

The Online Confucius Institute at the Open University and the Open Centre for Languages and Cultures



The Good Life: What ancient philosophers can tell us about living well today by Dr Jingyi Jenny Zhao (赵静一)

Online Confucius Institute Public Talk Series & OCLC Distinguished
Speaker Series

17 October 2023

We politely request that during the presentation
microphones are muted and cameras are turned off.

[EDITED TRANSCRIPT]

Mirjam Hauck

Welcome, everybody. My name is Mirjam Hauck. I'm the Director of the [Open University's Open Centre for Languages and Cultures](#). Today's event is a joint event by the [Open University's Online Confucius Institute](#) and the *Open Centre for Languages and Cultures*. We are honoured to have Jingyi Jenny Zhao as our speaker. She is a senior research fellow at the [Needham Research Institute](#), and Clare Hall College at University of Cambridge. She holds a PhD degree from the Faculty of Classics at the University of Cambridge and in her research she takes a comparative perspective on the philosophical traditions of ancient Greece and early China. She is the contributor and the co-editor of *Ancient Greece and China Compared* published by Cambridge University Press back in 2018. and her next book, *Aristotle and Xunzi on Shame, Moral Education And The Good Life* is forthcoming with Oxford University Press in 2024. Jenny, welcome, and over to you.

ZHAO Jingyi Jenny

Thank you very much for that introduction, Mirjam, and thank you very much, Dr KAN Qian, for inviting me to give a talk here at the Open University. And thank you all for joining me today.

When faced with the question, what is the meaning of life, philosopher and MIT professor [Kieran Setiya](#) has a ready response: 'We figured that out in the 1980s, but we have to keep

it a secret or we'd be out of a job'. So, in today's talk, I can't promise the answer to *the* meaning of life, but what I hope to show is to give you some philosophical accounts on 'the good life' from Early China and Ancient Greece that I think still have a lot of appeal in the contemporary world. And hopefully, you will come out of your lunch break or wherever you are in the world, feeling like it's been worth your while.

So, what is the good life and what's the relationship between pleasure happiness, and the good life? Is happiness a feeling like pleasure or joy, or something more long lasting, such as life satisfaction, or fulfilment of one's potential? Philosophers east and west have puzzled over questions like those for over two and a half millennia and a contrast is often drawn between short term pleasure, which represents a psychological state, and long term wellbeing. Short term pleasures are fleeting and may feel satisfying or fulfilling at a particular moment, but for the Ancients, a life well lived - or sometimes framed as the happy life - generally refers not to a psychological condition, but to what is objectively the best life for a human being. Socrates gives the example of a man who has an itch and scratches it instantly, constantly; he can't be said to be leading a happy life. We could say that it's the same for a glutton or a couch-potato. We cannot call a glutton or a couch-potato a happy person that's leading a flourishing life even if he himself professes to be happy.

Happiness and the good life have long been hot topics of discussion and debate and in the present day, the field of [positive psychology](#) draws on the western philosophical tradition to carry out, I quote, 'the scientific study of positive human functioning and flourishing on multiple levels that include the biological, personal, relational, institutional, cultural, and global dimensions of life'. And here we have the three kinds of happy life that's been identified in positive psychology: we have 'the pleasant life', which is centred on positive emotions and the avoidance of discomfort; we have 'the engaged or flow-inducing life', in which we actualize our potential and experience creative engagement' and there's 'the good or meaningful life', in which we find satisfaction through the pursuit of meaning. As we will discover some of these features can be identified in the ancient philosophical accounts too.

