

What is The Good Life?

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Introduction

Anxiety, sadness and regret; calmness, happiness and gratefulness, the feelings in our heart. Trees, buildings, roads, rivers, people and the sky, the world in our eyes. Everything that we experience, life as we call it. As humans we have the tendency to categorize by good and bad, so what is a good life if there is one? This paper will attempt to answer this quintessential question.

Nature of Life

The condition of living from the perspective of a living being is near impossible to put into words; it is elusive and unable to define (Watts, *The Way of Zen*, p. 54). Every idea that we can conceive of it is fundamentally an abstraction of it that outlines its property without fully describing the whole. I think, what lies at the source of this is the fact that there is no cognition before life, it is the source of cognition and any knowledge that is possibly known. Hence we only recognize this world through living, by existing in it. In Heidegger's words, we are thrown into this world; we do not choose to be in this world, rather we have found ourselves in it and only then, we begin to gradually expand our knowledge of the world (Heidegger, *Being and Time*, p. 44-55). This existence is at the same time, a relation between us and the world, and thus the world fundamentally consists of relationships between all of its beings. All of the beings in the world are in a sense, together, for between one and other there exists relationships however subtle and inconceivable they are. There is an interconnectivity seeing as for all beings, one can be affected by others and the other way around. To be, is to affect and to be affected. Thus the process by which the world functions is a series of interactions between one and other, what follows this is change. Despite the change, the world itself cannot be said as permanent or impermanent, for in essence it cannot be summed up by mere abstractions (Watts, *The Way of Zen*, p. 57). However what can be observed is, when one tries to hold on to it, change seems to be present everywhere. Using the influential writer, Alan W. Watts's words, it is similar to chasing one's shadow, the faster one pursues it, the more it flees. In a world of changes, there must be resistance to it; something which change can act on or somewhere change can happen. If the process of decaying and dying is said to be the process of change, then life is the resistance to it. Before life, there is no existence, and after life, there is only nonexistence; between them stands life, a place and time where change is susceptible. As such, the cycle of life is a testament to the process of constant change where life and death take turns. It seems that even in nature, the things that we observe consist of changes and resistances to them. One example that I find suitable can be visualized in the rock formations by the seashore; they constantly withstand waves that clash against them; the reason for their existence is that they withstood the changes.

Clinging to Life

Something that can be drawn upon is every being's tendency to maintain its form in this ever changing world; this tendency to resist change and to cling to life. But there is something particular about conscious beings, which is that we feel and think. But what does that have to do with the tendency of clinging to life? It seems that nature developed all living beings in such a way that their body and structure is fit for survival. Moreover, the clinging to life, or survival instincts as we call it are imbued in us and prompt us to take action in the face of danger. If we look beyond biology and onwards, there is special attention to be given to the society's definitions of good and bad. On this topic the prominent philosopher Nietzsche has presented us with the view that the concept of good is bestowed upon themselves by people of power, the aristocrats and nobility in particular in an effort to represent their qualities and values (Nietzsche, *On the Genealogy of Morality*, p. 11-25). Meanwhile those without power lack these qualities and values, and they come to resent the nobility for dominating them. Acting on the resentment for their masters, they try to subvert the general view of submissiveness and passivity for it to be seen as good (Nietzsche, *Beyond Good and Evil*, p. 152-157). What they do not realize is that their actions and decisions are restrained and impeded in consideration of this subverted sense of goodness and suffer a disadvantage compared to those who are willing to employ means that go against these values. Nietzsche's thoughts are without a doubt insightful, he takes inspiration from history and forms a convincing argument out of it, but nevertheless they are seen from a social political perspective. That is, his idea of the distinction of good and bad only exists after human society is formed; after humans have interacted with one another. However we must go back to the roots to search for the source of it all, as the distinction of good and bad must have existed before the formation of society, for even a caveman who has lived alone tens of thousands of years ago must have had some notion of good and bad. In particular, regarding the human's clinging to life, there exists a relation between the two. Being the conscious creatures that we are, standards and principles are inseparable from us, for there exists a world in our mind that is outside the physical realm; the way in it is found only with the help of an instrument (Watts, *The Way of Zen*, p. 50-52). And so, clinging to life the first humans swiftly and naturally began the process of categorizing things into good and bad; what enables survival and what disallows it. When humans start to gather around and settle and form communities, their ideas of good and bad travel and interact, as a result social agreements and coercion of ideas have had to be made, which of course links to Nietzsche's thinkings stated above. This distinction of good and bad has without a doubt shaped humanity and all aspects around it in the course of history, be it culture, politics, arts and sciences. The implications of it are subtle yet ubiquitous, all the goals of human endeavors seem to be the perpetuation of existence and life; the most obvious example being that science was always developed to help with human existence, by improving the condition of humans and its surroundings. I think another clue lies in the fact that no society or culture in history has valued death. It is important to mention that death here refers to death alone, the act of dying on its own without a greater good. There is no inherent value in death as seen by the eyes of man; it is seen as nothing, worthless. I would also argue that if meaning was given to death inasmuch as life, the distinction of good and bad would fundamentally change. Reading

