

## LIVING WELL

Steven M. Cahn and Christine Vitrano

*What is living well? We describe two contrasting lives and ask whether one is better lived than the other. Many philosophers, among them Susan Wolf, Richard Kraut and Stephen Darwall would say so. We criticize their position, which views certain activities as intrinsically more worthy than others. Instead, we conclude that persons are living well if they act morally and find long-term satisfaction, regardless of the pursuits they choose.*

In Ronald Dworkin's posthumously published *Religion Without God*, he argues that an atheist can be religious. While this claim would come as no surprise to adherents of Jainism, Theravada Buddhism, or Mimamsa Hinduism, Dworkin has in mind not these Asian religious traditions but a viewpoint common to many Western thinkers denying theism yet recognizing 'nature's intrinsic beauty' and the 'inescapable responsibility' of each person to 'live well'.<sup>1</sup> Dworkin considers such an outlook religious.

Leaving aside his curious line of thought that finds support for religious belief in such disparate phenomena as the Grand Canyon, the prowling of jaguars, and the discovery by physicists of the Higgs boson, let us concentrate instead on his view that we should all seek to live well so as to achieve 'successful' lives and avoid 'wasted'<sup>2</sup> ones.

Does one model fit all? On this important point Dworkin wavers. He maintains that 'there is, independently and objectively, a right way to live'. Yet he also recognizes 'the responsibility of each person to decide for himself ethical questions about which kinds of lives are appropriate and which would be degrading for him'.<sup>3</sup>

What sort of life did Dworkin find degrading? We are not told but suspect that for such a successful academic, a degrading life might have been one without intellectual striving, just as a famed athlete might find to be degrading a life as a couch potato.

But what sorts of lives are worthy? To help answer the question, consider the following two fictional, though realistic, cases.

1. Pat received a bachelor's degree from a prestigious college, earned a Ph.D. in philosophy from a leading university, was awarded an academic position at a first-rate school, and eventually earned tenure there. Pat is the author of numerous books, articles, and reviews, is widely regarded as a leading scholar and teacher, and is admired by colleagues and students for fairness and helpfulness. Pat is happily married, has two children, enjoys playing bridge and the cello, and vacations each summer in a modest house on Cape Cod. Physically and mentally healthy, Pat is in good spirits, looking forward to years of continued happiness.

2. Lee did not attend college. After graduation from high school, Lee moved to a beach community in California and is devoted to sunbathing, swimming, and surfing. Lee has never married but has experienced numerous romances. Having inherited wealth from deceased parents, Lee has no financial needs but spends money freely on magnificent homes, luxury cars, the latest in electronic equipment, designer clothes, meals in fine restaurants, golfing holidays, and trips to far-flung locations. Lee has many friends and is admired for honesty and kindness. Physically and mentally healthy, Lee is in good spirits, looking forward to years of continued happiness.

Both Pat and Lee live in ways that appear to suit them. Both enjoy prosperity, treat others with respect, engage in activities they find fulfilling, and report they are happy. So are both living well? Are both pursuing equally successful lives? Is either life being wasted?

Dworkin offers little guidance to help answer these questions. He urges that we 'make our lives into works of art',<sup>4</sup>

but works of art typically contain complexities and conflicts not found in the lives of Pat or Lee. The story of each might be told in the form of a play or novel, but neither individual appears to have the makings of a Medea, Hamlet, or Raskolnikov.

Dworkin remarks that 'Someone creates a work of art from his life if he lives and loves well in family or community with no fame or artistic achievement at all'.<sup>5</sup> Here Dworkin, having urged us to live well by making our lives into works of art, unhelpfully explains that works of art are those made by living well. This circular explanation sheds no light on how to live well, so Dworkin's appeal to works of art does not help us choose between the lives of Pat and Lee.

Many other philosophers, however, have provided reasons for believing that Pat's life is superior to Lee's. They rate the pursuit of philosophical inquiry, playing the cello, or raising a family more highly than surfing, having a series of romances, or living in a luxurious home.