In the current age of momentous social shifts and political division - and especially since the COVID 19 pandemic - we've seen a plethora of new publications that have surfaced that promote philosophy as a guide for life, using ancient wisdom to address contemporary issues of disillusionment and discontent, and it seems that more and more people are now turning to philosophy to probe life's fundamental questions. What I'm showing here is just a selection of recent publications that seek to draw on ancient wisdom to enlighten current discussions on how we should live. These are all written by academics but made accessible for a general audience, and each offers its own unique perspective and approach. So, we have [John Sellars](#), on Epicurus, the philosopher who's most noted for his ideas of hedonism, and life of pleasure; we have [Edith Hall](#) on Aristotle; [Nancy Sherman](#) on stoic wisdom - and the stoic school seems to be particularly popular these days, especially after the pandemic, understandably, understandably, because it offers ways to cope with adversity; and we have [Stephen Angle](#) on Confucianism; and [Michael Puett's book that's co-authored with Christine Groos-Loh](#), which is based on Puett's third most popular course in Harvard, and that's called *The Path*, referring to the Chinese idea of Tao, the way; and then there is [John Haidt's *The Happiness Hypothesis*](#), that has more on modern science, but it does also refer to ancient discourses on happiness.

So, what about when we bring the Chinese and the Greek philosophers together in a comparative study? While the period that philosophers tend to focus on in their research on Greece and China comparisons is sometimes referred to as [The Axial Age](#), a term that was coined by Karl Jasper's in 1949. It refers to the period of roughly the eighth to the third century BCE, when there were significant social and intellectual changes that took place, more or less simultaneously, across different parts of the world. We see new ways of thinking and conceptualising, the world appearing in Persia, India, China, Greece, and we can see that studying this period allows us to get to the origins of Ancient Greek and Early Chinese philosophical thinking. So, looking at this list of philosophers and so-called schools, I seem to have set myself an impossible task: each philosophical tradition is rich with examples of what 'the good life' represents and, in fact, we will sometimes find different versions of 'the good life' in one philosopher or text, as I will illustrate. So, given the abundance of materials, I will necessarily have to be very selective in showing us the examples, and I will focus on some of my favourite examples from the Classical Chinese tradition with references to the Greek. I think, taking this cross-cultural comparative approach across time and space will bring to light some interesting similarities and differences.

Before moving on, let me say a few words about the idea of philosophy as a way of life. Nowadays, philosophy is regarded as largely a professional pursuit, but the French philosopher [Pierre Hadot](#) is right to point out that in antiquity, philosophy was a guide for life. He says, 'ancient philosophy proposed to mankind an art of living. By contrast, modern philosophy appears above all, as the construction of a technical jargon reserved for specialists. Philosophy had a personal touch, it did not merely cause one to know but to be in a certain way, so that by practising philosophy, one aimed at transforming the whole of one's life'. And as David, Boniwell, and Ayers comment in the [Oxford Handbook of Happiness](#), 'happiness is a topic that is universal and at the same time, deeply personal. It's important not only in scholarly discourse, but in our daily lives'. And I do fully agree with that sentiment too.

The illustration I show here on the left hand side is the cover of [Benjamin Hoff's](#) 1982 publication called [The Tao of Pooh](#), which became a New York Times bestseller for many weeks. And this book cleverly uses the figure of Winnie the Pooh to introduce concepts of Taoism to a western audience. Taoism is very much a way of life and Winnie the Pooh, by being simple-minded and open-minded, leads a life of effortless action that actually represents qualities of the Daoist sage. It's a very interesting book that I would highly recommend; makes fun reading.

So, let me first talk about how essential it is to gain knowledge of what 'the good life' is, according to these ancient philosophers. Now, what is 'the good life' is never a single question. Gaining knowledge of what 'the good life' is, involves probing into a network of questions relating to the human condition. These include: is human nature good, bad or neither? How are humans different from other living things? What should education consist of? What kind of state or ruler can best provide for its people? And how should humans understand the patterns of the natural world and interact with the natural world? What kind of relationships should humans have with the environment? These are all worth considering when we think about the question of flourishing and happiness.

