21 Haybron Again

Lecture Notes: Happiness, the Good Life, and Luck

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1. Big Picture

- Both readings ask: What makes a life "good" and how does happiness fit into that?
- Key themes:
  - The good life is not the same as constant happiness or success.
  - Moral character and wise choices matter more than wealth or status.
  - Luck and contingency shape our lives, but we still have agency in how we respond.
  - We should be realistic about limits of control, yet still pursue meaning and goodness.

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2. Reading 1: A Good Life and How to Live It

2.1 Defining a "Good Life"

Core proposal:
- A good life = a life you could reasonably affirm or be justifiably satisfied with. - Call this the "justified affirmation" account. - It's about whether your life deserves affirmation, not whether you feel satisfied.

Two dimensions:

1. Well-being (good for you)
    - Your life must be well worth living:
        - Better than not having lived, by a substantial margin.
        - Does not require:
            * High happiness
            * Big achievements
            * Things always going well
    - Even very ordinary, somewhat unlucky lives can still be well worth living.
2. Virtue / ethical quality (good as a life)
    - Have you conducted yourself well?
    - Includes:
        - Moral virtues (kindness, justice, honesty).
        - Wider practical wisdom (prudence, dignity, making sensible choices).
    - A good life = well-lived and well worth living.

2.2 Why Morality Matters So Much

The "eulogy test": - Imagine writing a eulogy: - Would you honestly say: "She had a good life"? - We generally: - Deny that clearly bad, cruel people had good lives, even if rich and happy. - Affirm that morally admirable people, even with suffering, had good lives.

Tension: - Virtuous but extremely miserable life (unending horror, grief, illness, no consolations): - We hesitate to call this a good life. - So: - Virtue is necessary but not sufficient. - There must be some threshold of doing/faring well enough to make life well worth living.

2.3 How Hard Is a Good Life to Achieve?

- Well-being requirement is low: lots of small pleasures, most lives contain more good than we notice.
- Humans have negativity bias:
    – We react more strongly to bad events than to everyday goods.
- For most people, the main obstacle to a good life is:
    – Not lack of happiness or success
    – But bad choices and bad character.

Key claim: - For the most part, whether you have a good life is up to you, because: - You largely control whether you act well. - Many people already have good lives: - They fulfil basic responsibilities, care for others, earn an honest living. - They have reason to affirm their lives, even if they're not especially happy.

2.4 Ordinary Lives vs Famous Achievers

- Good lives are often ordinary, not famous or "great".
- Extreme achievement and fame often demand:
    – Single-minded devotion
    – Sacrificed relationships and balance
- An unnoticed, wise homemaker may have a better life (by this standard) than celebrated figures with chaotic or destructive personal lives.
- We can be glad others did extraordinary things, but need not want to live like them.

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3. Practical Priorities for a Good Life (Reading 1)

The author suggests four main practical priorities:

3.1 Connect with People and Things That Matter

- Connection is both:
    – A major source of happiness, and
    – An independent part of living well.
- Threats to connection:
    1. Materialism
        – Making life about money, status, "stuff".
        – Can undermine the relationships and values we actually care about.

2. Perpetual distraction (technology)
    – Phones, social media, games = constant low-level stimulation.
    – Risk: being "plugged in but disconnected" from reality, people, and meaning.
    – Texting and online interaction are not substitutes for rich, face-to-face relationships.

Work and money choices: - Very high-paid jobs (finance, law, etc.) often: - Demand long hours, high stress. - Are well-paid because they're punishing. - Two main realistic paths to riches: 1. Hard, unpleasant high-paying work. 2. Hard work at something you're really good at and care about. - Above a moderate income level (about where basic security and comfort are met): - More income has little extra effect on happiness. - Takeaway: - Don't sacrifice meaningful work and relationships purely for higher pay. - Value money, but don't overvalue it.

