



Book The Best Things in Life

A Guide to What Really Matters

Thomas Hurka
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Recommendation

Professor of philosophy Thomas Hurka ponders what makes a good life. He writes simply, explaining philosophical concepts with understandable examples: Chocolate and sex, for instance, are good. Hurka layers his concepts, one upon another, weaving a modern and interesting – if not necessarily compelling to the reader who is not philosophically minded – report on what comprises a good life. More practical readers might prefer tips or parameters, but this isn’t a self-help guide. It’s more of a discussion, with points to consider and directions for reaching your own conclusions. Hurka’s ability to cite Kant, Socrates and other philosophical giants without getting bogged down helps readers consider theories they might find otherwise inaccessible. *BooksInShort* suggests this book to managers, executives, entrepreneurs and armchair philosophers seeking gentle guidance toward a more rewarding life.

Take-Aways

- Reflecting on essential good and evil aids decision making.
- Pleasure, one of the key “goods” in life, comes in many forms and intensities.
- Reaching for happiness directly probably won’t bring results; try a roundabout approach.
- Seek what brings you joy, regardless of what anyone else owns or does. One clue: The goal of your quest probably isn’t money.
- Pursue enjoyable activities and seek “flow,” an immersion that brings good feelings.
- Knowledge is one of life’s goods; some kinds of knowledge outshine others.
- Achievement – involving action, intention and work – generates a good life, with more advanced achievements earning more acclaim.
- Goodness, or virtue, contributes to a worthy life because it compounds other goods.
- Love and friendship evoke more than good feelings; they provide a space for knowledge, achievement and opportunities to be virtuous.
- Ultimately, a good life derives from a unique, individual balance of all these goods.

Summary

Building a Good Life

Life’s most important decisions require tough choices. Some decisions combine practical and philosophical concerns, such as deciding whether to work after college or volunteer abroad, or whether to stay married for the kids’ sake or to get divorced for your happiness. To choose the right course, you must weigh all factors and determine what would make your life good or bad. Philosophers disagree on what encompasses a good life. Thomas Hobbes believed the best life comes from getting the most of what you want. Epicurus and others from his school of thinking prioritized pleasure; Socrates and his comrades chose knowledge, while diverse

philosophers rank “moral virtue,” creativity or religious dedication as most important. All these varied priorities concern what is intrinsically good. Two related ideas prevail: Fundamental good exists, as do different paths to a good life. Still, some lives will have more worth than others, based on what has ultimate value.

Measures of Pleasure

Pleasure – also known as contentment, enjoyment and happiness – comes with a variety of commingling sensations. Pleasure does not exist in a pure form, despite the saying “pure pleasure.” As with sound, you can measure more or less pleasure. And although they evoke similar feelings, pleasures vary in kind and in goodness.

“While it’s good to know your inner states, it’s no tragedy if you don’t, and if being wrong about them helps you achieve other important goods, that’s probably on balance a blessing.”

You can divide pleasure into two categories, each with two subtypes. The first category separates simple, self-contained pleasures, such as taste and other bodily sensations, from more complex pleasures, stemming from events that make “you pleased that something is the case,” such as your favorite team winning a title. The second category involves the degree and breadth of your feeling. You can experience slight pain or pleasure, as with a stubbed toe or back massage, all while maintaining other thoughts and feelings. Or you can feel pain or pleasure that affects your sense of well-being, as with depression or contentment. These aren’t experienced in a body part or in parallel with other feelings. Rather, they color your entire outlook.

“Good feelings don’t often come in the front door because you asked them to enter; they prefer to slip in the back door when and because you’re absorbed in something else.”

All pleasures are equally good, separated in worth simply by their “degree of pleasantness.” Figuring out how much pleasure you feel at any moment requires identifying your many good feelings, measuring their intensities and adding them up. Two people could arrive at the same amount by widely differing routes. Consider a party-loving ladies’ man filled with self-doubt or a frugal priest contented with his lot in life. Despite different types of sensations, their total pleasure may rate similar values, and, thus, their lives would rate similar degrees of goodness.