A lot of the contemporary discussions of happiness in the sense of well-being actually draw on the ancient Greek concept of [eudaimonia](#). It literally means having a good guardian

spirit, and it's generally translated as 'happiness' or 'human flourishing' and is equated to living well. So, we owe this idea to Aristotle, who in the fourth century BCE, believed that eudaemonia equates to living well and this represents the chief good of human life. He believed that some things such as humans or animals have their own specific *ergon*, function, and doing well resides in the fulfilment of one's function. And Aristotle famously defines human function, or the human good, as the activity of the rational part of the soul in accordance with excellence. There is some contention regarding the nature of eudaemonia in Aristotle, since eudaemonia in Book 1 is associated with 'activity', but in Book 10 - so in the last chapter, in the last book of [Nicomachean Ethics](#), it is associated with 'contemplation'. So, contemplation is the activity that's said to be the closest to the activity of the gods. So here we get different conceptions of eudaemonia and Aristotle, and scholars have debated ways of reconciling the two conceptions.

Now what if we translate the topic of happiness and well-being to the Chinese context? Unlike the idea of eudaemonia in ancient Greek, there's no single word that would correspond to 'the good life'. In classical Chinese, we have a range of related terms that I've listed here. So 樂 *le*, is the first one here, which in its pronunciation of *yue* also means 'happy', 'music', so, clearly, the aesthetics of music is closely related to the idea of happiness. We have also the second 悅 *yue*, meaning 'joy' and 喜 *xi*, carrying the sense of joy as well. 安 *an* is interesting, *an* in the sense of 'security'. So [Michael Nylan](#), In her book, the *Chinese Pleasure Book*, believes that it's interesting that the antonym of 樂 *le* -, 'pleasure' in Chinese - is not pain, but 'a lack of security'. And she sees that as a marked difference between the Chinese account and some Western accounts. Now, the last character, 道 *dao* (*way*) is probably one of the most prominent, important, terms in Chinese philosophy, it represents a guiding or *the* guiding principle. Sometimes you see, *dao* spelled with a capital D, or 'way' spelt with a capital W. It's the governing force of the myriad things and the overarching order in the cosmos. So, 'the good life' concerns not just the human but relates the human to the wider workings of the patterns of 天 *tiān* or 'heaven'. One leads a good life by following these patterns, or following *dao*. Although what following *dao* means is subject to debate, is given different explanations in different texts.

Chinese philosophers might not explicitly treat the happy life as a topic of discussion. They might not say, like Aristotle, okay, here, I'm going to talk about 'the good life' or *eudaemonia*, but there is a lot that we can gain by piecing together the puzzle, by looking at the different accounts of what makes for a good life. So even if there's no explicit discussion, quite often, we will find an abundance of materials on related ideas.

In 1974, the American philosopher [Robert Nozick](#), proposed something called '[The Experience Machine](#)'. This machine would give you any experience that you desire; it would stimulate your brain so that you would feel and think, say, that you were writing a great novel, or making a friend, or reading an interesting book, and Nozick says all that time you'll be floating in a tank with electrodes attached to your brain. Should you plug into this machine for life, pre-programming your life's experiences? This experiment was conducted in many countries - not the actual machine but the proposal, the question, would you plug in to a machine like this, and most people across the world chose not to do that, despite the promises of happy simulations that it offered. I think what this experiment shows is that to merely simulate a pleasant and satisfying life is not sufficient for most people, and that there is something other than pleasure that for most people has value. People want to have

actual experiences of a living, fulfilling life, not just relying on simulations. We can find versions of The Experience Machine in ancient texts.

