

A Good Life Doesn't Mean an Easy One

For many, 'psychological richness' is more valuable than simple happiness

Alison Gopnik, Wall Street Journal Aug. 28, 2020

What makes a good life? Philosophers have offered two classic answers to the question, captured by different Greek words for happiness, *hedonia* and *eudaimonia*. A hedonic life is free from pain and full of everyday pleasure—calm, safe and serene. A eudaemonic life is a virtuous and purposeful one, full of meaning.

But in a new study, philosopher Lorraine Besser of Middlebury College and psychologist Shigehiro Oishi of the University of Virginia argue that there is a third important element of a good life, which they call “psychological richness.” And they show that ordinary people around the world think so, too.

According to this view, a good life is one that is interesting, varied and surprising—even if some of those surprises aren’t necessarily pleasant ones. In fact, the things that make a life psychologically rich may actually make it less happy in the ordinary sense.

After all, to put it bluntly, a happy life can also be boring. Adventures, explorations and crises may be painful, but at least they’re interesting. A psychologically rich life may be less eudaemonic, too. Those unexpected turns may lead you to stray from your original purpose and act in ways that are less than virtuous.

Profs. Besser and Oishi make the case for a psychologically rich life in a paper that has just appeared in the journal *Philosophical Psychology*. But is this a life that most people would actually want, or is it just for the sort of people who write philosophy articles?

To find out, the authors and their colleagues did an extensive study involving more than 3,000 people in nine countries, recently published in the *Journal of Affective Science*. The researchers gave participants a list of 15 descriptive words such as “pleasant,” “meaningful” and “interesting,” and asked which best described a good life.

When they analyzed the responses, Profs. Besser and Oishi found that people do indeed think that a happy and meaningful life is a good life. But they also think a psychologically rich life is important. In fact, across different cultures, about 10-15% of people said that if they were forced to choose, they would go for a psychologically rich life over a happy or meaningful one.

In a second experiment the researchers posed the question a different way. Instead of asking people what kind of life they would choose, they asked what people regretted about the life they had actually led. Did they regret decisions that made their lives less happy or less meaningful? Or did they regret passing up a chance for interesting and surprising experiences? If they could undo one decision, what would it be? When people thought about their regrets they were even more likely to value psychological richness—about 30% of people, for example, in both the U.S. and South Korea.

The desire for a psychologically rich life may go beyond just avoiding boredom. After all, the unexpected, even the tragic, can have a transformative power that goes beyond the hedonic or eudaemonic. As a great Leonard Cohen song says, it’s the cracks that let the light come in.

In response to our question about what makes a “good life”:

Al Romig, Texas

A spiritual belief. Loving and being loved. Good enough health to enjoy it. A sense of purpose. Continuous learning.

Nancy Irving, Ohio

Here are some key attributes for my husband and me: health, freedom, “enough,” serving others, sharing our blessings.

Barry Zalma, California

A wife who loves me after 52 years of marriage, children who grow into successful adults, and loving grandchildren. Everything else is meaningless.

Stephen RS Martin, Arizona

The first sine qua non to a good life is absolute financial security, which includes the complete absence of debt. True happiness and peace of mind are impossible without it.

Samuel Zimmer, Austria

A reasonable proximity to bodies of water, fulfilling pursuits, frequent reading, and bountiful Weißbier [wheat beer] upon the clock’s 5 p.m. strike.

Michele McGovern, Pennsylvania

When I was a kid, I always thought the people in the neighborhood who had a second refrigerator in the garage—affectionately known as the “beer fridge”—had “made it.” They were living the good life. Now that I’m an adult, I think I might have had it right as a kid. The good life—just enough money to buy a second fridge and beverages to put in it, enough friends and family members to join in that you need the fridge, and enough time and inclination to enjoy it with them.

Unknown

A good life is knowing that, despite your parenting, your children have turned out to be good people.