Yet not all philosophers agree with this assessment. Two who do not are Richard Taylor and Harry Frankfurt, each of whom would maintain that Pat and Lee are living equally well.

Consider first Taylor's approach. He discusses the case of Sisyphus, who, according to Greek myth, was condemned for his misdeeds to the eternal task of rolling a huge stone to the top of a hill, only each time to have it roll down to the bottom again. Is the activity of Sisyphus meaningless? Taylor concludes that the answer depends on whether Sisyphus has a desire to roll stones up hills. Most of us don't, but if Sisyphus does, then he has found 'mission and meaning'.<sup>6</sup> So, according to Taylor, living well is living in accord with your desires. If your activities match your wishes, then your life is successful. Whether the activity is teaching philosophy, driving luxury cars, or rolling stones up hills makes no difference.

Frankfurt reaches a similar conclusion. He maintains that we infuse our lives with meaning by loving certain intrinsic

ends and caring about the means to achieve those ends. Need the ends themselves be of a particular sort? Not according to Frankfurt. As he writes, 'Devoting oneself to what one loves suffices to make one's life meaningful, regardless of the inherent or objective character of the objects that are loved.'<sup>7</sup> Therefore while Pat loves discussing philosophy, playing bridge, and spending time with family, Lee loves surfing, golfing, and engaging in romantic adventures. Thus according to Frankfurt both possess the essentials of a meaningful life.

As we noted, however, most philosophers reject this view of what makes a life significant.<sup>8</sup> Susan Wolf, for instance, argues that if your life is to have meaning, you need to be engaged with projects of worth, i.e. those with objective value.<sup>9</sup> What are these? Unfortunately, Wolf offers no theory of objective value to guide us, but she does provide examples of activities that are worthwhile and others that are not. For example, she maintains that caring for an ailing friend gives life meaning but providing financial support for a sick stranger does not; practicing a religion gives life meaning but playing computer games does not; climbing a mountain gives life meaning but solving crossword puzzles does not.

How about a life devoted exclusively to the practice of corporate law? Is that more akin to climbing a mountain or solving crossword puzzles? Wolf isn't sure and declares the matter controversial. Whether her assessment would be different if the legal specialty were, for example, constitutional law is not clear.

Nevertheless, we might suppose that Wolf would look with greater favor on Pat's interests than Lee's. But perhaps not.

Consider her reply to psychologist Jonathan Haidt, who suspects that Wolf's list of meaningful activities presupposes '*politically liberal* bourgeois American values'. As a challenge to her views, he presents the case of one of his students, a shy woman who was passionate about horses: riding them, studying their history, and making 'horse

friends' with others who shared her passion. Haidt argues that this woman found meaning in life through her interest in horses, but he recognizes that 'all of her horsing around does nothing for anyone else, and it does not make the world a better place.'<sup>10</sup> So according to Haidt, Wolf's theory of objective value fails in this case.

In replying to Haidt, however, Wolf takes a surprising step. Rather than dismissing horses as an appropriate subject on which to build a worthwhile life, Wolf emphasizes that you need not accept someone else's word for what has objective value, then suggests that horses might well contribute to the meaningfulness of the woman's life, and concludes that a person's liking some activity, whatever it may be, can lead to its becoming valuable for that individual. What, then, becomes of objective value? Wolf senses the problem and admits that her discussion 'may leave others either disappointed by what they see as watering down of what is distinctive about my conception of meaningfulness, or confused about what the point of it is, if it is to be understood so broadly.'<sup>11</sup> We share such confusion.

If we follow Wolf's line of reasoning about the case of the woman who loved horses, then perhaps Lee's life might be on a par with Pat's. After all, if riding horses makes a life worthwhile, why not swimming, driving luxury cars, and traveling to far-flung locations?

