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### *Häyry Reconsidered*

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A response to "Considerable Life Extension and Three Views on the Meaning of Life" by Matti Häyry (CQ 20(1))

In "Considerable Life Extension and Three Views on the Meaning of Life"<sup>1</sup> Matti Häyry investigates the desirability of considerable life extension from the perspective of three different views about the meaning of life.<sup>2</sup> These views, he concludes, "produce dramatically different responses to the issues of considerable longevity."<sup>3</sup> In the following I briefly discuss the three views, which he refers to as the "more is better" approach, the "moral is better" approach, and the "Epicurean" approach, and I then argue the following three points: (1) Contrary to Häyry's conclusion, I suspect that the Epicurean approach positively supports considerable life extension. I am not entirely sure, then, that introducing it into the debate has the import that Häyry takes it to have. (2) The more is better approach seems to be a somewhat implausible approach to thinking about the meaning of life. Consequently, I believe that it may be a mistake to draw any conclusions about the desirability of considerable life extension by reference to that approach. And (3) the question of whether considerable life extension is desirable is ambiguous.

The more is better approach fails to appreciate that ambiguity, giving us even more reason to discount any conclusions one might draw about considerable life extension by appeal to this approach.

#### **Three Views about the Meaning of Life**

According to the "more is better" approach to the meaning of life, the meaning of life can be found in the individual experiences that make up a person's life. If those experiences are good, then life is meaningful, and consequently, continuing to live on is desirable. On this view, it appears that the meaning of life is explained by appeal to the level of *welfare* a person enjoys during her life. Häyry says, for example, that "one group of scholars insists that the point of all this [considerable life extension] is to give individuals an opportunity to continue their physical lives for as long as these lives are worth living or have value in them."<sup>4</sup> Later he says, "When 'more is better' the emphasis is on persons as individuals,

on their subjectively felt well-being, and on the active continuation of their physical lives.”<sup>5</sup> Although the author does not put it in this way, perhaps we could agree that some kind of summative principle can be used to calculate the overall level of meaning in a life. The overall level of meaning is equal to the sum of the episodes that determine the level of welfare one enjoys in one’s life. For, if meaning is a function of welfare, then having more of whatever contributes to one’s welfare will generate more meaning as well. If this is correct, then more is indeed better.

The second view, which he refers to as the “moral is better” approach, holds that “the purpose of our being is to lead a good life within a community and tradition that gives it moral shape. Religious thinking is often a part of the structure that defines our lives, and so are habits, customs, and widely held ideals about the family and its interactions with society.”<sup>6</sup> He claims that, on this account of the meaning of life,

considerable life extension is shunned because communities cannot retain the vitality of their moral traditions unless new individuals take on the designated social roles from time to time. There is value in being young, middle-aged, and old, with the communal expectations that go with these phases, and it gives people’s lives structures that they mature from children to parents and grandparents and then give way to new generations.<sup>7</sup>

Interestingly, Häyry also holds that although this second approach to thinking about the meaning of life rejects considerable life extension on an individual level, he claims that this approach favors life extension in a more symbolic sense. Contrary to what he appears to state at the start of his article, he concludes that both approaches to the

meaning of life “want to reach beyond the 100-year life span that we could now have as unenhanced biological beings. The first group want it individually, physically, and concretely; the second group want it collectively, spiritually, and symbolically; yet both want it.”<sup>8</sup> Although I think the moral is better approach is an interesting approach to the meaning of life, my discussion in this article focuses largely on the more is better approach and the Epicurean approach. I will not, therefore, address this approach in this paper.

The third approach to the meaning of life, inspired by Epicurus, holds that one should strive to achieve a state of tranquility in one’s life. The peaceful life is the meaningful life. Achieving tranquility in one’s life requires, among other things, expunging irrational fears (such as the fear of death) and eliminating desires for things that lead one to falsely believe that one can stave off death. The desire for fame and power are examples of such desires. With respect to this view, Häyry holds that

the Epicurean model I have sketched here does not insist on a fixed normative view about considerable life extension. On the one hand, there is no particular reason to ban or restrict it, because the possibility of living much longer does not necessarily prevent people from finding their peace of mind, *ataraxia*. On the other hand, there is no particular reason to encourage the development of its techniques, either, because it seems likely that serenity, if it can be found at all, can be found in the course of decades as effectively as in the course of centuries or millennia.<sup>9</sup>