I think some of you will already have heard of the cave allegory in [Book 7](#) of Plato's *Republic*. Plato's mouthpiece, his teacher Socrates, asks his interlocutors to picture a cave where prisoners are chained from birth. You see them facing a wall, there's a fire to their back which projects shadows of puppets behind a wall. The prisoners look at these shadows and they ignorantly believe that what they see represents reality. So, it is only by going out of the cave like the philosophers, the true philosophers, that one gets access to what is true knowledge. On the right we have these philosophers embracing the outside. This allegory recalls Socrates' famous saying, 'the unexamined life is not worth living'. But the process of accessing true knowledge is not without pain. When you first go out of the cave, you will find that the sunlight is piercing, so the philosopher has to first look at shadows and reflections and then gradually sees things as they are, and is only finally able to look at the sun, directly at the sun, representing true knowledge. And in the Chinese text, [Zhuangzi](#) that we find an idea that's not dissimilar. *Zhuangzi* is attributed to [Zhuang Zou](#) who lived around the 4th to 3rd century BCE. This Daoist classic is full of myths and parables, and it tells of the meeting between a frog in a caved-in well, and a great turtle of the Eastern Sea. The frog boasts to the turtle about hopping around in the well and sitting in the crack of the wall and he naive naively thinks of it as the best form of life, so then the great turtle tries to step in, and he couldn't even fit into the tiny well, and he then goes on to tell the frog of the vastness and expansiveness of the Eastern Sea, and the delight that one can take in it. When the frog in the well heard this, he was dumbfounded, and completely at a loss. The Chinese characters 自失 (zì shī) literally, mean 'he lost himself' - he feels completely lost. So, this example of the frog in the well, illustrates that 'the good life' is beyond individual subjective experiences and you have to really jump out of the well in order to appreciate reality, the real world. So, based on Plato's cave, and Zhuang Zou's as well, we could say that the good life involves having a sense of epistemic humility, being aware of one's limitations. It's only by being aware of one's own ignorance and stepping outside the confines of conventional society that we can achieve a higher level of existence.

The idea of going beyond conventional norms is a prominent theme in Zhuang Zou. Unlike the Confucian sage, who actively engages in government, the Daoist sage retreats from political life to achieve individual freedom. So, the passage reads:

Once, when Zhuangzi was fishing in the Pu River, the King of Chu sent two officials to go and announce to him: 'I would like to trouble you with the administration of my realm.' Zhuangzi held on to the fishing pole and, without turning his head, said, 'I have heard that there is a sacred tortoise in Chu that has been dead for three thousand years. The king keeps it wrapped in cloth and boxed and stores it in the ancestral temple. Now would this tortoise rather be dead and have its bones left behind and honoured? Or would it rather be alive and dragging its tail in the mud?' 'It would rather be alive and dragging its tail in the mud,' said the two officials. Zhuangzi said, 'Go away! I'll drag my tail in the mud!'

So, what this passage shows, I think, is that being lowly on the outside - that is, without any official appointments, without a high social position - doesn't render the Daoist sage morally low, rather, he leads a good life by refusing to be constrained by official duties. And I think

Zhuang Zou's playful and subversive ideas still have a lot of appeal in the 21st century and they enlighten contemporary discussions of inclusion.

Here we have a New York Times article by John Oldman and Brian Van Norden, published in 2020; they asked, 'Was this ancient Tao is the first philosopher of disability?' And for sure *Zhuangzi* has lots to say about disabled people in the text, often portraying them in a surprisingly positive light, something that would overturn the readers assumptions about what disability is. This passage reads, 'There's Crippled Shu, a shoe, chin stuck down in his navel, shoulders up above his head, pigtail pointing at the sky, his five organs on the top, his two thigh, pressing his ribs. By sewing and washing, he gets enough to fill his mouth; by handling a winnow and sifting out the good grain, he makes enough to feed ten people. When the authorities call out the troops, he stands in the crowd waving goodbye; when there is a great service to be undertaken, they pass him over because of his constant ailments. And when they are doling out grain to the ailing, he gets three big measures and ten bundles of firewood. With a crippled body, he's still able to look after himself. So how much better, then, if he had crippled virtue!' So for Zhuang Zou, going beyond social conventions also involves ridding oneself of these preconceived and often mistaken notions about who's capable of leading a good life. We all need to recognise that 'the good life' takes many forms. His ideas are strikingly contemporary, I think.