Perhaps Wolf goes astray in formulating her list of worthwhile activities, so let us consider the list offered by Richard Kraut, who maintains that 'a flourishing human being is one who possesses, develops, and enjoys the exercise of cognitive, affective, sensory, and social powers (no less than physical powers).'<sup>12</sup> Does this description fit Pat better than Lee?

Kraut probably would suppose so, but the answer is not obvious. Consider the following activities he cites with approval: playing tennis, writing poetry, cooking, running an organization, philosophizing, and enjoying our sexual powers. Here are some other activities Kraut finds of lesser value: bowling, playing checkers, accumulating wealth,

achieving fame, holding socially isolating jobs, and remaining single.

As with Wolf's list, Kraut's raises more questions than it answers. Why is tennis better than bowling? How do both compare to badminton, archery, or quoits? Why is cooking better than checkers? How do both compare to gardening, hiking, or playing Monopoly? What's the matter with socially isolating jobs, such as serving as a lighthouse keeper, exploring a rain forest, writing fiction in a remote cabin, or doing research in a library cubicle? Why are fame and wealth denigrated, when most of us, including philosophy professors, are motivated by the possibility of receiving increased recognition and higher salaries? Furthermore, why does the study of philosophy invariably appear on philosophers' lists of worthwhile activities, whereas the study of such subjects as sociology, geology, Asian religions, ceramics, and finance are rarely cited with enthusiasm?

Perhaps surprisingly, Kraut's criteria for flourishing might well fit Lee's life: Lee's surfing would presumably lead to greater development of physical powers, Lee's travel might offer a wider perspective on understanding the world, Lee's many friends might offer a richer social life, and Lee's romances might lead to significant development of affective and sexual powers. How are we to weigh these advantages against Pat's devotion to research, teaching, family, and hobbies? The answer is unclear, but if Kraut's criteria do not favor the life of Pat or Lee, what guidance do they provide for living well? In any case, they would be especially unconvincing to an unmarried person who belongs to a bowling league.

Assuming that lists of more and less worthwhile activities offer too easy a target for criticism, why not avoid specifics and simply assert that living well is pursuing goals of intrinsic value? That strategy is adopted by Stephen Darwall, who claims that 'the best life for human beings is one of significant engagement in activities through which we come into appreciative rapport with agent-neutral values, such as aesthetic beauty, knowledge and understanding, and the

worth of living beings.’<sup>13</sup> Darwall here fails to take into account John Dewey’s insight that any subject can have intrinsic value. In Dewey’s words, ‘It is as true of arithmetic as it is of poetry that in some place and at some time it ought to be a good to be appreciated on its own account – just as an enjoyable experience, in short.’<sup>14</sup> Thus Pat considers philosophy, bridge, and playing the cello to have intrinsic value, while Lee thinks the same of surfing, golf, and travel.

Darwall, however, adds that our activities are meritorious only if others recognize them as such. We should, therefore, focus on ‘things that matter’, and things matter only if others who care about us judge that our choices ‘have worth.’<sup>15</sup> Do Pat’s friends find Pat’s life to be of worth? Quite likely. Do Lee’s friends find Lee’s life to be of worth? Also quite likely. Thus we have reached an impasse.

To illustrate the problem more vividly, consider the real-life case of Phil Saltman, a jazz pianist in the 1930s and 1940s, whose extraordinary talents could have propelled him to international renown.<sup>16</sup> But after appearing as soloist with the Boston Pops Orchestra, he decided that life as a touring musician was not to his liking, and he chose instead to open a summer music camp for boys and girls who enjoyed playing music, even if they did not plan to pursue the activity professionally. The camp flourished,<sup>17</sup> and he never doubted his choice to give up the opportunity for a distinguished solo career in order to guide youngsters and play music with them in amateur combos. Did he make a mistake? Did he limit his chances for a successful life? Did he waste his most significant talents? Some of his friends thought so; others did not. Thus Darwall’s test is unhelpful. Regardless, why should Phil Saltman’s friends have been given the final say? They probably did not fully understand his situation, and in any case the life at stake was his, not theirs.