this part as a person would unavoidably invoke the feeling of stating the obvious, but that is just how we are conditioned to feel without even realizing, it is in our nature to despise death for what it is, as it is the end of life that reminds us of our own.

The Good Life

It has been established that the distinction of good and bad is a manifestation of our clinging to life, however that inevitably leads to a multitude of questions. First and foremost, the question of what is a good life still has not been answered. Moreover, if the mind is driven to differentiate between good and bad for the sole purpose of survival, then is the concept of the good life even important or is there something greater than it or beyond it?

Perhaps we need to take one step back and inspect what a good life is, because it is the foundation which the questions are built upon. However in this we soon find our backs against the wall, behind us stands the problem of defining life. As previously said, life is elusive and escapes from any encapsulation by the mind, even if we as humans try our best (Watts, *The Way of Zen*, p. 49). Hence in view of two possible approaches of defining life, that is life as a whole or life as a moment, the latter should be adopted. The reason being that a boundary is required so that life can possibly be inspected in terms of good and bad. Defining using the former is impossible, there are no words and sentences that can summarize life which extends through countless moments; they would only be crude and unworthy generalizations of it. Meanwhile the latter is akin to using a microscope as the tool, it sets its boundaries on a specific spot and thus missing the whole picture. With that being said however, for the purpose of evaluating life the definition of life as a moment is still valuable in my opinion, because every moment was once the moment that is being lived and experienced. Keeping in mind that life is to be in the present moment, we can start to work with the many questions at hand. It has been previously established that the quality of goodness is that it enables beings to cling to life, and it does this naturally by bringing about contentment and joyfulness for the being. Thinking along this line, I propose that the good life is any moment when the being wishes to live, as simple as that. It is almost too simple that it seems unbelievable that this is the conclusion that we have come to. However I would argue that a good life is not as complicated as made out to be, in fact it does not have to be that way, because the most direct and natural way often works and fits the best. Hence a good life can be lived in infinite ways; a person could live a hundred million ways that he would be content to live in the next moment. There are no rules, but there are conditions and inasmuch as flowers that need water and sunlight to survive, humans too have conditions to be met, to find the process of living desirable. I feel that in the same way as flowers are tilting towards the direction of the sunlight to better receive them, humans look for and embrace goodness by nature. So natural is this process that one does not need to figure out in his head what a good life is for him to live it. A good life is one that can be achieved even without planning, without calculating, for the answer to the good life is in every living being's mind all along. All living beings have an idea, or in its

simplest and most elementary form, a sense of it that acts as the guide to the course of their actions; we are all in pursuit of a good life with or without knowing it.