### **Objections to Häyry**

Although I think that Häyry’s discussion is interesting and thought provoking, I think that there are some important

problems worth noting. Consider, first, the Epicurean approach. I believe that, contrary to Häyry's conclusion, one can draw a normative conclusion about the desirability of considerable life extension on this view. For Epicurus, although one's life is meaningful (perhaps "complete" would be more appropriate here) when one has proper philosophical understanding of the world, and that living considerably longer would not add to or improve the completeness of one's life, it is nonetheless true that life is still a good, and that living on is desirable:

But the wise man neither deprecates living nor fears not living. For he neither finds living irksome nor he thinks not living an evil. But just as he chooses the pleasantest food, not simply the greater quality, so too he enjoys the pleasantest time, not the longest. He who advises the young man to live well but the old to die well is naive, not only because life is something to be welcomed, but also because to practice living well and to practice dying well are one and the same.<sup>10</sup>

As is apparent from the passage, quality of life is prized over duration. Preferring one over the other, however, does not thereby imply that we have no reason to desire a longer life. Indeed, in their commentary on Epicurus's writings on death, A. A. Long and D. N Sedley say that "no doubt the prolongation of good is still preferable to its cessation: hence Epicurus advises us against positively courting death."<sup>11</sup> So, although it may be true that more time does not increase or enhance the completeness of one's life—it does not add to its meaning—it is nonetheless true that more time is desirable.<sup>12</sup>

With respect to his view about the Epicurean approach to the meaning of life, then, I do not completely agree with

Häyry's diagnosis that this approach "could challenge the conceptual foundation of the current debate and open new avenues for further discussion."<sup>13</sup> I think that Epicureans would positively support considerable life extension, and they would do so for a reason that is much like the reason why the more is better approach supports it: if life is good, we have reason to prefer its continuation. I acknowledge that this support does not follow directly from Epicurus's view about the *meaning* of life. However, I think it would be uncharitable to consider Epicurus's view about the meaning of life in isolation. It seems preferable to recognize that Epicurus's view about the meaning of life is one part of his entire philosophical system, and that when we consider that entire system, it appears that it would indeed support considerable life extension.

As for the more is better approach, Häyry claims that this view implies that considerable life extension is desirable: "Life is a string of experiences. When the experiences are good, life is good and it is desirable to continue it."<sup>14</sup> About this, I think Häyry is correct: if an approach to the meaning of life held that certain types of states of affairs made a life good, then having more of them is desirable. Unfortunately, I think that the more is better approach may be a somewhat implausible way to approach the *meaning* of life. This approach to thinking about the meaning of life seems to conflate welfare with meaning, and I think it is important to keep these two evaluations distinct. Indeed, I think it is important to notice that there are many different ways to evaluate a life: we can evaluate it for its aesthetic qualities (how beautiful the life is); we can evaluate it for its moral qualities (how morally good the life is); we can evaluate it for its social value (how much does this life contribute to society); we can evaluate it for its

welfare level (how much value does this life have for the person who lives it); and we can also talk about the meaning or the purpose of a life.<sup>15</sup>

Given these different approaches to evaluating lives, we can say, for example, that some lives score high on the aesthetic scale but low on the moral scale. It might also be the case that some lives that score low on the aesthetic scale will score high on the welfare scale. And, finally, it might be that there are some lives that score high on the welfare scale but low on the meaning scale. Consider, for example, a person who wishes to do nothing more than some repetitive, mundane task on a daily basis and does precisely that. Perhaps Rawls's grass counter is a good example: this person desires nothing more than to count blades of grass and does nothing more than count blades of grass. On some very plausible theories of welfare, such as desire-satisfactionism, this person enjoys a fairly high level of welfare. Does it make sense to say of this person, however, that his life scores high on the meaning/purpose scale? I suspect not. More plausibly, we might say that this person's life is meaningless, purposeless. Indeed, we might criticize this person for devoting his entire life to a worthless activity.

If we hold that meaning tracks welfare, as Häyry appears to do in his discussion of the more is better approach, we do not have the conceptual capacity to make such a claim. Häyry, therefore, can either abandon the more is better approach to meaning or develop it in such a way that judgments about welfare are different from judgments about meaning. If neither option seems appealing, he could instead refocus the debate so that it concerns welfare rather than meaning. If he were to do that, then the question he should ask is whether different theories of welfare imply that considerable life extension is desirable.

