

## What Makes a Life Good?

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Two studies examined folk concepts of the good life. Samples of college students ( $N = 104$ ) and community adults ( $N = 264$ ) were shown a career survey ostensibly completed by a person rating his or her occupation. After reading the survey, participants judged the desirability and moral goodness of the respondent's life, as a function of the amount of happiness, meaning in life, and wealth experienced. Results revealed significant effects of happiness and meaning on ratings of desirability and moral goodness. In the college sample, individuals high on all 3 independent variables were judged as likely to go to heaven. In the adult sample, wealth was also related to higher desirability. Results suggest a general perception that meaning in life and happiness are essential to the folk concept of the good life, whereas money is relatively unimportant.

Research on subjective well-being (SWB) has sought to identify those variables associated with leading a satisfying life. It is an interesting characteristic of the SWB literature that much of this work concerns variables that are not related to happiness—often, variables commonly assumed to bring happiness are found to have little value empirically. For instance, in a review of the research on happiness, Myers and Diener (1995) concluded that knowing a person's sex, income, race, or age gives little clue about how happy he or she is. Myers and Diener closed their review by calling for more research in the area of happiness to help people "rethink their priorities" and better understand how to build a world that "enhances human well-being" (p. 17). This statement conveys a worthwhile sentiment but it assumes, without empirical support, that people don't know what it takes to make a good life. That is, findings with regard to the lack of relation between money and SWB are counterintuitive only if researchers assume that there is a general belief that money does buy happiness. The purpose of the current studies was to investigate *folk concepts* of the good life. How do people weigh characteristics of a life in making a judgment about its overall value?

A variety of thinkers from a broad range of disciplines have puzzled over what it is that makes a good life. Aspects of the life well-lived that are frequently proposed include the importance of happiness, a sense of purpose, wisdom, creativity, a

philosophy of life, achievement, and the experience of love (Allport, 1961; Becker, 1992; Coan, 1977; Rogers, 1961; Russell, 1930/1958; Ryff, 1989a). The ways in which individuals answer the question of what makes a life good are undeniably shaped by history and culture (cf. Coan, 1977; Markus & Kitayama, 1991; Schweder, 1993). It is important to note, for instance, that concern for internal states such as happiness and personal fulfillment may be peculiarly Western and modern concerns (cf. Baumeister, 1987; Coan, 1977). Given the importance of culture and history in definitions of the good life, we selected three variables that have been the subject of attention and debate in Western notions of "the good life": happiness, meaning in life, and money.

Happiness, meaning in life, and money may all contribute to the good life, but using this term ultimately begs the question "What is good?" From the broad range of meanings of "good," we chose to study two types of goodness: desirability and moral goodness. We defined the desirability of a life as its perceived quality, whether one would like to have the life, and how much the life reflected the good life. With regard to moral goodness, we asked participants to judge how good and moral a person was, but also to rate how likely the person was to go to heaven.

Many religions include the concept of an afterlife and many believe in the existence of a final reward (heaven) or punishment (hell). A recent *U.S. News & World Report* survey of 1,000 Americans found that 80% believed in some kind of afterlife, 67% believed in heaven, and 52% believed in hell ("Oprah," March 31, 1997). Only 8% of those surveyed seriously doubted the existence of heaven, whereas 17% seriously doubted the existence of hell. A survey of Britons found that 50% of those surveyed believed in heaven, whereas 25% believed in hell ("Church panel," 1996). Given the rather widespread belief in an afterlife and final judgment, we thought that there was no more straightforward way to inquire about moral goodness than to simply ask participants if the target was likely to go to heaven. In asking this question, we relied completely on participants' intuitive ideas of the afterlife and on their willingness to cast such a judgment.

Our hypotheses for desirability ratings were driven by the relations of the independent variables to SWB in the research

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literature and by research on the content of human goals. Because attempts to answer questions of moral or spiritual nature are essentially culturally and historically bound, our hypotheses with regard to issues related to the moral or spiritual value of happiness, meaning, and money were made in a particular context. We conducted these two studies in Dallas, Texas, and therefore our hypotheses were drawn, to some extent, from Western, Judeo-Christian notions of moral goodness.

### Happiness

The importance of happiness in determining the quality of a life is difficult to question, from a Western view. The whole point of living happily ever after is living *happily* ever after. Aristotle argued that goals are valued only to the extent that they relate, ultimately, to happiness. It has been argued that SWB research has equated happiness with the good life (cf. Ryff & Singer, 1998). Research on life goals and wishes confirmed that seeking happiness is a common desire. Richards (1966) found that happiness was a common goal among college students. Schwartz and Bilsky (1987) identified "enjoyment" as a central dimension of human values. The wish for happiness was a "top three" wish among participants in a study by King and Broyles (1997). Clearly, people want to be happy.

A provocative question that has not been examined in research on SWB is the relative importance of happiness, per se, in determining one's quality of life. People can sacrifice happiness for other goals yet still maintain a sense of fulfillment. Becker (1992) acknowledged this dilemma in his comprehensive review of the characteristics philosophers have associated with the good life. There are clearly individuals (e.g., the Marquis de Sade) whose lives were driven primarily by hedonistic desires for self-fulfillment but were so devoid of any other value that we would never call them "good." In contrast, history is rich with examples of heroic individuals who sacrificed personal happiness for higher ends, whose lives could hardly be called happy ones (Becker, 1992). Although there might be some agreement that these lives were good, there remains some question as to whether such lives would be desirable.

Morally speaking, happiness presents an ambiguous case. Although there is no reason to assume that happiness is morally bad, there is a common Judeo-Christian notion that earthly suffering may earn one heavenly rewards. Thus, one might expect happiness to relate negatively to judgments of moral character. This line of reasoning is contradicted however, if one considers the place of happiness not only as one of the goods in life but also as a by-product of being a "good person." A happy life may be a manifestation of following God's will (cf. Weber, 1930/1976). Happiness may also be viewed as a reflection of a clear conscience, suggesting that happiness might relate to heightened judgments of goodness.

