a purpose. In some cases, they keep searching for an answer and never reach a conclusion. In other cases, they go beyond the question and adopt a standard or ideal — many times unwittingly — to judge life. They then compare life to their adopted standard and make a judgement about whether life measures up to the standard.

The evaluations and subsequent judgements are also prompted by unhappiness, pain, and suffering as, for example, when Job suffers and then begins to question whether life is worth living. The persons who are suffering compare their lives to a prior time when they were not suffering, to other people's lives, or to what they consider an ideal life, which, in turn, leads them to make a judgement about the value of their lives.

Because we make these comparisons between life as we are experiencing it, and life as we would like it to be, we will make judgements about the value of our lives even if we do not deliberately set out to do so. Therefore, it is important to understand the methods used to make these judgements and, if we find ourselves judging life, to select the best method for doing so.

A number of methods and standards for judging whether life has value have been evaluated to identify the best method and standard for making this judgement. The two purpose-based standards have been cast aside because they fail to take into account experiences that do not involve pursuing goals. Because one's life can be worth living even if one's life is not purposeful, the important question is, not whether there is a purpose(s) of or in life, but whether one's life is worth living. In addressing this question, it can be difficult

to determine if the benefits of being alive outweigh the costs. It is possible, though, for one to infer whether one finds life worth living.

Of the inferential methods that were evaluated, methods two (continuing to live) and four (choosing to bring others into the world) were rejected because, in many cases, they would falsely indicate that people find life worth living. Although the eternal recurrence standard and unirecurrence without variation (the standard proposed by Baier) would not yield false positives, they are unreasonable. To avoid the problems inherent with using standards that are too low or too high, a moderate standard is needed. There are two moderate standards to choose between: reflecting on whether we would have chosen to be born and live our lives, if the choice had been ours to make, and reflecting on whether we would want to live a second life that is similar to the one we are living (unirecurrence with variation).

Many people, I suspect, if the choice had been theirs to make, would have chosen to live their lives instead of remaining nonexistent. However, they may have no desire to live again, even if their second life were different from their first such that they could experience novelty and excitement. Thus, the repetition-based method reflects a higher standard for judging whether life is worth living. For life to be worth living, according to this higher standard, it is not enough to be satisfied with life, one must also want to live again. But why should one have to want to live again for one's life to be considered worth living? There is no advantage in adopting this higher standard. If one would have chosen to enter the world and live one's life knowing in advance what one would experience, and one feels grateful that one has had the opportunity to experience the sights, sounds, and wonders of this world, then this should be sufficient to find life worth living.

In conclusion, the best standard for judging whether one's life has value is to ask oneself whether one would have chosen to be born into this world and live one's life. If the answer is «no,» then the question becomes, what, if anything, should be done with this judgement. Should one ignore the evaluation, commit suicide, or do something to try to make one's life worth living? In deciding this question, one point worth considering is that these evaluations can fluctuate over time such that a person can find life not worth living at one point and find life worth living at a later point in life. If one answers «yes» to the question of whether one would have chosen to be born into this world, then one can feel confident that one finds life worth living.

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**Brooke Alan Trisel**  
<[triselba@cs.com](mailto:triselba@cs.com)>