Unfortunately, thinking about the question of considerable life extension in the context of welfare rather than meaning makes the case for considerable life extension far less compelling. The fact that a person's level of welfare increases with an increase in the number of years lived does not, in itself, give a convincing reason for the desirability of considerable life extension. Consider the grass counter: the fact that he will have the opportunity to continue to count blades of grass (a completely meaningless activity, albeit one that generates a high level of welfare) does not provide a very persuasive reason for pursuing considerable life extension.

Let me develop this objection a little more. I suspect that this problem is a result of the fact that there is an important ambiguity in the question, is considerable life extension desirable? It can mean the following: (1) is it rational for me to desire, on an individual level, considerable life extension? It can also mean the following: (2) is considerable life extension a project that is worthy of pursuit, in general? The first is a question about me; the second is a normative question about the value of considerable life extension, generally. I think that the more is better approach fails to appreciate this distinction. Indeed, in *Rationality and the Genetic Challenge*, Häyry discusses John Harris's view about considerable life extension—a view that is a paradigmatic example of the more is better approach—and says the following: "Harris himself believes that all forms of life extension and research into them should be allowed and encouraged, because every rational and reasonable person would, according to him, welcome the *opportunity* to stay alive and to experience more good things."<sup>16</sup>

In this passage it appears that Harris draws a normative conclusion about considerable life extension from the fact

that it is what is desired by reasonable people. However, the way in which one answers (1) should not settle (2). Simply because I rationally want to live longer, it does not thereby follow that considerable life extension is a worthwhile project. To return to the grass counter, he may rationally want to live longer, seeing as living longer allows him to continue to satisfy his desires, but this fact alone does not in any way decide the question of whether considerable life extension is *worthy* of pursuit. The real question we should ask here is (2); once that question has been settled, we can then turn to (1).

### Conclusion

The question about the desirability of considerable life extension is an important and interesting one, and it is one that Häyry investigates from the perspective of three different views about the meaning of life. Although I think the discussion is interesting and insightful, I think some of Häyry's conclusions might be worth reconsidering. First, I think that one can reasonably hold that the Epicurean view implies that considerable life extension is desirable. Second, I think that the more is better approach to the meaning of life conflates meaning with welfare, rendering this approach implausible. Moreover, I claimed that the question of whether considerable life extension is desirable is ambiguous. Some approaches to thinking about considerable life extension fail to pay attention to the ambiguity. The more is better approach is one such approach. As a result of failing to pay attention to this ambiguity, the more is better approach simply

assumes that the worthiness of considerable life extension is a matter of whether individuals would ever desire such a thing. I think it is a mistake, however, to think about considerable life extension in this way.

### Notes

1. Häyry M. Considerable life extension and three views on the meaning of life. *Cambridge Quarterly of Healthcare Ethics* 2011;20:21–9.
2. By “considerable life extensions,” Häyry means the “average and maximum increase of our biological and psychological existence from the current century (give or take a decade or two) to at least a millennium” (see note 1, Häyry 2011, at 22).
3. See note 1, Häyry 2011, at 22.
4. See note 1, Häyry 2011, at 24.
5. See note 1, Häyry 2011, at 25.
6. See note 1, Häyry 2011, at 25.
7. See note 1, Häyry 2011, at 25.
8. See note 1, Häyry 2011, at 25–6.
9. See note 1, Häyry 2011, at 28.
10. Epicurus. *Letter to Menoecus*. In: Long AA, Sedley DN, eds. *The Hellenistic Philosophers*. Vol. I. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press; 1987, at 150.
11. Long AA, Sedley DN, eds. *The Hellenistic Philosophers*. Vol. I. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press; 1987, at 154.
12. It is worth noting, of course, that Epicurus would still warn us against forming false beliefs and desires about considerable life extension. For example, he would caution one against desiring considerable life extension because one (falsely) believes that by extending one's life one reduces the duration of one's death.
13. See note 1, Häyry 2011, at 26.
14. See note 1, Häyry 2011, at 27.
15. For a similar view, see Heathwood C. The problem of defective desires. *Australasian Journal of Philosophy* 2005;83:487–504. Heathwood says, for example, “I do distinguish a life rich in personal welfare from lives rich in virtue, excellence, dignity, achievement, aesthetic value, etc.” (500).
16. Häyry M. *Rationality and the Genetic Challenge*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press; 2010, at 208.