### Meaning in Life

Meaning in life typically involves having a goal or a sense of unified purpose (Baumeister, 1991; Csikszentmihalyi, 1990; Ryff, 1989a, 1989b). Research has identified meaning in life as a strong correlate of SWB (e.g., Antonovsky, 1988; Ryff, 1989a, 1989b; Shek, 1994; Zika & Chamberlain, 1987, 1992) and as a

unifying theme in philosophical treatments of the good life (Becker, 1992; Ryff & Singer, 1998). Research on generativity, the sense that one has left a meaningful legacy for the future, also supports the notion that experiencing a sense of purpose is a vital part of SWB (McAdams & de St. Aubin, 1992; McAdams, de St. Aubin, & Logan, 1993). Becker (1992) included "meaningful opportunity" and "meaningful activity" as characteristics of the good life. Research on the content of human goals supports the idea that people do seek a sense of meaning. Richards (1966) found that a common goal was to "find a real purpose in life." It is important to note that a person may suffer greatly and still possess a strong sense of purpose (Frankl, 1985).

With regard to moral goodness, it seems clear that devoting one's life to a meaningful purpose, particularly one that benefits others, would be considered morally good. To some extent, a poverty-filled life that is rich in meaning, if not in personal happiness, would best represent the New Testament ideal. The example of Mother Teresa is clearly appropriate: Her daily existence was filled with objectively gruesome tasks, yet her life's work was undoubtedly meaningful and fulfilling.

### Money

A final independent variable to be considered is money. Surprisingly, beyond being able to afford life's basic needs, additional income has little effect on happiness. One study found the correlation between income and happiness to be a mere .12 (Diener, Sandvik, Seidlitz, & Diener, 1993). Diener, Horwitz, and Emmons (1985) found that the very wealthy were a little happier than others. In a study of lottery winners, Brickman, Coates, and Janoff-Bulman (1978) found that winning a large sum of money resulted in only a temporary increase in SWB. Money might best be seen as a means to an end rather than an end in itself. In Diener et al.'s (1985) study, participants tended to agree with the statement that money could contribute to happiness or unhappiness, depending on how one used it. Plato, Aristotle, and Aquinas agreed that money as an end in itself was dehumanizing (Lamb, 1992). These notions have been supported by empirical research demonstrating the valuing of material wealth over other ends to be associated with poorer psychological functioning (Kasser & Ryan, 1993, 1996).

Research has indicated that money doesn't buy happiness. The question remains, "Do people think that it does?" King and Broyles (1997) found the wish for money to be quite common in a sample of college students. Wicker, Lambert, Richardson, and Kahler's (1984) analysis of human motives identified economic status as one of the underlying clusters. Despite the potential dark side of seeking wealth, lottery receipts alone would seem to indicate that wealth is widely viewed as desirable. To paraphrase a common saying (about relationships), is it as easy to love a rich life as a poor one?

The moral and spiritual consequences of material wealth have been explicitly addressed in religious contexts. In the New Testament, Jesus warned his disciples that, "It is as easy for a camel to pass through the eye of a needle as it is for a rich man to enter the kingdom of God" (Matthew 19:23). Thus, one might expect wealth to relate negatively to judgments of moral goodness. This line of reasoning is contradicted, however, by the

Protestant work ethic that presents earning money as an ethical duty. In his landmark analysis of the Protestant work ethic, Weber (1930/1976) suggested that earthly economic success might be taken as a comforting cue that God looked upon one favorably. In addition, career success may be viewed as an indicator of ethical goodness, in the sense that one is successful at one's "calling" and is therefore following "God's will" (e.g., Weber, 1930/1976).

It is noteworthy that in the *U.S. News & World Report* survey ("Oprah," 1997), more than half of the respondents (51%) endorsed the belief that "doing good deeds" was what would get a person into heaven, tending to speak against the idea of a widespread belief in predestination and salvation through God's grace. Interestingly, survey respondents were also asked to rate the likelihood of 15 prominent individuals going to heaven. Eighty-seven percent of the respondents believed themselves to be likely to go to heaven; 79% thought Mother Teresa would likely go to heaven, followed by Oprah Winfrey at 66%, and Michael Jordan at 65%. Mother Teresa was arguably the prototypical selfless person, having no material wealth and devoting her life to a meaningful cause. Still, the other examples (Oprah Winfrey and Michael Jordan) provide some evidence that career achievement and economic success do play a role in judgments of heavenly reward.

### Overview and Predictions

In two studies, participants were asked to carefully examine a "Career Survey" (see Appendix) that had ostensibly been completed by someone rating his or her own occupation. Responses of these fictional respondents were manipulated to be relatively happy or not, to be experiencing a great deal of meaning or not, and to be relatively wealthy or not. In the low-money condition, the respondent was not portrayed as poverty stricken, but rather as lower middle class (making \$20,000 to \$30,000 per year, compared with over \$100,000 in the high-money condition) in order to reflect the income differences typically examined in SWB research. Participants rated the desirability of the respondent's life and the moral goodness of that life.

With regard to the desirability of a life, we expected folk concepts of the good life to conform to the literature on SWB. A life high in meaning and high in happiness was expected to be preferred. Money was not predicted to be relevant to desirability. With regard to moral goodness, we predicted a main effect for meaning, such that the meaningful life would be evaluated as morally good. With regard to the effects of happiness and wealth on moral goodness, no clear predictions were made. On the basis of the Protestant work ethic, we might expect that happy, wealthy individuals would be judged as morally good. On the other hand, on the basis of the "suffering servant" portrayed in the New Testament (and in the life of Mother Teresa), we might expect that earthly rewards would be negatively related to judgments of moral goodness. In this case, we expected a three-way interaction, such that the suffering, poor individual who experienced meaning would be judged as most likely to go to heaven.