Pursuit of Happiness

Types of pleasure can work together, reinforcing each other and spreading one into the other. That means happiness of one type encourages pleasure of other kinds. Similarly, sadness of one kind can lead to more sadness. An overall good mood is the most powerful pleasure, paving the way for simple delight and general satisfaction with life. Achieving that happiness is vital, but it leads to a pivotal question: How do you find happiness?

“If achieving a goal makes the right kind of change in the world, it has intrinsic worth.”

Seeking happiness head-on, with that as your firm goal, won’t bring nearly as much pleasure as an indirect route. Sidling up to happiness – while pursuing activities that you do well – seems to bring the most pleasure. You can try raising your pleasure quotient with physical joys like sweets, sunning or sex. You’ll feel good, but those feelings won’t last. You can try increasing your income. But as you earn more, you’re likely to spend more. A bigger paycheck soon becomes another normal aspect of your life, and its effect on your happiness level will fade. Improving your mood helps make you open to happiness, although individual temperament seems to align to a certain consistent lifelong mood.

“To fully enjoy an activity you have to be absorbed in it; if you’re only half attending, you’ll get only half the pleasure.”

However, you can increase your happiness. Avoid physical pain, and fix the things to which – according to studies – you will never grow accustomed, such as a long commute or noisy working conditions. Go after things you want simply because they’ll bring you joy, regardless of what other people get. That means more vacation rather than more money, according to a study of Harvard students.

“To get the most pleasure, you shouldn’t consciously seek it or even think of it as good; if pleasure is not to be out of sight, it must be out of mind.”

Pursue enjoyment in a form that works for you, from playing golf to solving puzzles. Seek “flow,” that total state of focus wherein you lose sense of time and awareness of nearly everything around you as you merge and become one with whatever you’re doing. Actions become automatic, and you probably won’t fully recognize the pleasure you’re getting from the activity until later. This brings longer-lasting pleasure than physical pleasure, and mood changes affect it less. Find an activity and let it take you away. Good feelings will naturally follow.

Pleasure or Pain?

Pleasure – meaning all good feelings – isn’t that important. Compared to pain – meaning all bad feelings – pleasure comes in second.

“The root of flow is the successful exercise of a developed skill, which requires the right balance between challenge and ability.”

For example, consider a person who is suffering pain at the most intense level possible. Then imagine someone else enjoying pleasure as much as possible. You might first think that lessening the suffering person’s pain and increasing the other’s pleasure are equally good. But that isn’t true. You should favor reducing pain, because pain holds higher value. Living a better life requires caring most about those who suffer most. A so-called “time bias” also limits pleasure. You care more about pleasure now than several years away. A similar bias means pleasure and pain raise less feeling when they’re in the past. Aiming for future accomplishments or goodness might produce less immediate but more permanent enjoyment.

Types of Knowledge

Societies send children to school – to acquire skills and to learn the laws of nature, history, and culture – simply for the value of knowing. But all knowledge is not equal. Understanding nature’s laws serves you well, unlike knowing something trivial, such as how many blades of grass fill your yard. In determining the worth of

different types of knowledge, it helps to separate them into three areas:

- Outside knowledge, which exists apart from you.
- Relational knowledge, which concerns your place in the world
- Internal knowledge, which includes your thoughts as well as your personal qualities.

“Achievements have to be challenging, and the more challenging the better.”

When you weigh these three kinds of knowledge, relational knowledge has an edge, because it connects internal and outside knowledge. A fourth type of knowledge, moral knowledge, requires knowing what’s right, or good, and what’s wrong, or bad.

The Value of Achievement

Knowledge and achievement connect you to reality. Fitting your mind to the world is knowledge, such as learning the cycles of the moon. Fitting the world to your mind is an achievement, such as setting a goal and reaching it. Not every action is such an achievement. For example, breathing demands action, but not the intention and willful effort that define achievement.

“The best friends, unlike the best judges or scientists, are moved more by simple feeling than by evaluative judgment.”

Achievements vary in worth. The most valuable ones affect many people or last for a long time, such as the work of political leaders who improve their constituents’ lives or poets who contribute to literature. Similarly, valuable achievements include those that require meeting lesser goals on the way to the larger goal. Valuable achievements involve work, must be challenging, and require learned abilities and effort. For example, mastering the skills, preparation and equipment to climb Mount Everest demands structuring your goals step by step, which increases the value of your achievement. Precision also adds value. For instance, in golf, poetry and woodworking, those with the most advanced skills command the most admiration.

