

by the modern presumption that there is necessarily a tension between pursuing happiness and fulfilling obligations? If the latter, could we draw lessons from the Stoic texts about how eudaemonism and virtue ethics can be integrated with deontology? Or, rather, is the lesson that we should not anachronistically insist on aligning the Stoic position with our modern templates for moral theory? Gill's main achievement in the third part consists in showing that the Stoic version of 'virtue ethics' is at least as promising as or even superior to its older and more famous Aristotelian sister. But this still leaves ample scope for another study of Stoic ethics for contemporary philosophers, one which starts with a less constrained conception of what kind of ethical theory Stoic ethics amounts to.

Charles University

DAVID MACHEK
david.machek@ff.cuni.cz

THE WORTHWHILE LIFE IN ANCIENT PHILOSOPHY

MACHEK (D.) *The Life Worth Living in Ancient Greek and Roman Philosophy*. Pp. xiv + 257. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2023. Cased, £75, US\$99.99. ISBN: 978-1-009-25787-9.
doi:10.1017/S0009840X23002421

This book is about conceptions of life and its worth as they were developed in ancient Greek and Roman philosophy. There are chapters on Plato, Aristotle, the Stoics, ancient hedonists, the Peripatetics and Plotinus. The chapter on Plato incorporates discussion of Socrates; it does not attempt to distinguish a separate Socratic view on life. The chapter on the Stoics mostly concerns Roman Stoicism, though there is some discussion of Chrysippus. The chapter on hedonism includes both Cyrenaics and Epicureans, with the focus mainly on the latter. There is no dedicated discussion of Scepticism. The overall approach is interpretative, rather than evaluative; M. delineates the perspectives on life held by these various philosophers and compares them only insofar as that sharpens our understanding of each. The interpretations are nevertheless charitable, and they are set out in an engaging way, without much intrusion of scholarship or philology.

There are, of course, many books on similar topics, with some of them covering almost exactly the same historical ground. It would be good, then, to identify what sets *The Life Worth Living* apart from other works. In this respect, it helps to note how the title is slightly misleading. The book is not an examination of the life worth living as *distinct* from, say, the pursuit of wisdom. That is good, because in most ancient Greek and Roman philosophy, the philosophical life turns out to *be* the life worth living or at least the life *most* worth living. What sets M.'s book apart is how it focuses on the concept of worth itself. For each philosophical perspective, M. asks: (i) what is the worth of just being alive, (ii) what is the worth of lives that are sub-optimal, and (iii) what is the life *most* worth living. Other works consider almost exclusively the third question and rarely make comparisons between all three. The originality of the volume lies primarily in its discussions of the first two questions. In the first case M. discovers intriguing tensions within Aristotelian, Stoic and Neoplatonic philosophy. In the second M. reveals unexpected differences between ancient philosophies. For example, Aristotelian and

hedonist philosophies turn out to be more elitist than Platonism because of how little they value any life other than the philosophical life.

To carry out his investigation, M. devises a ‘toolbox’ of conceptual distinctions, which are then applied throughout the book. There is the distinction between ‘mere life’ and life of a certain kind. There is the distinction between a meaningful life and a worthwhile life. There is the distinction between a life worth continuing and a life worth living. There are the conceptions of ‘worthmakers’ and ‘worthbreakers’ and so on. These tools are applied consistently. They are useful, at the broadest level, in sorting things out, but they are too sharp for the ancient texts (or the directions of thought behind them) to bear. To his credit, M. discusses the texts sensitively, with attention to nuance and ambiguity, regularly alerting readers to issues that cannot be fully resolved by the application of his tools. Indeed, each chapter is prefaced with opposing passages that highlight the need for hermeneutic sensitivity. This approach proves to be both engaging and enlightening.

The chapter on Plato begins on familiar ground, with the examined life. Not enough attention is paid to the negative character of Socrates’ dictum (the *un*-examined life is *not* worth living). Instead, M. focuses on whether the examined life is the only one worth living, and the sense in which a life must be examined. In an unusual move, M. turns to the *Cleitophon*, a work of uncertain authorship, for answers. He finds there that the worth of a life lies in how one’s soul is used. If used badly, life is not worthwhile; if used well (i.e. in accordance with reason) it has some worth, even if the instructions for use are externally derived. Thus, a carpenter, or even a slave, can have a worthwhile life, if only they act in accordance with reason. The examination need not be their own.