## Study 1

### Method

**Participants.** One hundred four college students (19 men, 81 women, 4 not reporting) participated in this study to earn extra credit in upper level psychology classes. Age ranged from 18 to 42 years ( $M = 21.66$ ,  $SD = 3.49$ ).

**Materials and procedure.** Participants were asked to carefully examine a questionnaire that ostensibly had been completed by a participant in a study of "career satisfaction." We used a "career survey" in order to make the survey as concrete as possible. The importance of job satisfaction to life satisfaction is well-established (cf. Myers & Diener, 1995). Although the survey participants examined referred to aspects of the respondent's job, the questions participants answered referred to the respondent's life in general.

The career survey was designed so that all fictional targets had received a bachelor of arts degree, and no information about sex or age was given. Participants were randomly assigned to conditions in a 2 (high vs. low happiness)  $\times$  2 (high vs. low meaning)  $\times$  2 (high vs. low money) between-subjects design. Survey responses were manipulated so that for some participants the respondent was earning greater than \$100,000 per year, and for some the respondent was earning between \$21,000 and \$30,000 per year. The survey included three questions about the degree of happiness experienced in the respondent's job. These items included "I truly enjoy going to work everyday," "At my job, I feel happy most of the time," and "My job involves a lot of hassles." These items had been rated on a scale ranging from 1 (*completely false of me*) to 5 (*completely true of me*). In the high-happiness condition, these items were rated 5, 4, and 1, respectively. In the low-happiness condition, the items were rated 1, 2, and 5, respectively. Mixed in with the happiness items were three items about the amount of meaning the respondent experienced in his or her job. These items included "In my job I really feel like I am touching the lives of people," "My work is very rewarding and I find it personally meaningful," and "My work will leave a legacy for future generations." In the high-meaning condition, these items were rated 5, 5, and 4, respectively. In the low-meaning condition, they were rated 1, 1, and 2, respectively.

The dependent measures completed by participants included three questions about desirability and three about moral goodness. For desirability, on a scale from 1 (*not at all*) to 5 (*extremely much*), participants responded to the questions "How much would you like to have this person's life?" and "How much do you think this person is leading 'the good life'?" Next, on a scale from 1 (*very low*) to 10 (*very high*), participants rated the quality of the respondent's life. With regard to moral goodness, on a scale from 1 (*not at all*) to 5 (*extremely much*), participants rated how good and how moral they thought the person was. Finally, participants read and completed the final rating:

Many religions and philosophies include the idea of a "final judgment." If there were such a thing as life after death, circle the number that best represents your guess as to what this person would experience.

|            |   |   |   |   |   |   |   |   |   |            |
|------------|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|------------|
|            | 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 | 5 | 6 | 7 | 8 | 9 | 10         |
| punishment |   |   |   |   |   |   |   |   |   | reward     |
| ("hell")   |   |   |   |   |   |   |   |   |   | ("heaven") |

Because religiosity might reasonably be expected to relate to this last measure, participants also completed two items tapping the importance of religion in their lives ("How important is religion in your life?" and "How important is spirituality in your life?"). Both items were rated on a scale from 1 (*not at all*) to 5 (*extremely much*) and the mean of

Table 1  
Intercorrelations of Dependent Measures: Study 1

| Dependent measure                    | 1    | 2    | 3    | 4    | 5    | 6    |
|--------------------------------------|------|------|------|------|------|------|
| 1. Would you like to have this life? | —    |      |      |      |      |      |
| 2. Is this a good life?              | .73  | —    |      |      |      |      |
| 3. What is the quality of this life? | .72  | .80  | —    |      |      |      |
| 4. Is this a good person?            | .43  | .55  | .52  | —    |      |      |
| 5. How moral is this person?         | .47  | .52  | .46  | .60  | —    |      |
| 6. Is this person going to heaven?   | .48  | .46  | .57  | .54  | .48  | —    |
| Grand <i>M</i>                       | 1.93 | 2.80 | 5.43 | 3.28 | 3.18 | 6.89 |
| <i>SD</i>                            | 1.27 | 1.15 | 2.23 | 0.95 | 0.94 | 1.89 |

Note.  $N = 104$ . All correlations are significant at  $p < .01$ . Ratings for the liking for a life, whether this is a good life, and how good and moral the person is were made on a scale ranging from 1 (*not at all*) to 5 (*extremely much*). Ratings of quality of life and heavenly reward were made on a scale ranging from 1 (*extremely low; hell*) to 10 (*extremely high; heaven*).

the two ratings was taken as a crude measure of religiosity ( $M = 3.44$ ,  $SD = 1.23$ ; correlation between the two items = .69,  $p < .001$ ).

### Results and Discussion

Correlations were computed among the dependent measures, and results are shown in Table 1.<sup>1</sup> All of the dependent measures were highly correlated, with the desirability measures being somewhat more highly correlated than the moral goodness measures. The correlations across the two types of measures indicate that participants said that they would like to have the life of a person who was moral, good, and going to heaven. Respondents who were judged as having a high quality of life were also judged to be good, moral, and on a path to heaven. Note also that participants' responses to the going-to-heaven question had a grand mean of 6.89, suggesting a tendency toward leniency. These ratings spanned the full 1–10 range, with 2 targets judged as certain to go to hell and 11 judged as certain to go to heaven. Only 4 participants did not answer the final judgment question.