Virtue

Being a good person holds value, but it isn’t the only measure of a good life. Virtue contributes to a good life, just as vices detract. Aligning your viewpoint with the good compounds your goodness, such as when you feel good because you brought pleasure to someone else. Similarly, a negative point of view about evil feelings is also good. However, connecting a bad feeling, such as envy, with a positive object lessens its virtue. Aristotle held that enjoying good activities is good. Pursuing or considering a good is also good. Better still is experiencing the good yourself.

“It can hurt and it can harm, but for most of us, love’s glories are worth the gamble.”

Ideally, you will pursue goodness and shun badness for two reasons: because you realize it is morally good (or bad) and because you value it (or not). For example, consider how you feel about lying. You avoid it because you believe it to be wrong and you don’t like it. You bring harmony to your life when these two “moralized” and “simply emotional” thoughts align. Kant placed superior value on moral beliefs, but that doesn’t hold up in all situations. Ought a friend visit you in the hospital because it’s her duty or because she cares about you? The former brings you little comfort; the latter, much.

“Compare one life devoted to learning about the history of the 20th century and another spent running a medium-sized business. Can we say that either is clearly better? I don’t see how.”

When you compare virtue with other kinds of good, however, it can come up short. Since virtue involves having the proper attitude toward something else – be it good or bad – it is less valuable than the item it is evaluating. For example, a teacher educates children with a genuine desire that they learn. Outsiders value the instruction more than they value the teacher’s attitude, so they are bestowing higher worth on the act itself than on the teacher’s motivation.

What’s Love Worth?

Love and friendship are essentially the same good with different degrees of intensity and a similar core: enjoying someone’s company and wishing that person good things. Love’s first value comes from the positive feelings it creates in you. But love also provides a place for other good things to flourish, such as your knowledge of the other person, achievement together and virtuous opportunities. You want your friends and lovers to be happy. You enjoy their pleasure and suffer through their pain. Conflicts accompany love but do not lessen its goodness.

“Pleasure is a limited value: Though good, it’s not as good as its opposite, pain, is evil. Even among feelings, it sits in second place.”

The problems associated with love are rarely sufficient to make you avoid the risks. For example, you might wish a friend happiness while recognizing that he is about to make a bad choice. Rejection and jealousy complicate love, and explaining love is never easy. Partly, you love a person for traits that others could appreciate, like a smile or sense of humor. But you also love someone for “historical qualities,” the history you’ve created together that no one else can share. Love changes as your history grows, as you learn new things about each other or as you change together. Love also can wither as one person’s moral values or sense of fun might change. If your contented past becomes today’s fights and arguments, your history has changed and so might your love.

Building a Good Life

Two other factors also contribute to a good life. The first is proper balance – for example, determining the ideal quantities of pleasure and knowledge. Too much focus on any single area can detract from others, just as too little focus undermines useful knowledge. Seek a comfortable place as either more of a specialist or more of a well-rounded person. Being purely one or the other won’t lead you to your best life. Let your values and abilities guide you to an ideal division of goods. Most people should focus – but not too hard – on a few goods or a single good.

“Being good at a game is good.”

The second factor is your life’s general form. For example, is an even keel better than a life of highs and lows? Is a longer life better than a shorter one? Is excelling in a single good better than a well-rounded balance of goods? This issue involves your life through time. Do you want it to improve in quality as you age? Does living longer add or subtract to the quality of life? Philosophy cannot answer these questions with authority. Only living can.

The Ultimate Question

And what about death? An accidental death at a young age deprives you of years of good things, but if you’re sick and in pain and you die today, then you’re spared more suffering. Thus death prevents evil rather than depriving you of good things. Enjoying the good things in life and living well, then, is a reasonable response to inevitable death.

About the Author

Thomas Hurka teaches ethics and philosophy at the University of Toronto, where he holds a chair in Philosophical Studies. His other books include *Perfectionism*; *Virtue, Vice, and Value*; and *Principles: Short Essays on Ethics*.