So now that we are aware of the need to overcome our limited worldviews and are ready to aspire to higher states of being, we might ask, 'How are we to achieve 'the good life'?' Self-cultivation is going to be a key here: the cultivation of a good moral character takes time and effort, and it's achieved through repeated practice - that's what Aristotle calls habituation. And the 'self' in self cultivation is important because it highlights that acquiring a moral character doesn't just rely on indoctrination through teaching, but the active involvement of the agent is very important in achieving self-improvement. Individual human agency plays a big part in what kind of person one is to become.

Self cultivation is a topic that lends itself very well to cross-cultural comparative study. On the left hand side, we have a volume on cultivating a good life in Early Chinese and Ancient Greek philosophy, and on the right is a conference that I went to in June, earlier this year in Royal Holloway, that took a comparative perspective on philosophies of self-cultivation. I think from these images, you can notice the strong organic elements: on the left we have a tree, on the right bamboo shoots, and that's because ideas of self-cultivation are heavily laden with these organic metaphors. So, for example, in the Chinese Confucian [Xunzi](#), we get references to the idea that everybody has four sprouts within themselves, and you need to cultivate those sprouts of goodness, so that they become fully realised into complete virtue. So, cultivation is a process, an organic process, but it involves a lot of human effort. This idea of building a strong character is associated with [virtue ethics](#), which has experienced something of a revival in recent decades. So contrary to [deontology](#), and [utilitarianism](#), that emphasise the rules and the consequences of actions, virtue ethics, focuses on the formation of one's character. The important thing is that one's able to respond appropriately in any given situation. So, this idea of building a strong moral character lies really at the core of many ancient philosophical systems.

Earlier, I mentioned that for Aristotle, humans and non-human animals have their distinctive functions. Chinese philosophers, understandably, do not use terms related to *ergon* – function - but they do often make distinctions between humans and non-human animals or other living things, to make a point about how humans should behave. So, as you can see,

the third century BCE Chinese philosophy questions separate out humans from animals, non-human animals from plants and water and fire. We have the parallel ideas in Aristotle in terms of the differentiations and the arguments there. What's similar is that both of these philosophers argue that humans need to live in order to fulfil what is most characteristic of humans. So, for students this is a sense of propriety, which is sometimes simply translated as morality. For Aristotle, this is kind of thought and intellect reasoning. Strikingly, both emphasise humans as members of communities, societies. So that's a key element of human nature too, the ability to form communities, and that's aided by their sense of propriety or their reasoning capacity and their capacity for speech and disputation. And during the process of cultivation, it's important to recognise what's within and what's outside of our control. The first and second century BC, philosopher [Epictetus](#) famously remarked that, 'Some things are in our control and others not. Things in our control are opinion, pursuit, desire, aversion, and, in a word, whatever are our own actions. Things not in our control are body, property, reputation, command, and, in one word, whatever are not our own actions.' I think 'body' here is more to do with your bodily condition, what you're born with. Similar ideas can be found in Zhuang Zou, 'Death, life, preservation, loss, failure, success, poverty, riches, worthiness, unworthiness, slander, fame, hunger, thirst, cold, heat—these are the alternations of the world, the workings of fate. Day and night they change place before us, and wisdom cannot discover their source. Therefore, they should not be enough to destroy your harmony; they should not be allowed to enter the storehouse of spirit.'

So, I've presented views of Epictetus and Zhuang Zou, this idea of what's within your control. But for Aristotle, interestingly, external goods do play a role in 'the good life'. So, here we have a different picture when we look at Aristotle. Aristotle says that we shouldn't disregard external goods altogether, because they will play a role in our exercising of the excellences. For Aristotle, friends, wealth, political power, good birth, being blessed with children, and children's beauty, these are all necessary parts of 'the good life'. So, what role should emotions play in 'the good life'?