*What makes a life desirable?* In order to tap the desirability of a life, we asked participants to rate how much they would like to have that life and how much the life reflected the good life (on scales ranging from 1 to 5) and to rate the quality of the life (on a scale ranging from 1 to 10). A 2 (high vs. low happiness)  $\times$  2 (high vs. low meaning)  $\times$  2 (high vs. low money) multivariate analysis of variance (MANOVA) on responses to these three desirability questions revealed significant main effects for happiness and meaning, multivariate  $F(3, 94) = 26.13$  and  $32.68$ , respectively, both  $p$ s  $< .0001$ , and a significant Happiness  $\times$  Meaning interaction, multivariate  $F(3, 94) = 3.11$ ,  $p < .05$ , for the question "Would you like to have this life?",  $F(1, 96) = 9.22$ ,  $p < .001$ . Means for this interaction, shown in Table 2, indicate that the combination of meaning and happiness was preferred significantly more than the alternatives. In addition, the low-happiness, low-meaning condition was preferred the least, with the exception of the low-happiness, high-meaning condition.

With regard to whether the respondent was leading the good life, participants rated the high-happiness survey as reflecting the good life more so than the low-happiness survey ( $M = 3.35$  vs.  $2.20$ ),  $F(1, 96) = 56.51$ ,  $p < .001$ , and the high-meaning

survey as reflecting the good life more so than the low-meaning survey ( $M = 3.44$  vs.  $2.15$ ),  $F(1, 96) = 71.86$ ,  $p < .001$ . For this question, the highest ratings went to the high-happiness, high-meaning, high-money life ( $M = 4.15$ ), though no two- or three-way interactions were significant.

With regard to quality of life, participants rated the high-happiness survey as reflecting a higher quality of life than the low-happiness survey ( $M = 6.57$  vs.  $4.20$ ),  $F(1, 96) = 64.74$ ,  $p < .001$ , and the high-meaning survey as reflecting a higher quality of life than the low-meaning survey ( $M = 6.62$  vs.  $5.42$ ),  $F(1, 96) = 64.52$ ,  $p < .001$ . Although the high-happiness, high-meaning survey received the highest quality of life rating ( $7.96$  vs.  $7.92$  for high happiness, high-meaning, high money), no significant interactions emerged. With regard to the three desirability questions, no main effects for money emerged, multivariate  $F(3, 94) = 0.13$ .

*Moral goodness.* Next, analyses examined the extent to which varying the amount of happiness, meaning, and wealth experienced by the respondent influenced judgments of the moral goodness of the person. A 2 (high vs. low happiness)  $\times$  2 (high vs. low meaning)  $\times$  2 (high vs. low money) multivariate analysis of covariance (MANCOVA) was performed on ratings of how good, moral, and likely to go to heaven participants had rated the respondent to be, controlling for self-reported religiosity. Main effects for happiness, multivariate  $F(3, 89) = 3.89$ ,  $p < .02$ , and meaning, multivariate  $F(3, 89) = 16.82$ ,  $p < .001$ , were qualified by a significant three-way interaction, multivariate  $F(3, 89) = 3.47$ ,  $p < .02$ . This interaction was significant for the questions of goodness,  $F(1, 96) = 3.51$ ,  $p < .05$ , and likelihood of going to heaven,  $F(1, 96) = 6.09$ ,  $p < .02$ .

Cell means for ratings of goodness are shown in Figure 1. Post hoc tests demonstrated that the low-happiness, high-meaning, low-money condition ( $M = 3.86$ ) was rated as higher in goodness than three other groups (all low in meaning): (a)

<sup>1</sup> Initially, analyses were conducted using sex as a variable. However, sex did not show significant main effects, nor did sex interact with any of the other variables in predicting desirability or moral quality of life. Therefore, all analyses combine men and women.

Table 2  
*Liking for a Life as a Function of Happiness  
 and Meaning: Study 1*

| Meaning  | Happiness         |                     |
|----------|-------------------|---------------------|
|          | Low               | High                |
| Low      |                   |                     |
| <i>M</i> | 1.00 <sub>a</sub> | 1.48 <sub>a,b</sub> |
| <i>n</i> | 25                | 27                  |
| High     |                   |                     |
| <i>M</i> | 1.80 <sub>b</sub> | 3.37 <sub>c</sub>   |
| <i>n</i> | 25                | 27                  |

Note. Ratings were made on a scale from 1 (*not at all*) to 5 (*extremely much*). Means with differing subscripts differ significantly at  $p < .05$ .

the low-happiness, low-meaning, low-money condition, (b) the low-happiness, low-meaning, high-money condition, and (c) the high-happiness, low-meaning, high-money condition. In addition, the high-happiness, high-meaning, high-money condition was rated as higher on goodness than these same three groups ( $M = 4.15$ ). Thus, participants rated the suffering individual who had meaning as being a good person (following the "Mother Teresa model"), but in keeping with the Protestant work ethic, they also thought that the person who "had it all" was good as well.

Cell means for ratings of heavenly reward are shown in Figure 2. Post hoc tests revealed that the only two means to significantly differ were for high happiness, high meaning, and high money versus low happiness, low meaning, and low money, with the person who has it all being judged as more likely to find heavenly reward than the individual who has none of life's goods. These ratings of final judgment again conform to a Protestant work ethic view—that earthly success may reflect divine grace. Inter-

estingly, the low-happiness, high-meaning, low-money survey was not seen as particularly likely to find reward in heaven.