3.2 Relax

Two senses of "relax":

1. Pace of life
    • Modern life: chronic busyness, "treadmill existence".
    • Historically, humans had lots of downtime; doing "nothing" together was normal.
    • True connection often requires unhurried, unscheduled time:
        – You cannot simply "schedule" deep "quality time" in tiny slots.
    • Many dying patients regret:
      > "I wish I hadn't worked so hard."
    • Slowing down helps:
        – Noticing life's small goods.
        – Being present to people and surroundings.
2. Emotional relaxation
    • Don't blow problems out of proportion.
    • Avoid being needy, perfectionist, or constantly dissatisfied.
    • Learn to shrug off setbacks, keep perspective, and not dwell on anger or anxiety.
    • Expect setbacks as part of life; don't let them dominate your outlook.

3.3 Avoid Debt

• Debt = unfreedom.
    – It can trap you in jobs or lifestyles you dislike or find unethical.
• Many suffer by using debt to buy unnecessary things they cannot afford.
• "Focusing illusions" in big purchases (especially housing):
    – We exaggerate differences (curb appeal, extras) and ignore shared basics (shelter, safety).
    – We overestimate how much "upgrades" will affect long-term happiness.
• Takeaway:
    – Financial security is important; heed risks of overleveraging yourself.
    – Don't trade long-term freedom and peace of mind for status goods.

3.4 "Make It Come Out Even": The Moral Balance Sheet

• Central moral rule (from the author's great-grandmother):
  "Make it come out even."

- Idea:
  - Think in terms of a moral balance sheet, not money:
    * Have you fulfilled obligations?
    * Given back enough relative to what you've received?
    * Left relationships and the world better, not worse?

The "conversation test": - Imagine facing everyone your actions affected (family, co-workers, strangers, future generations). - Could you, honestly and without evasion, say: - "I treated you reasonably well." - "My way of living was justified"? - You will fail sometimes, but: - Aim overall for a positive moral balance. - Make amends where possible.

Key points: - "Making it come out even": - Is about how you lived, not simply net benefits produced. - Does not justify harming others even if you think you've been wronged. - Even severely disabled or dependent people can "make it come out even": - Through courage, generosity, and the way they enrich others' lives.

Final practical summary from Reading 1: - Engage in meaningful activities — but don't overwork. - Make time for people you love and for real connection. - Limit debt and keep finances simple enough to preserve freedom. - Live so that, in the end, you can honestly affirm your life as morally decent:
"Well-lived and well worth living." - Context matters: surround yourself with people and environments that support these priorities.

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4. Reading 2: Luck and the Search for Happiness (Sissela Bok)

4.1 Radical Contingency and Gratitude

- Bok reflects on how unlikely each person's existence is:
  - Her own life depended on:
    * Her mother refusing a recommended hysterectomy.
    * A riskier operation succeeding.
- The decision was partly rooted in her mother's:
  - Ideas about happiness (valuing larger families).
  - Trust in luck ("magical luck").
- This illustrates:
  - How random events and personal choices intertwine to produce a life.
  - Why survival after near-death often leaves people feeling:
    * Awed and deeply grateful just to be alive.

4.2 Luck vs Agency

Perspective Bok proposes: - Our lives result from innumerable accidents and forces we don't control. - But: - This should not lead to fatalism (blaming parents, society, fate, and then giving up). - Instead: - We partly become who we are by how we respond to shifting, unpredictable circumstances. - Like her mother, we can still act, take risks, and reshape our situation within limits.

4.3 Happiness as a Quest Without Guarantees

Bok uses myths and folktales: - Young people "set out to seek their fortune": - No guarantee of success; happiness is not owed to them. - They must face: - Unknown regions - Temptations and lures - High-stakes risks - They must balance: - Empathy (fellow-feeling, sensitivity to others' needs). - Resilience/self-protection (not being exploited or misled). - Modern parallel: - We too face many competing promises about happiness. - We should combine: - Sympathetic understanding of different views. - Healthy skepticism, especially toward authorities (religious, political, commercial) claiming the one true path.

So: - Happiness is something to be pursued and explored, not passively received or blindly accepted.