Let me say a few words about feeling happy. The author [Cody Delistraty](#) points out that, 'Happiness is in many ways the marketing breakthrough of the past decade... If we continue to allow ourselves to be manipulated into pining after peak experiences, then we leave ourselves open not only to market manipulation but also to loneliness, poor judgment and, ironically, an abiding sadness'. So, of course, this feeling, this pressure to feel happy is fuelled by social media where people showcase their highly curated profiles that filter out any negative experiences, but actually, a happier flourishing life doesn't involve being episodically happy all the time, and, ironically, being constantly under social pressure to feel happy can have the opposite effect of reducing our well-being.

[Brock Bastian](#) cites research to show that lifetime rates of clinical depression and anxiety in the West tend to be approximately four to ten times greater than in Asia, and he believes that this can be explained by cultural differences in how people cope with the so-called negative emotions. The idea being that in Asia, there is generally much less social expectation for wanting to feel happy and that's actually a better way than having that constant pressure to feel happy. Of course, quite a lot of progress has been made in recent years to normalise feeling sad, anxious or depressed, but I think it is important to be aware of how much our emotions are being manipulated through marketing and social media, etc., often without us knowing. Indeed, sometimes what we would normally perceive to be

negative emotions can play an important role in 'the good life'; the example of shame illustrates this point.

In 21st century Western societies shame is generally regarded in a negative light with concerns that it damages the individual's self-esteem. The shame has an internal element of self-reflection: when you feel shame, you're responding to a situation, and you recognise that you're not up to a certain standard. So, it really is an emotion that brings out the moral and the social characteristics of human nature and it acts as an important bridge between the individual and society. By recognising that one's actions fall short of a standard, the agent is aware of the steps that he or she needs to take in order to make moral progress. For philosophers such as Aristotle and Zhuang Zou - as was the topic of my previous research - shame plays an important role in the notion of 'the good life', because the notion of 'the good life' is contingent upon making the right kinds of moral choices and cultivating robust moral character. So then, I think studying these ancient philosophers makes us question the contemporary polarisation of positive and negative emotions: the negative emotions might feel unpleasant, and nobody likes to feel unpleasant, but they can lead to positive changes in one's life choices, so long as one deals with them appropriately.

Ritual is another way that connects individual morality to social expectations. For Confucius, as depicted in [The Analects](#), 'the good life' involves observing ritual on a daily basis in the minute details of life. We see that, 'He did not converse at meals, nor did he talk in bed' (10.10); 'Even when a meal consisted only of coarse rice and vegetable broth, he invariably made an offering from them and invariably did so solemnly' (10.11); 'He did not sit unless his mat was straight' (10.12). But ritual behaviour is not just for superficial display, they should have the right dispositions to accompany them, and need to be based on values that are internalised, as this last passage shows: 'So the master said, 'what can a person do with the rites who is not benevolent (*ren*)? What can a man do with music who is not benevolent?' There's a lot of anthropological literature on the role of ritual in human societies. [Michael Puett](#) sees ritual as having the potential to change one's disposition. So that say, by straightening the mat, Confucius creates a slightly different way of being and manages to alter the mood in the room slightly. In other words, forget seeing ritual is something antiquarian, outdated, it can very well contribute to our well-being today.

So, now I come to the final section on the aesthetics of 'the good life'. As we will see, *The Analects* is not all heavy-going with teachings about morality and government, but also contains passages that have aesthetic appeal. The opening passage of *The Analects* famously describes the pleasure of learning and the joy of receiving friends from afar, 'The Master said, 'is it not a pleasure, having learned something, to try it out at due intervals? Is not a joy to have like-minded friends come from afar?'. And here I share with you one of my favourite passages in *The Analects* in full:

'When Zilu, Zeng Xi, Ran You and Gongxi Hua were seated in attendance, the Master said, 'Do not feel constrained simply because I am somewhat older than you are. Now you are in the habit of saying, 'My abilities are not appreciated,' but if someone did appreciate your abilities, do tell me how you would go about things.'