The Bad in Life

However, if the assumptions are true, that all humans strive for goodness and to live a good life, how does the existence of bad come into being? All this talk about goodness does not cover up the reality of the world, and in particular society that is far from being filled with goodness. Thus we would have to search for the source of the bad and evil in the world, the antithesis of goodness. Namely the crimes humans perpetuate against each other, for they seem to be acts and displays of barbarism that is devoid of anything good. But these acts can easily find explanation in that goodness aforementioned is a result of clinging to life; when one lacks the resources and means to survive, he is left with no options but to steal or threaten others into surrendering their resources (Nietzsche, *Beyond Good and Evil*, p. 157). Hence goodness cannot be conflated with goodness in the sense of morality, but the topic of morality will be brought up again later. What about the people that have committed suicide then? Is it not a fact that they have felt that the ending of their lives is the best option there is for them? If so, these self-destructive tendencies contradict the concept about the tendency of goodness and clinging to life that we have just built up. However one would argue that, with good comes the bad and just as life is encountered with death, the tendency for goodness or the will to cling to life is met with challenges and hardships. When the condition for life is no longer there, so will the tendency to survive give way to the tendency to desist, it is an indisputable fact that life will ultimately succumb to death (Nietzsche, *Beyond Good and Evil*, p. 37-38). To put in plain words, when a person is met with challenges and hardships that he cannot overcome or escape from, he is the one who will be overcome. As many would recognize, this relates to Nietzsche's concept of the will to power that is the acting force behind everything in the world, and I would add that nature works in such a way that there are conditions for everything to exist in this world; death is when the condition for life no longer exists, and this condition can occur physically or mentally. However our argument is not complete without tackling perhaps the most hideous and vile acts that is torture. On this subject, the nature of it is similar to suicide but the tendency for goodness is not defeated, but bent in such a way that one enjoys himself while seeing others suffer from pain. Apart from hatred, one's feeling of goodness can be changed by constant pressure and traumatic events. Human nature is a subject to change, for existence means being connected with the world and being affected by the events that happen.

Morality as The Path to Goodness

The good is what enables survival and the bad is what disallows it, as felt by beings. The good and bad acts as the metric for humans to achieve the continuation of life, and as such there is no greater

good than to maintain life. In this respect, nature and nurture are inseparable; if survival is human nature, to reach goodness is the process of nurturing. Most would think that being selfish and manipulative is the path to survival, but being selfless and caring bestows many advantages to the being, for he is well liked and cared for by the community the same way he gave himself to them. Hence the point that is trying to be made here is that goodness, even though it aims for survival, does not take the direct path of protecting and strengthening one's position to the utmost. However goodness is also not to be substituted by morality and goodness in a traditional sense, for morality is just one aspect of achieving goodness. In regards to morality and goodness, Watts has stated that the members of Zen buddhist communities practice a strict moral discipline in their daily routine (Watts, *The Spirit of Zen*, p. 63-64). The reason for this is the Zen practice of accepting everything as the nature of Buddha would be a grave danger to humanity if not for moral restrictions, as it would be justified to do anything and anything heinous. More importantly, he has expressed that morality is a good servant, but a terrible master to mankind. What this means is morality enables one to integrate in society and provides the grounds to practice spiritual freedom, but if morality is all that one follows and put in the highest regard, he will become a bigot or a conventional ethical machine. Morality prevents humans from obstructing each other, but it is not the path to attain spiritual understanding. Watts presents us with a picture, a garden has to be disciplined and planned out in order that the flowers do not compete with each other, but the beauty of the garden does not exist in the discipline, rather it exists in the things which it has made possible. The German philosopher Nietzsche, meanwhile, holds that morality has been the values of the weak throughout history, it encourages men to be passive and submissive, in contrast to a person who does not shy away from taking matters in his own hands, someone that molds the world according to his will (Nietzsche, *On the Genealogy of Morality*, p. 25-27). For this person, he would not reject other options on the grounds of morality, and he accepts the evil and ugly side of life as he sees fit. He is a yes sayer to all aspects of life. The Christian religion and its morality is especially despised by Nietzsche because he sees it as the tool to promote passivity and submissiveness (Nietzsche, *Beyond Good and Evil*, p. 49-50). Both Watts and Nietzsche's thoughts reveal the underlying fact that goodness in a traditional and moral sense only constitutes part of goodness in nature and serves a limited purpose. What is good in our mind far outweighs the good in morality and encompasses a broader range of things. Wealth, status, affection, truth and much more, these are all things that carry value in our mind but do not fit in the category of moral goodness, rather they stem from our clinging to life.