No two-way interactions emerged. With regard to main effects, it is notable that both happiness and meaning showed significant main effects for goodness and heavenly reward. Happy individuals were judged as higher in goodness ( $M = 3.05$  vs.  $3.55$ ),  $F(1, 96) = 8.77$ ,  $p < .01$ , and more likely to go to heaven ( $M = 6.47$  vs.  $7.29$  on a scale from 1 to 10),  $F(1, 96) = 6.50$ ,  $p < .01$ . Individuals pursuing a meaningful life were judged as higher in goodness ( $M = 2.77$  vs.  $3.71$ ),  $F(1, 96) = 38.28$ ,  $p < .001$ , and in likelihood of going to heaven ( $M = 6.22$  vs.  $7.53$ ),  $F(1, 96) = 13.16$ ,  $p < .01$ . With regard to ratings of morality, only the main effect for meaning was significant,  $F(1, 96) = 34.34$ ,  $p < .001$ , with the person experiencing a great deal of meaning judged as more moral ( $M = 3.63$  vs.  $2.72$ ). It is interesting to note that the 2 respondents who were given a "1" on the heavenly reward question (i.e., judged as certain to go to hell) were high on happiness, high on money, and low in meaning. Among the 11 respondents judged to be bound for heaven, 8 were high in meaning, 9 were high in happiness, and 6 were wealthy.

To gauge the relative weight of the three independent variables in accounting for variance in the ratings of desirability and moral goodness, we found it useful to examine the effect sizes of the main effects of these variables. This is particularly convenient because so few interactions were significant, rendering these main effects largely interpretable. The multivariate effect size for happiness on ratings of desirability was .45 (mean  $\eta^2$  across the three items = .34). For meaning, the multivariate effect size for desirability was .50 (mean  $\eta^2 = .39$ ). Thus, the main effects of happiness and meaning were similarly large (Cohen, 1977). With regard to the main effect of money, the multivariate effect size was quite low (.01; mean  $\eta^2 < .01$ ).

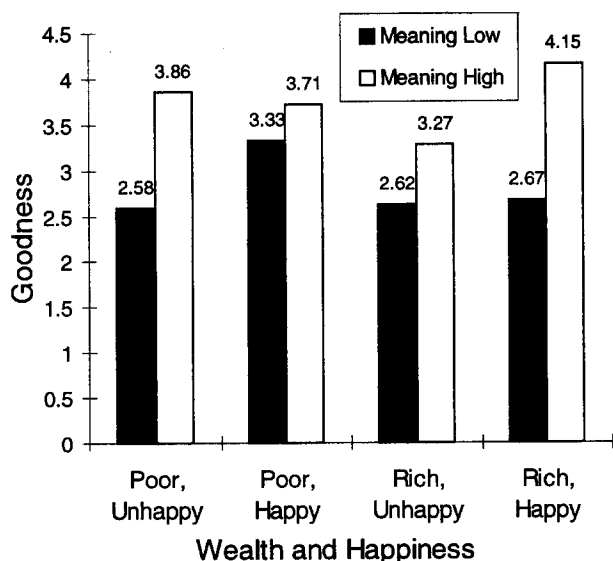


Figure 1. Means for ratings of how good the respondent is as a function of meaning, happiness, and money: Study 1.

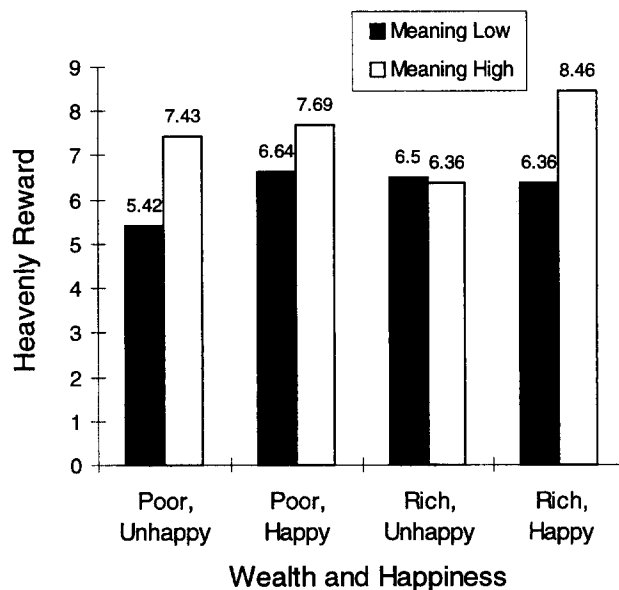


Figure 2. Means for ratings of whether the respondent is going to heaven (10) or hell (1) as a function of meaning, happiness, and money: Study 1.

Turning to moral goodness questions, for happiness the multivariate effect size was .12 (mean  $\eta^2 = .06$ ), for meaning it was .36 (mean  $\eta^2 = .35$ ), and for money it was .06 (mean  $\eta^2 = .019$ ). This examination of the effect sizes of the independent variables indicated that meaning and happiness had large effects on ratings of desirability, and meaning had a sizable effect on ratings of moral goodness.

Results of Study 1 indicated that happiness and meaning determined perceptions of the quality of a life. Thus, participants' views of a good life did converge with the view represented in the SWB literature. With regard to moral goodness, evidence was mixed. Meaning was consistently related to moral goodness, but the interactions shown in Figures 1 and 2 indicated that earthly happiness and economic success were also components of a life perceived to be bound for heavenly reward.

An important limitation of Study 1 is that the sample consisted of college students. These individuals may underestimate the importance of money due to lack of experience in "the real world." In addition, previous research has highlighted the role of age in conceptions of the good life (Ryff, 1989a, 1989b). In order to attempt to replicate these results in a more diverse group drawing from a broader age range, Study 2 was undertaken. In this study, the procedures were essentially identical to Study 1, except that participants were recruited from offices and public places in Dallas, Texas.

## Study 2

### Method

**Participants.** Two hundred sixty-four adults in the Dallas community (99 men, 155 women, 10 not reporting) participated in this study.<sup>2</sup> Ages ranged from 20 to 85 years ( $M = 38.72$ ,  $SD = 13.21$ ).

**Materials and procedure.** Participants were approached by students from an upper level psychology course at their workplaces in and around the Southern Methodist University campus, as well as throughout the city of Dallas. Student experimenters received extra credit in their classes for distributing four questionnaires. Participants were told that the completion of the questionnaire would take approximately 5 min and that their responses would be completely anonymous. Materials were identical to those used in Study 1. For the religiosity questions, the mean was similar to that reported in Study 1 ( $M = 3.48$ ,  $SD = 1.26$ , interitem  $r = .64$ ,  $p < .001$ ).