Zilu promptly answered, 'If I were to administer a state of a thousand chariots, situated between powerful neighbours, troubled by armed invasions and by repeated famines, I could, within three years, give the people courage and a sense of direction.' The Master smiled at him. 'Qiu, what about you?'

‘If I were to administer an area measuring sixty or seventy *li* square, or even fifty or sixty *li* square, I could, within three years, bring the size of the population up to an adequate level. As to the rites and music, I would leave that to abler gentlemen.’

‘Chi, how about you?’

‘I do not say that I already have the ability, but I am ready to learn. On ceremonial occasions in the ancestral temple or in diplomatic gatherings, I should like to assist as a minor official in charge of protocol, properly dressed in my ceremonial cap and robes.’

Now, finally, Confucius turns to the fourth disciple:

‘Dian, how about you?’

After strumming a few dying notes and the final chord, he stood up from his lute. ‘I differ from the other three in my choice.’

The Master said, ‘What harm is there in that? After all each man is stating what he has set his heart upon.’

‘In late spring, after the spring clothes have been newly made, I should like, together with five or six adults and six or seven boys, to go bathing in the River Yi and enjoy the breeze on the Rain Altar, and then to go home chanting poetry.’

The Master sighed and said, ‘I am all in favour of Dian.’

Perhaps Confucius's agreement with Dian is surprising, as his version is the least socially and politically ambitious, and we're here presented with a very simple picture of someone enjoying a blissful day. But Confucius's approval Dian's account doesn't mean that this is the ultimate one that everybody should aim at, or even that this is the only picture of the ideal life; after all, Confucius often adapts his responses according to the nature or what kind of person that he's addressing. I think this passage suggests that there are multiple goals in life and indeed multiple versions of the ideal life in human flourishing and enjoying simple pleasures with friends could be one of them. The illustrations here are by LI Zhang; we collaborated on the children's picture book several years ago so I have taken the liberty of using them here for your enjoyment.

The last point I'd like to make is about the idea of spontaneity. There's a sense of beauty and spontaneity or effortless action:

The Master said, ‘At fifteen I set my heart on learning; at thirty I took my stand; at forty I was never in two minds; at fifty I understood the Decree of Heaven; at sixty my ear was attuned; at seventy I followed my heart's desire (*cong xin suo yu*) without overstepping the line’.

We could say that Confucius's heart's desire is in attunement with his values and actions, so that behaving virtuously becomes second nature and effortless - you can simply follow your heart's desire without overstepping the line. This idea of spontaneity can also be found in *Zhuangzi*. This is the last passage that I will share with you today. So, here we see a cook, Ding, who cuts up in an ox for Lord Wenhui explaining his art:

‘A good cook changes his knife once a year — because he cuts. A mediocre cook changes his knife once a month — because he hacks. I've had this knife of mine for nineteen years and I've cut up thousands of oxen with it, and yet the blade is as

good as though it had just come from the grindstone. There are spaces between the joints, and the blade of the knife has really no thickness. If you insert what has no thickness into such spaces, then there's plenty of room — more than enough for the blade to play about it. That's why after nineteen years the blade of my knife is still as good as when it first came from the grindstone.

However, whenever I come to a complicated place, I size up the difficulties, tell myself to watch out and be careful, keep my eyes on what I'm doing, work very slowly, and move the knife with the greatest subtlety, until — flop! the whole thing comes apart like a clod of earth crumbling to the ground.'

So, he really describes how he cuts up this ox in the second paragraph, it says, 'with the greatest subtlety until the whole thing comes apart like a clod of Earth crumbling to the ground'. You can just picture this image. And interestingly, Lord Wenhui says, 'I have heard the words of Cook Ding and learned how to nurture life (*yang sheng*)!' So, what's at stake here is not merely the skills involved in being a good butcher and cutting up an ox, but it's an ideal way of living and interacting with the external environment from having acquired *dao* or having attained *dao*. There's a sense of effortlessness, which records the engaged or free-flowing life in positive psychology that I mentioned earlier.