We should also note that like Wolf and Kraut, Darwall takes philosophy as a paradigm case of a worthwhile activity. As he puts it, ‘Readers of this essay might agree

that philosophy and philosophical activity have intrinsic worth. . .<sup>18</sup>

No doubt most would. Keep in mind, however, the insightful words of the pre-Socratic philosopher Xenophanes, who is said to have remarked that 'if oxen and horses and lions had hands, and could draw with their hands and do what man can do, horses would draw the gods in the shape of horses, and oxen in the shape of oxen, each giving the gods bodies similar to their own.'<sup>19</sup>

Of course, most philosophers find philosophy to be worthwhile, just as most chess players find chess to be worthwhile. After all, how many of us suppose that a successful life depends on engaging in activities that we do not enjoy or may hardly understand? Instead, we are prone to urge others to recognize the worth of at least some of our preferred undertakings. For instance, rarely do philosophers fight fires, achieve extraordinary feats of athleticism, or amass large sums of money in business ventures. Few philosophers, therefore, are apt to find as much value in firefighting, professional sports, or commerce as in contemplation.

The high regard in which philosophers hold philosophy, an attitude historically associated with Aristotle,<sup>20</sup> has been expressed recently by Neil Levy. He argues that the best of all lives is the pursuit of knowledge, exemplified most clearly in philosophical inquiry, which to his mind is an activity open only to 'an elite' fortunate enough to possess 'cognitive abilities, of a special sort, which are . . . extremely sophisticated *relative* to the population norm.'<sup>21</sup> The supposition that academics, especially philosophers, are more intelligent than all others is not likely to survive witnessing even one faculty meeting. Nevertheless Levy is committed to the view that work as a physician, judge, business executive, airline pilot, violinist, electrician, caregiver, or parent ranks below spending countless hours assessing such matters as proposed solutions to the Gettier problem. We find this implication to be a *reductio ad absurdum* of his position.



Now let us return to assessing the lives of Pat and Lee. While we reject the assumption that for all people at all times certain activities are intrinsically more worthy than others, we nevertheless note two crucial ways in which Pat and Lee are alike. Despite the vast differences in their interests, both act morally, neither harming anyone. How could they be living well while behaving unethically? To speak, as Frankfurt does, of Nazism offering its leaders a 'complex, exhilarating, and rewarding life' is unconvincing.<sup>22</sup> Value cannot be found in doing unmitigated evil. Nor, as Taylor apparently overlooks, can the desire to act immorally provide the basis for living well.

But Pat and Lee not only act ethically; both are also happy. They have found deep satisfaction in their respective lives. Granted, we might urge either one to consider alternatives. Perhaps we could suggest to Lee the study of philosophy, lauding its power to help understand the human condition. Lee might take our suggestion and find philosophy fascinating; then again, Lee might find it opaque and boring. Likewise, perhaps we could urge Pat to take up golf. Pat might enjoy it, or, contrary to our expectations, consider it a waste of time. We can offer such suggestions to both of them, but doing so doesn't imply that the life of either is in any way unsatisfactory.

Suppose, however, that Pat and Lee were fundamentally frustrated or angry. Suppose they regretted many important decisions they had made, resented how they were treated by others, or rued what they considered to be a long series of misfortunes. Under those circumstances, even if their actions had been socially beneficial, the results for them would have been negative.

Our view, then, is that acting morally and finding long-term satisfaction are necessary conditions for living well. Seeing no plausible case for any other, we consider them jointly sufficient. By that standard, Pat and Lee both are living well. We might admire the life of one more than the other, but such a judgment would reflect our own preferences or purposes and not provide an appropriate basis for determining whose life is well-lived.