### Results and Discussion

Correlations among the dependent measures are reported in Table 3.<sup>3</sup> Dependent measures were highly correlated—participants in this sample also tended to rate morally good lives as desirable lives. Again, the ratings for the final judgment question ranged from 1 to 10. Five targets received a "1," indicating that they were certain to go to hell, and 13 received a "10," indicating they were certain to go to heaven.

**What makes a life desirable?** A 2 (high vs. low happiness)  $\times$  2 (high vs. low meaning in life)  $\times$  2 (high vs. low money) MANOVA on responses to the desirability questions revealed significant main effects for happiness, multivariate  $F(3, 251) = 28.13$ , meaning, multivariate  $F(3, 251) = 34.43$ , and money, multivariate  $F(3, 251) = 4.52$ , all  $ps < .01$ , but also revealed a Happiness  $\times$  Meaning interaction, multivariate  $F(3, 251) = 3.43$ ,  $p < .004$ . As in Study 1, the interaction was significant

for the question "Would you like to have this life?",  $F(1, 253) = 7.71$ ,  $p < .01$ . Means for Sample 2 on this question are shown in Table 4. The high-meaning, high-happiness condition was rated significantly higher than all alternatives. The low-meaning, low-happiness condition was preferred significantly less than all three alternatives.

For ratings of whether the respondent was leading the good life, all three main effects were significant. Participants rated the happy life as better than the unhappy life ( $M = 3.15$  vs. 2.34),  $F(1, 253) = 45.50$ ,  $p < .001$ , the meaningful life as better than the meaningless life ( $M = 3.25$  vs. 2.18),  $F(1, 253) = 76.99$ ,  $p < .001$ , and the wealthy life as better than the "poor" life ( $M = 2.87$  vs. 2.62),  $F(1, 253) = 4.98$ ,  $p < .01$ . The Happiness  $\times$  Meaning interaction did approach significance,  $F(1, 253) = 2.71$ ,  $p < .10$ .

For ratings of quality of life, three significant main effects were observed. A happy life was rated as higher in quality than an unhappy life ( $M = 6.09$  vs. 4.09),  $F(1, 253) = 68.00$ ,  $p < .001$ , and a meaningful life was seen as higher in quality than a meaningless life ( $M = 6.14$  vs. 3.87),  $F(1, 253) = 87.44$ ,  $p < .001$ . The wealthy life was rated as higher in quality than the poor one ( $M = 4.67$  vs. 5.45),  $F(1, 253) = 11.34$ ,  $p < .01$ .

**Moral goodness.** A MANCOVA was performed on the moral goodness questions, controlling for self-reported religiosity. Multivariate tests were significant for the main effects of happiness, multivariate  $F(3, 231) = 7.47$ ,  $p < .01$ , and meaning, multivariate  $F(3, 231) = 34.42$ ,  $p < .001$ . No interactions or main effects for money emerged. With regard to goodness ratings, main effects were significant for happiness ( $M = 3.05$  vs. 3.50),  $F(1, 233) = 16.26$ ,  $p < .001$ , and meaning ( $M = 3.71$  vs. 2.77),  $F(1, 233) = 66.87$ ,  $p < .001$ . For ratings of how moral the person was, again, main effects for happiness ( $M = 3.36$  vs. 2.94),  $F(1, 233) = 16.51$ , and meaning ( $M = 3.58$  vs. 2.64),  $F(1, 233) = 72.69$ ,  $p < .001$ , were significant. Similarly, in judging whether the respondent would likely find punishment or reward in the afterlife, two significant main effects emerged, for happiness ( $M = 6.87$  vs. 6.20),  $F(1, 233) = 8.16$ ,  $p < .004$ , and meaning ( $M = 7.30$  vs. 5.66),  $F(1, 233) = 47.18$ ,  $p < .001$ .

As in Study 1, because of the absence of interactions, the effect sizes for the main effects of the independent variables provide a useful basis for comparing the relative impact of each variable on the ratings of desirability and moral goodness. For desirability, the multivariate effect size for happiness was .25 (mean  $\eta^2 = .21$ ), for meaning it was .30 (mean  $\eta^2 = .23$ ), and

<sup>2</sup> Experimenters were asked to request that participants write their own occupation on the back of the survey sheets. Most experimenters neglected to do so, however. From the 35% who did, we can estimate that the participants in Study 2 were from very diverse backgrounds—including unemployed individuals, medical doctors, college professors, clerical workers, service personnel, sales people, homemakers, and skilled laborers.

<sup>3</sup> Analyses were initially run using sex as a variable. Sex had a significant main effect on judgments of how good the target was—men rated the individual significantly more highly than women, in general,  $F(1, 223) = 8.14$ ,  $p < .01$  ( $M = 3.45$  vs. 3.14). However, sex had no other main effects and no interactions with the other variables, and therefore all subsequent analyses included men and women as a whole.