The Trouble in Our Mind

By gathering all the pieces regarding the distinction of good and bad, we conjure up a picture that tells the story. The clinging to life is our primary motivation and by pursuing goodness we are executing our will to cling to life, but far from being the goodness in a restricted moral sense, anything that enhances one's position relative to maintaining life can be considered as being good. Wealth and status, family and

friends, truth and reality, aspirations and goals are looked upon as being good, but is life complete by attaining them? Is there truly an end goal to life, which one can spike the ball and do the touchdown dance after accomplishing it? Perhaps we are so caught up in the pursuit of the good life that we are overlooking some things in this journey that we call life. The distinction of good and bad is ingrained in us, but is it beneficial for our existence? I feel that we cannot ever tell because it drives our very form of feeling and thinking. It is one that cannot be gauged by our knowledge of how the world functions, for it is inherently part of us; trying to examine it would be like to taste one's own tongue. Thus there is no true way to question our pursuit of goodness, still we are constantly driven to pursue what we perceive as good. Here is where the pursuit of goodness comes to trouble us; our mind is fixated on attaining anything and everything that is perceived as good, that we allow ideas and concepts of them to hold a place in our mind. More importantly, we allow ourselves to be entangled in the thought processes of attaining what we perceive as good. Something that relates to this is the buddhist concept of Tanha, or thirst (Watts, *The Spirit of Zen*, p. 56-57). The word refers particularly to the mental state of desiring. It is only natural that we desire things that we perceive as good, however in pursuing it we make up ideas and plans in our mind, it is as if we are trying to build a house, we become the builder that is always working to pile up the bricks for it to resemble the shape and structure of a house in the world that is our mind. However what we do not know is by subjecting the world into this imagination, there will be disparities because no thoughts can perfectly represent real life, where everything is moving and changing. We unknowingly build up a world of thoughts that is outside of the real world and worse, we have given it the permission to affect us. Thus when something major deviates and the world of imagination collides with the real world, we fall apart as humans, for we are unprepared to accept the outcome. Essentially we are trying to trap and shape reality with our thoughts, an effort that will prove to be impossible (Watts, *The Way of Zen*, p. 53). In this futile pursuit, we take the thoughts in our mind for the truth and worry ourselves excessively when things do not seem to go the way that we have envisioned. This is in spite of the fact that we all know well that the pursuit of goodness does not always promise success; even the prerequisite for goodness, life, is untenable and will ultimately fade away. Thus when we think that we are in possession of something, we have lost sight of the reality, and looking down upon our hands, we find ourselves only in possession of the idea that we have possessed something (Watts, *The Spirit of Zen*, p. 57-60). We are absorbed in our own thoughts and tricked into thinking that reality can be found in the activities of the mind, and for this Watts have given us an excellent piece of analogy. That being, a person cannot concentrate on the music if he is preoccupied with his own feelings about the music. One does not experience reality as it is when he is clouded by his own judgments.

Life Beyond Worries and Boundaries

In regards to the pursuit of goodness and all the activities in the mind that causes trouble for a being, there are two perspectives as offered by the Stoics and Zen Buddhists. The Stoics offer us a