In conclusion, let us return to Ronald Dworkin's account of a religious outlook, which he took to include belief in a world where 'objective value permeates everything', and human beings should act in accord with 'life's intrinsic meaning'.<sup>23</sup>

We do not share his view, but neither do some notable religious thinkers. Consider, for example, the author of the Book of Ecclesiastes, who declares that 'everything is futile and pursuit of wind'.<sup>24</sup> How, then, are we to act? The answer provided is brief and blunt: 'There is nothing worthwhile for a man but to eat and drink and afford himself enjoyment with his means.'<sup>25</sup>

This position is properly understood as applying only within the bounds of morality<sup>26</sup> and not sanctioning the foolish pursuit of unrestrained pleasures.<sup>27</sup> Even so, Dworkin would surely have judged the outlook misguided. We, on the contrary, find it astute.<sup>28</sup>

*Steven M. Cahn is Professor of Philosophy, City University of New York, Graduate Center, and Christine Vitrano is Assistant Professor, Brooklyn College, City University of New York. [cvitrano@brooklyn.cuny.edu](mailto:cvitrano@brooklyn.cuny.edu)*

## Notes

<sup>1</sup> Ronald Dworkin, *Religion Without God* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2013), 2, 4, 155.

<sup>2</sup> *Ibid.*, 10, 2.

<sup>3</sup> *Ibid.*, 155, 114.

<sup>4</sup> *Ibid.*, 157–158.

<sup>5</sup> *Ibid.*, 158.

<sup>6</sup> Richard Taylor, *Good and Evil* (Amherst, NY: Prometheus Books, 2000), 324.

<sup>7</sup> Harry Frankfurt, 'Reply to Susan Wolf' in *Contours of Agency: Essays on Themes from Harry Frankfurt*, eds. Sarah Buss and Lee Overton (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2002), 250.

<sup>8</sup> See, for example, Stephen Darwall, *Welfare and Rational Care* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2002); Richard Kraut, *What is Good and Why* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2007); and Susan Wolf, *Meaning in Life*

and *Why It Matters* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2010).

<sup>9</sup> Wolf, 34–39.

<sup>10</sup> *Ibid.*, 96, 97.

<sup>11</sup> *Ibid.*, 131.

<sup>12</sup> Kraut, 137.

<sup>13</sup> Darwall, 75.

<sup>14</sup> *The Middle Works of John Dewey, 1899–1924*, vol. 9, ed. Jo Ann Boydston (Carbondale: Southern Illinois University Press, 1985), 248–249.

<sup>15</sup> Darwall, 95, 97.

<sup>16</sup> See his *Method of Modern Jazz Piano Playing*, rev. ed., Boston Music Company, 1937.

<sup>17</sup> Known as Camp Encore/Coda, it continues under the directorship of Phil Saltman's son and daughter-in-law; its history can be found at [www.encore-coda.com](http://www.encore-coda.com).

<sup>18</sup> Darwall, 79.

<sup>19</sup> John Manley Robinson, *An Introduction to Early Greek Philosophy* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin Company, 1968), 52.

<sup>20</sup> The locus classicus is Book X of the *Nicomachean Ethics*, trans. David Ross, rev. J. L. Ackrill and J. O. Urmson (Oxford and New York: Oxford University Press, 1998), where at 1178a5 Aristotle maintains that a life of contemplation is 'best and pleasantest'.

<sup>21</sup> Neil Levy, 'Downshifting and Meaning in Life', *Ratio* 18 (2005), 187, 188.

<sup>22</sup> Frankfurt, 247.

<sup>23</sup> Dworkin, 1, 11.

<sup>24</sup> *Ecclesiastes* 2:17. The translation is from *Tanakh: The Holy Scriptures* (Philadelphia: Jewish Publication Society, 1988).

<sup>25</sup> *Ecclesiastes* 2:24.

<sup>26</sup> *Ecclesiastes* 7:17.

<sup>27</sup> *Ecclesiastes* 10:17.

<sup>28</sup> Themes from this article are developed in our forthcoming book, *A Time for Seeking: Philosophical Reflections on Living Well*, to be published in 2015 by Columbia University Press.