

## **On the Fantasy of a Good Life**

By Jialin (Ariel) Wang

With only one chance at life, it is no wonder most people strive to live theirs out in the best way possible. This wish propels them on an anxious search for a guide on how to live a good life, and quickly, then, are they brought to the core of this question: what is a good life? The vagueness of a supposed “good life” is exasperating, leaving the perplexed seekers with pulled reins and an inability to do as much as depart for this unknown destination. In this essay, I intend to relieve them of their Sisyphean task by demonstrating that a good life does not exist, and I will prove my claim by contradiction.

To proceed with this inquiry, it is fundamental to decide on a rightful judge for a person’s life. In this subjective matter, different people will come to different conclusions. I will argue that, in consequence of its high subjectivity, the goodness of a life must be determined by the person who lives it. When others—whether a select few or everyone—are to decide, many uncertainties and inconsistencies arise.

In the former option of having an external judge, who is to be selected, and who is to select the selected few? No one can argue that they know the liver better and nor can anyone prove to be more knowledgeable in this area. Family members could have biases while strangers may have misunderstandings. Their friends are inclined to glorify their gifts and euphemise their flaws. Their foes are sure to disparage their deeds or misjudge their character. In the end, the opinions of any appointed figure, no matter their identity, are not to be wholly trusted, for all judgements are fallacious to some degree.

So should everyone have the power to decide? Upon further thought, this option is all the more flawed. If every opinion is taken into consideration, then, as values differ, they can quickly become contradictory and lose their value. For instance, most people long for

enjoyment while many religions value restraint; some hope to uphold justice and do heroic deeds while others only wish for peace and stability. These contradictions, and many others, make it seem as though all lives are good lives. Yet this proves nothing, because from another viewpoint, it only means life can neither be good nor bad. The explanation is simple: in order to be good, life must have the possibility of being bad.

Most importantly, there are always differences between an individual's public versus private selves. Some care a great deal about others' opinions of them; these people are likely to put on disguises or act differently than what is true to their nature and perhaps even be unconscious of it. Others feel that public opinion is none of their concern, yet they still have concealments—in their case, mostly unintentional—that no one knows of. I concede that the open-book sort of people exist too, but even for them, thoughts, instincts, and emotions are perceived first-handedly and thus understood thoroughly by only themselves. At the very least, I have yet to account for accuracy in expression and reception: information may come across altered and different from original intentions.

For all the aforementioned reasons, external perception of a person and their life is, in essence, flawed. Now, only one option remains: for everyone to reflect upon their own life and determine its goodness. Although this will dismiss all the previous concerns, new ones appear.

If each person is their own judge, different values will allow for a plurality of good lives. This seems like a solution to the dilemma, but it, too, is rooted upon an unlikely assumption: that values do not change over time. Admittedly, it is possible to maintain the same values and desires throughout life, but most people do not. This is good, too, as it is evidence of our growth. So what happens when values change and the theoretical goodness meter of that life is reset? Is the previous score diminished? If so, how will we account for

that period of our lives, and if not, how should it contribute to our overall judgement? These matters are just as debatable, and even when resolved, yet another question follows: are clear values required in order to live a good life? Some people, especially the firm believers of fate, go through their lives by simply accepting without expectation. They give little thought to values, goals, and the like. These cases are even more complex and nearly impossible to assess.

Finally, there are the rare personages who are exempt from all previous concerns. They are those who have clear, unchanging values and have seemingly defined what a good life is for themselves. I will further argue that their definitions are self-contradictory in another way.

Nothing is ever good if it has always been easily acquirable. The good then becomes a normal and we would not be content with it. Money never satisfies the millionaire, nor accomplishments the forever successful. Similarly, for something to be a certain way, it must have been, at some point, a different way. In our case, we have never been happy until we have experienced sorrow and we cannot be healthy unless we are capable of being ill. It is true that a life can alternatively be compared to other lives and not another part of itself, however, the liver of that life will never be able to appreciate what made their life *comparatively* good. As they are ultimately the ones to decide, they still cannot deem their life good. Whatever made part of a life good, the opposite must have been true too. In short, only when a life has once been bad can the other parts of it be considered good. Therefore, a life that is good from beginning to end is not truly good. Life can only be partly good at best.

I have now refuted all possibilities of identifying a good life. One final question remains: can a good life exist unidentified? That is, can something be good without being deemed so by us? Unfortunately not, because “good” is only a concept. More accurately, it is

a small concept part of the vast one that is our perception of reality. The definition of good is established upon whether it is beneficial for us. Consequently, we are the determiners of something's goodness. When we do not regard something as good, there is no other way for it to be so. Human life is no exception to this rule.

With all possibilities of its existence disproved, I conclude that a good life does not exist. Major issues such as accuracy in perception force us to judge upon our own lives. Then, not only must we define a value, but also ensure it is unchanging in order for our life's "goodness meter" to remain consistent. And even in such restricted situations, problems arise. The quality of goodness is comparative; if our lives have always been good, our perception of it disallows us to properly experience it. Our appreciation of something's good is the only thing that can make it so. Contradictions prove the search for a good life to be a futile effort. This journey has no destination, and it, like a horse ride on a merry-go-round, is not worth departing for. Instead, we may pursue a fulfilling life, or a meaningful life, or whatever alternative we choose.