Table 3  
Intercorrelations of Dependent Measures: Study 2

| Dependent measure                    | 1    | 2    | 3    | 4    | 5    | 6    |
|--------------------------------------|------|------|------|------|------|------|
| 1. Would you like to have this life? | —    |      |      |      |      |      |
| 2. Is this a good life?              | .69  | —    |      |      |      |      |
| 3. What is the quality of this life? | .68  | .75  | —    |      |      |      |
| 4. Is this a good person?            | .46  | .57  | .54  | —    |      |      |
| 5. How moral is this person?         | .47  | .54  | .49  | .64  | —    |      |
| 6. Is this person going to heaven?   | .44  | .48  | .57  | .54  | .45  | —    |
| Grand <i>M</i>                       | 2.04 | 2.74 | 5.07 | 3.14 | 3.27 | 6.53 |
| <i>SD</i>                            | 1.25 | 1.20 | 2.51 | 0.98 | 1.02 | 2.06 |

Note.  $N = 264$ . All correlations are significant at  $p < .001$ . Ratings for the liking for a life, whether this is a good life, and how good and moral the person is were made on a scale ranging from 1 (*not at all*) to 5 (*extremely much*). Ratings of quality of life and heavenly reward were made on a scale ranging from 1 (*extremely low; hell*) to 10 (*extremely high; heaven*).

for money it was .05 (mean  $\eta^2 = .03$ ). With regard to moral goodness, the multivariate effect size for happiness was .09 (mean  $\eta^2 = .06$ ), for meaning it was .31 (mean  $\eta^2 = .20$ ), and for money it was .007 (mean  $\eta^2 = .002$ ). As in Study 1, these results demonstrate that meaning and happiness accounted for sizable portions of the variance in desirability ratings. In addition, meaning tended to account for a large portion of variance in judgments of moral goodness, with happiness accounting for a significant but somewhat smaller portion of the variance in moral goodness.

**Effects of age on judgments.** Because of the broader range of age in this sample, we conducted analyses to examine the possibility that age interacted with the independent variables to predict desirability or moral judgments. Hierarchical regression analyses were performed, regressing the dependent measures on the dummy variables of the conditions, the mean deviation score for age, and the interaction terms of age and the dummy variables, to test for interactions between age and the independent variables. No significant interactions (or main effects for age) were found.

### General Discussion

The results of these studies suggest that the folk concept of the good life converges with the portrait presented in the litera-

ture on SWB. Consistently, meaning and happiness determined the desirability of a life. Wealth was largely irrelevant to judgments of the good life by college students and was of only limited relevance for community adults. With regard to moral goodness, the college sample provided some support for the theory of the moral goodness of the suffering individual engaged in meaningful pursuits. However, this sample also tended to see salvation in the life that was characterized by meaning, happiness, and wealth. In the community sample, such an interaction did not emerge. For both samples, happiness and meaning tended to affect ratings of moral goodness.

In comparing the two samples, the results are remarkably similar. Happy, meaningful lives were given the highest "liking" rating in both samples. In contrast to the college sample, in the community sample, money consistently increased ratings of desirability. These differences may be attributable to the substantial differences in age and life experience of the two samples. The students who participated in Study 1 may simply be unaware of the role of money in procuring life's necessities. It might also be that our samples differed in income level and that this difference impacted on participants' ratings of the desirability of the wealthier life. It is notable, however, that even in the community sample, in which wealth had a significant main effect on desirability, meaning had an effect size 6 times that of money, whereas happiness had an effect size 5 times that of money.

The strong relationship between meaning in life and judgments of desirability and moral goodness is not surprising. An important consideration is the degree to which our particular means of manipulating meaning may have enhanced ratings of moral goodness. That is, we included one item that was specifically generative ("My work will leave a legacy for future generations") and one that was interpersonal in focus ("In my job I really feel like I am touching the lives of people"). Creating meaning through service to others is only one way to achieve meaning. Contrasting this type of meaning with meaning that is more personally defined (e.g., a suffering, starving artist whose work is never appreciated until after death) may be an interesting direction for future research.

Results with regard to happiness are, perhaps, more surprising. In both samples, happy people were judged not only as

Table 4  
Liking for a Life as a Function of Happiness  
and Meaning: Study 2

| Meaning  | Happiness         |                   |
|----------|-------------------|-------------------|
|          | Low               | High              |
| Low      |                   |                   |
| <i>M</i> | 1.27 <sub>a</sub> | 1.83 <sub>b</sub> |
| <i>n</i> | 62                | 71                |
| High     |                   |                   |
| <i>M</i> | 1.86 <sub>b</sub> | 3.15 <sub>c</sub> |
| <i>n</i> | 63                | 67                |

Note. Numbers in parentheses are cell *ns*. Ratings were made on a scale from 1 (*not at all*) to 5 (*extremely much*). Means with differing subscripts differ at  $p < .05$ .

leading a desirable life but also as good people who were likely to go to heaven. One explanation for these results is a just world mentality (Janoff-Bulman & Frieze, 1983). It may be that participants thought that individuals who were happy, wealthy, and living a meaningful life deserved these rewards due to their good works. Happiness may also be considered a by-product of leading the good life, rather than a contributor to the good life. Thus, in encountering an individual who is happy, participants may have assumed that such a person must be doing good things (the just world hypothesis; Janoff-Bulman & Frieze, 1983). These results resonate with research showing a positive bias on the part of happy people, who are likely to report themselves as more ethically good than the average person (Janoff-Bulman, 1989).

It is somewhat ironic that although money was irrelevant to judgments of the desirability of a life, money played a role in judgments of the likelihood that a person would be rewarded in heaven (for the college sample). The results in Figure 2 seem to resonate with the results reported in the *U.S. News & World Report* survey ("Oprah," 1997) that Oprah Winfrey was perceived as bound for heaven. These results seem to map onto the ideals of the Protestant work ethic—that success is a moral good.

The results of Study 1 suggest that television evangelists who present an image of happiness and prosperity might well be appealing to people's views of what a person bound for salvation looks like. Television evangelists often present themselves as the picture of happy prosperity—appearing on opulent sets and wearing ornate clothes and jewelry. Although the image of earthly wealth seems to conflict with the biblical notion of goodness, prosperity nevertheless may play a role in judgments of another as likely to find a heavenly reward.