solution first by dividing things into those that are controllable and uncontrollable (Seneca, *Letters From a Stoic*, p. 66-69). By concentrating solely on the things that we have control of, namely self, and putting a heavy emphasis on self discipline and control, the concern about anything outside of our power is sought to be eliminated. In addition, a simple categorization of the past, present and future is crucial to this idea; the past is something that has happened so it is unchangeable for us, while the future is ahead of us, naturally we are left with the present and can only work with it, the time and place that we are in and have a direct relation to (Seneca, *Letters From a Stoic*, p. 38). As such, the Stoics are able to live in the moment fully while having no reason to worry about anything outside of their reach. Whereas the Buddhists, coming from a more psychological perspective, conclude that it is for not having the right views about the nature of the world that we suffer. When we are entangled in the aforementioned form of thinking, we make our positions stationary instead of moving and changing along with the world. We become stubborn and the more we wish for things to stay the same, the more we notice that they change, and it is for that we suffer (Watts, *The Way of Zen*, p. 57). For Buddhists central to this is the idea of self and there are distinct views on this in different sects of buddhism (Watts, *The Spirit of Zen*, p. 21-22). For Zen Buddhists, the self is only true and complete when the self is not seen as something distinct from the world, rather it is the part that represents the whole. As opposed to this is the idea of self that exists solely in the mind which simply does not exist; an entity that is separated from the world and has no need from the world; when he desires something he simply takes from the world as if it is from a different dimension, he is someone who remains the same throughout life, who imposes on his environment and tries to create patterns and shapes in the world that he deems suitable. In simple words, he is opposed to the world rather than being a part of it. The entity that is being described does not have a need to interact with his surroundings, he cannot possibly exist in real life, for he has to breathe in air, and exhale the air out of his lungs. As such, he exists only inside the head of the being. To be a Zen Buddhist means to try and abandon the thinking that results in this. Meanwhile, in Nietzsche's work, it has been said that all human beings have ideas of themselves and others, but what separates normal human beings with the Übermensch is that, when he is confronted with something that deviates from his idea of self, he adapts to it (Nietzsche, *Ecce Homo*, p. 47-49). He does not shy away from the world just because the world is a world full of change and uncontrollability that contradicts his view on himself. This in part conforms to the conclusion that we have reached earlier, that thoughts and ideas cannot sustain themselves against change, and the one that holds on to them ultimately suffers from it.

Life Beyond Good and Bad

If there is something greater than the good life, then it must be life itself that includes the good life, the bad life and the life beyond good and bad. It will not be mistaken that pursuing goodness and the good life is part of our nature, but in trying to capture it in our mind, we have lost hold of the reality and the essence of life itself. In contrast, by accepting life as it is, by not confining it in the box that is our mind and

recognizing beyond good and bad, no additional effort is required for us to reach the good life, for it is in our nature to pursue goodness. The ones to lead us there are ourselves.

Conclusion

The distinction of good and bad when seen beyond the lens of morals and ethics is a system that owes itself to life and its will to maintain itself; it is a metric designed for the purpose to maintain life and its will to cling to life. Being far more than the traditional and moral sense of good, goodness is at the same time that which is greater than selfishness, than its existence in material, status and power that strengthen one's position in the world. Truthfully it is greater than what both spectrums can offer. In simple words, goodness does not only exist in strengthening oneself but also in connecting with others. Without this distinction of goodness, there would be nothing to act as goals and purposes for us, nothing common that we can agree upon, and therefore no social agreements that act as the basis for a society. Regarding life, it is that which no system of expression can express. Instead of trying to formulate ideas and thoughts about it, we as conscious beings should take the direct approach and prioritize our environment, not our mind. In relation to this Nietzsche has pointed out that for centuries, the methodology of artists, philosophers and priests have been linked to ascetic ideals (Nietzsche, *On the Genealogy of Morality*, p. 68-75); it has been only possible for men in the past to work in their profession by wearing the mask and cloak of asceticism. For an ascetic, he is free from sensuality and is forced to view life as if it is suspicious. The archetype of ascetics coincides with philosophers, who seem to be withdrawn from life altogether, looking at life with distant cold eyes and a hostile attitude. I feel that that is how one strays from the truth, for life is everything present before our eyes. Trying to grasp it by the means of thoughts and contemplations is akin to using a net to catch water; the essence of life will be gone before you know it. However that is what most philosophers strive for, for this Watts tells us the following:

'There are theologians and philosophers who show the greatest concern if anyone questions their ideas about the universe, for they imagine that within those ideas they have at least enshrined ultimate truth, and that to lose those ideas would be to lose the truth. But because the truth is alive it will not be bound by anything which shows no sign of life - namely, a conception whose validity is held to depend partly on the fact that it is unchangeable. For once we imagine that we have grasped the truth of life, the truth has vanished, for truth cannot become anyone's property, the reason being that truth is life, and for one person to think that he possesses all life is a manifest absurdity. The part cannot possess the whole.'

- Watts, *The Spirit of Zen*, p. 58

As for the good life, since life cannot be understood by the mind and all beings gravitate towards goodness, it is only in our hearts that it will be found.

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