Now, to come on to some conclusions. I think we can say that there's a diverse range of views across the classical corpus in both traditions. There's no single picture of 'the good life' in any one tradition. What I've shown you is just a snippet of a vast amount of literature, but I think we can identify two critical components. Firstly, one needs to understand what 'the good life' should look like: question what you know, aspire to a higher level of being and self-cultivation through practice; we had the theoretical and the practical aspects; and sometimes we find explicit discussions of what 'the good life' entails, as in the example of Aristotle, who talks about *eudaimonia*, and other times we are left to piece the picture together ourselves.

'The good life' can concern numerous questions relating to the human condition, such as desire, friendship, nature, death, etc. We haven't really had the opportunity to talk about death, but understanding death and not fearing death is very much a part of 'the good life' too. In order to contribute to human well-being, research on human happiness, human flourishing, or *eudaimonia*, necessarily has to be cross disciplinary, where we should draw on the fields of philosophy, psychology, neuroscience, sociology, aesthetics, and education, for example, to inform what makes 'the good life'. So, for example, scientific research has proven that when we act virtuously and help other people, it can promote physiological changes in the brain linked with happiness. This picture here is the [Oxford Centre for Eudaimonia and Human Flourishing](#) and you can see an image of the brain placed in the logo, really bringing out the importance of neuroscience and understanding human happiness.

I think in one sense, the Ancients grappled with similar sets of problems relating to the human condition. But on the other hand, clearly these philosophers were responding to their specific socio-historical contexts. We get the quote here, 'Aristotle, and Confucius would surely be perplexed by the stresses and various threats to happiness we experience today in our globalised, digitised culture'. In the present age, we're confronted with a series of new questions as a result of rapid advancement of AI technology, and in the 21st century version of the same scaled nature that I showed, we're no longer just comparing humans

with non-human animals, with plants, we also have to put AI into the picture. We have to critically assess what roles AI can play in 'the good life' and in which areas we can mitigate AI's impediment to human wellbeing. The other day, I saw an interesting article which says that [ChatGPT](#) is the modern allegory of Plato's cave. ChatGPT can be viewed as a compendium of the corpus of human knowledge, reflected back to us as the output of our prompts - shadows on the cave. And maybe we can say that it's becoming ever harder to get out of the well; the well is getting deeper, to use Zhuang Zou's analogy of the frog at the bottom of the well.

I think perhaps 'the good life' will be ever harder to grasp in a busy, modern, industrialised and goal-directed society, and it appears that we're also getting further and further away from the anxious notions of living in accordance with nature and with spontaneous energy, but I think that's all the more reason to study it for the wellbeing of ourselves and for our future generations too.

So, I will leave it there. Thank you for your attention.

Mirjam Hauck

Thank you so much, Jenny, this was incredibly rich and insightful. So, a round of applause for you. Thank you very much!

[END OF EDITED TRANSCRIPT]

FORTHCOMING EVENT

Please join us for the 6th session of our *Modern Chinese literature Online Book Club* on **Friday 17th November, 13:00-14:00 (UK time)**. All are welcome to attend, and you do not need to have attended any of our previous book club sessions. The sessions are informal, friendly and held in English.

In this session, we'll be discussing the story **Winter is Coming** (凛冬将至) written by WU Ang (巫昂) and translated by Kelly Zhang.

You can [read a full translation in English on the *Paper Republic* website here](#).

The [Chinese version of the story is available to read here](#) and you can also [watch a reading by Kelly Zhang in English and by Wu Ang in Chinese here](#).

Please [register on Eventbrite to attend the session](#). The Zoom link will be emailed to you prior to the event. The talk will also be recorded and made available afterwards on this page