The survey examined by our participants referred explicitly to the respondent's job. Future research might manipulate the life domain in which meaning, happiness, and material wealth are enjoyed in order to determine if life domain interacts with type of benefit to predict judgments of goodness. For instance, an individual who works at a meaningless occupation may experience meaning through his or her interpersonal relationships, or someone might experience very little happiness caring for a gravely ill spouse, but experience happiness at his or her occupation. Allowing participants a wider view of the target's life might provide provocative information about the sorts of experiences that are valued in different life domains.

Three important limitations of these studies must be addressed. First, as stated previously, the results of this study are limited to a particular place and time. Participants were drawn from a city in the "Bible Belt" of the United States. Responses would be expected to reflect a Western, middle class, and largely Christian mentality. Future research should seek to include cross-cultural data in order to evaluate the generalizability of the current results. Given the previous discussion of the cultural underpinnings of beliefs about the good life, results with regard to happiness and meaning might be predicted to generalize to other Western, industrialized groups but may not be replicable with individuals from Eastern cultures. For instance, Buddhism acknowledges the inevitability of suffering, so the issue of happiness would be irrelevant to moral goodness in Buddhist cultures (Osborne, 1996). Additionally, more collectivist cultures

would be unlikely to view individual success as relevant to the question of what makes a life good.

Even within U.S. or Western samples, a potentially important variable to include would be participant religious affiliation. It might be that Catholics, Protestants, Jews, Hindus, Buddhists, and atheists differ in terms of the relative weight they give to wealth, happiness, and meaning in such judgments, or in their willingness to make such judgments. Recall that in the *U.S. News* survey, many respondents endorsed the idea that good deeds were what earned a person a place in heaven. Such a statement is clearly drawn from a more Catholic sensibility than from denominations that emphasize the role of grace in salvation. The inclusion of other individual difference measures may have clarified the present findings. Measuring socioeconomic status would have allowed for a test of this possibility. Other individual differences might also be interesting to include in future research. Participants' levels of SWB might be an interesting variable to include, because this would allow for a test of similarity effects in happiness.

A second potential limitation of the present studies involves the subtlety of the money manipulation. Although the money manipulation was kept deliberately moderate (so that the poor person was not so much poor as average), this subtlety may have lessened our ability to detect differences on this dimension. Thus, participants may have been insensitive to the manipulation rather than insensitive to issues of wealth. It might be worthwhile in future studies to test this possibility with a variety of levels of income.

A final important limitation of this study was that a robust component of the good life was not included—interpersonal relationships. Research has shown that married people are generally happier than unmarried people (Glenn & Weaver, 1988; Inglehart, 1990; Jahoda, 1958; Lee, Seccombe, & Shehan, 1991). The importance of intimacy in the good life is well-established (cf. Coan, 1977; Ryff & Singer, 1998). Broadening this paradigm to include the respondent's relationship status would certainly strengthen any conclusions we might make. In addition, it might be interesting to use a paradigm similar to this one to investigate folk concepts of the good relationship. Future studies might ask individuals to evaluate the relative weight of relationship characteristics such as material benefits, positive affect, and meaning to relationship desirability.

The main thrust of these results for research on SWB is that such research ought to turn its attention to questions beyond the correlates of happiness. Research needs to focus on understanding the behaviors and life choices individuals engage in in search of the good life. The present results indicate that people do know what it takes to make a good life. Whether they actually put these ideas into action is an important focus for research. It may be that individuals make choices they erroneously believe will enhance the experience of meaning in their lives. Or it may be that individuals are unable to gauge the degree of happiness and meaning a particular life course will promise. Certainly, the amount of money a job will pay is concrete and easily understood. How one will feel in the day-to-day enactment of the job is a more complex puzzle. A final consideration in this regard is the extent to which perceptions of the good life for another person apply to individuals' perceptions of the good life for themselves. It may be that meaningful happy lives are admired and even envied when led by others but



that the desire for monetary success is seen as more central to the good life for oneself.

### Conclusions

The present studies indicate that folk perceptions of the good life include the experience of meaning in life and happiness. In addition, in judging the moral goodness of a life, individuals are likely to take into account not only the amount of meaningful activity engaged in but also the amount of happiness the person enjoys. Compared with wealth, meaning and happiness were overwhelmingly more powerful predictors of the value of a life. Placing this research in the context of the SWB literature, the current results tend to indicate that the mysteries of a good life have not eluded people. Yet, one need only take an informal survey of a daily newspaper or nightly news report to see that the good life remains merely a fantasy to many. We do know what it takes to make a life good; perhaps more interesting, then, is the fact that we still behave as if we did not.

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## Appendix

## Fictionally Completed Career Survey Presented to Participants

## Career Survey

Name \_\_\_\_\_

Place of Employment \_\_\_\_\_

What is your highest level of education? (Check one)

Grade school \_\_\_\_\_ High school \_\_\_\_\_

Some college \_\_\_\_\_ B.A. degree X

M.A./M.S. \_\_\_\_\_ Ph.D. \_\_\_\_\_ Other (explain) \_\_\_\_\_

What is your combined family income? (Check one)

Less than \$10,000 \_\_\_\_\_ \$11–20,000 \_\_\_\_\_ \$21–30,000 \_\_\_\_\_

\$31–40,000 \_\_\_\_\_ \$41–50,000 \_\_\_\_\_ \$51–70,000 \_\_\_\_\_

\$71,100–100,000 \_\_\_\_\_ greater than \$100,000 XRate the following items with regard to how much each is **true** of you in your job, using the scale below:

|             |   |   |   |            |
|-------------|---|---|---|------------|
| 1           | 2 | 3 | 4 | 5          |
| completely  |   |   |   | completely |
| false of me |   |   |   | true of me |

1 My work is very rewarding and I find it personally meaningful.5 I truly enjoy going to work everyday.1 In my job I really feel like I am touching the lives of people.4 At my job, I feel happy most of the time.1 My job involves a lot of hassles.2 My work will leave a legacy for future generations.

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