The chapter on Aristotle deals with the thorny question of external goods and the difference they make to the worth of life. M. argues that Aristotle’s biology commits him to the view that life itself has value, but merely living is not enough to attain the threshold of a worthwhile life. In fact, the bar is set very high, since, unlike Plato, it is not just the correct use of the soul that makes a life have worth for Aristotle, but the exercise of one’s own rational capacities. Incapacity to reason is thus a worthbreaker. At the same time poverty, ugliness, low station and the like are not. People that have reason and develop virtue attain the threshold for worth, even if there is a life (one that has external goods in addition) that is *more* worthwhile.

The Stoics directly challenge the Aristotelian view that there can be a life more worthwhile than the life of reason and virtue, but they do so by distinguishing two incommensurable conceptions of worth. One conception attaches to reason and virtue, the other attaches to ‘preferred indifferents’. M. does not attempt to resolve the problem created by having dual axiologies; he merely draws out the implications for Stoic views on the life worth living. For the Stoics, preferred indifferents, such as wealth and station, are ‘conditional worthmakers’ in that they make life worth living (on one scale of worth) when one has enough of them to overbalance their opposites. The only life that is unconditionally worth living, however, remains the life of reason and virtue.

The chapter on hedonism argues that Cyrenaics and Epicureans collapsed the difference between threshold and target. The target is the pleasant life. At first this seems easy to attain. It turns out, however, that the pleasant life requires virtue, and virtue requires philosophy, so the *truly* pleasant life is the philosophical life. This claim is only slightly softened by hedonist views that reason and virtue are, *ceteris paribus*, accessible to all. The fact remains that philosophy requires diligence beyond the capacity of most. Thus, hedonism, as it was conceived in Greece and Rome, is ultimately the most elitist of all the ancient philosophies.

The chapter on the Peripatetics is mostly concerned with how they differ from Aristotle. The chief and most intriguing difference lies in the value of freedom, understood as the

ability to actualise natural capacities. M. argues that the Peripatetics had naturalistic commitments that led them to place a higher premium on virtue-independent value than Aristotle did. Thus, for the Peripatetics, it becomes an open question whether the life of unrestricted exercise of power, even if vicious, is worth living.

The final chapter, on Plotinus, deals mainly with the tension between early Neoplatonic ambivalence towards living in general and the positive value accorded to all things insofar as they exist at all. Resolution comes through Plotinus' metaphysics, which equates absolute value with the One and scales all other value in terms of distance from the One. All things considered, there are better conditions than being alive, but embodied souls can assist in the orientation of the universe towards the One. If an embodied soul does this and avoids vice along the way, there is a sense in which it can be said to have led a worthwhile life.

The Life Worth Living is rich in detail and insights. It regularly appeals to texts that have been overlooked. This is a double-edged sword, of course. Too heavy reliance on the *Cleitophon* (Plato), *Protrepticus* (Aristotle) or Stobaeus/Cicero (for the Peripatetics) could distort comprehension, but that seems a risk well worth taking for the amount of interest M. generates through their examination.

The University of Sydney

RICK BENITEZ
rick.benitez@sydney.edu.au

VIEWS ON THE BRAIN

WRIGHT (J.L.) *The Care of the Brain in Early Christianity*. Pp. x + 296. Oakland, CA: University of California Press, 2022. Cased, £80, US\$95. ISBN: 978-0-520-38767-6.

doi:10.1017/S0009840X23002342

Writing in the seventeenth century, Descartes pondered whether all his experiences might be the fabrications of a malicious demon intent on deceiving him. An updated version of his argument posits that I am a brain in a vat in the laboratory of a scientist who is likewise generating all my experiences. Both scenarios reflect the supposition that the brain is the locus of our personhood and subjectivity, as does the fact that, as neuroscientist M. Gazzaniga points out, while we are willing to receive heart, kidney or liver transplants, we would not consider brain transplantation as a remedy for brain damage since, rather than the recipient acquiring a new brain, the donor would acquire a new body (Gazzaniga, *The Ethical Brain* [2005], p. 31). Following F. Vidal, W. refers to this identification of the human self with the brain as 'cerebral subjectivity' (p. 4; cf. Vidal and F. Ortega, *Being Brains: Making the Cerebral Subject* [2017]). But whereas Vidal's history of cerebral subjectivity jumps from Galen to Descartes in the belief that the intervening centuries saw little interest in the relation between the anatomical brain and human personhood, W. shows that Christian writers in late antiquity made scientific knowledge of the brain an essential component of their account of human personhood, both anticipating cerebral subjectivity and paving the way for it, as well as referring to the brain's physical properties when adjudicating pastoral dilemmas and in order to establish their authority as physicians of the soul by projecting medical expertise. In the course of