4.4 Historical and Contemporary Debates About Happiness

Bok situates current interest in happiness within a long history:

- "Axial age" (roughly 6th–5th centuries BCE):
    – Thinkers like Confucius, Buddha, Lao-Tse, Zoroaster, Socrates:
        * Challenged ordinary views of what's good.
        * Proposed new paths to true happiness or enlightenment.
- Early Common Era:
    – Competing claims from:
        * Christianity, Judaism, Greek/Roman religions,
        * Eastern cults, mystery religions,
        * Philosophers like Aristotle and Epicurus, who offered secular accounts of earthly happiness.

Parallels to today: - Massive migration and cultural mixing: - People encounter unfamiliar ideals of the good life. - Competing modern visions (religious, secular, consumerist, nationalistic, etc.) each: - Embed moral teachings about how to live. - Implication: - We need both openness and critical distance in evaluating these visions.

4.5 Bok's Project: Integrating Science and the Humanities

Bok's aims: 1. Synthesize new scientific work on happiness: - Self-reports of well-being. - Brain activity during happy states. - Interaction of heredity and environment. 2. Connect this with: - Philosophical and religious traditions. - Historical reflections, literature, poetry.

Goal: - Achieve a fuller, deeper understanding of happiness by: - Linking empirical research with longstanding human reflection. - She is not: - Offering a step-by-step self-help manual. - Claiming a single formula. - Rather, she explores: - The nature of happiness. - Its role in human lives. - The limits of what we can know.

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5. Connections Between the Readings

5.1 Luck and the Good Life

- Both authors acknowledge luck:

- Bok: Existence itself is radically contingent; life is "a strange and unpredictable adventure".
  - Reading 1: Circumstances (illness, depression, imprisonment) can heavily affect how well we fare.
- Yet both resist fatalism:
  - Reading 1 stresses: you still largely control whether you act well.
  - Bok stresses: we shape ourselves by how we respond to accidents and pressures.

5.2 Happiness vs a "Good Life"

- Reading 1:
  - Emphasizes moral character and wise living over feelings of happiness.
  - Happiness and success are important but secondary.
- Bok:
  - Focuses on understanding happiness through multiple lenses.
  - Treats happiness as a complex, contested ideal intertwined with moral teachings.

Together: - Suggest that: - A good life is not the same as maximum pleasure or constant positive emotion. - It involves: - Moral integrity, - Meaningful relationships and activities, - Reasonable well-being, - And a realistic attitude toward luck and uncertainty.

5.3 Practical Orientation

- Reading 1 offers concrete priorities:
  - Connect, relax, avoid debt, live morally so it "comes out even".
- Bok offers a framework for reflection:
  - See your life as a precarious but precious adventure.
  - Approach competing happiness claims with empathy plus skepticism.
  - Draw on both science and tradition to think about happiness.

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6. Key Exam-Ready Takeaways

1. Justified Affirmation Account:
   - A good life is one you can reasonably affirm:
     Well-lived + well worth living, combining sufficient well-being and reasonably good conduct.
2. Well-being vs Virtue:
   - Virtue is central but not enough on its own if suffering is extreme and unrelieved.

   - Some threshold of doing/faring "well enough" is required.
3. Everyday Good Lives:
   - Most people, through ordinary decency and small pleasures, likely have good lives by this standard.
4. Four Practical Priorities (Reading 1):
   - Connect with people and valued activities; resist materialism and distraction.
   - Relax in pace and emotionally; don't overwork or overreact.
   - Avoid debt that compromises freedom and peace of mind.

- Make it come out even morally: aim for a life you can morally defend to those affected.
5. Luck and Agency (Bok):
   - Our existence and circumstances are highly contingent, but we retain meaningful agency in our responses.
   - Happiness is a quest under uncertainty, not an entitlement.
6. Competing Ideals of Happiness:
   - Across history and cultures, visions of happiness embed moral teachings and often conflict.
   - We need understanding + critical scrutiny toward those claiming a single, guaranteed route to happiness.
7. Interdisciplinary Approach:
   - Best understanding of happiness comes from combining:
     – Empirical research (psychology, neuroscience, social science),
     – With philosophical, religious, and historical reflection.

These points capture the core ideas and arguments you should be ready to explain and connect in discussion or exams.