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Alex C. Michalos

Ancient Views on the Quality of Life

 Springer

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To Deborah, with love

Preface

This little monograph is the result of some years of reading about the lives and views of ancient philosophers largely for pleasure and generally rounding out my early education in the field of philosophy. Like all students specializing or majoring in philosophy, I had to study the classics to build at least a modest foundation for understanding and creating more contemporary works. Specializing in logic and the philosophy of science as I did, I was never very enthusiastic about texts written over 2000 years ago. They had their place in history, but my place was far removed in time and topics, and it did not seem likely that I would find much of interest or use in them.

As my interests moved from theoretical or speculative philosophy to measuring the quality of life in sufficiently rigorous ways to produce information useful for guiding my own and others' personal decision-making as well as public policy making, I took to reading and re-reading ancient texts as a kind of diversion from my routine empirical investigations. To my surprise and delight, I discovered that the people writing many of those texts were dealing with questions fundamental to my own research, e.g. questions like "What is a good life?" and "What is the best sort of person to be?" "How can one tell if one's society is making progress to some sort of desirable state or falling backward?" These are all fundamental issues of quality of life and well-being measurement.

I found or thought I found several ancient writers who had suggested problems and solutions directly connected to those that contemporary quality of life researchers were dealing with. With ancient texts, it is often difficult to know what one has discovered in the text versus what one has built into it, what was meant by the author versus what the reader and/or interpreter thought was meant or hoped was meant as a result of the reader's and/or interpreter's preferences or prejudices. Granting the difficulties of understanding exactly what this or that ancient writer intended to say, it seemed to me that some important, more or less primitive, wheels were invented long ago and entirely neglected by some more recent "inventors". As well, I increasingly came to admire the creativity of some ancient writers as they struggled to find explanations for how things work in nature or naturally work or ought to work, including how human beings naturally act and at their best ought to act.

The result of these experiences led to the present investigation. Quite simply, I wanted to find the earliest ideas in recorded Western philosophical and/or scientific history that were significantly related to current research and understanding of the quality of life or well-being for individuals and communities. If this little monograph sheds some light on how the very early reflections of ancient writers are directly connected to current views, it will have done its job. If contemporary readers come to appreciate their common humanity and the somewhat common human conditions with the ancients, that will be an added bonus for me. Across time and across many cultures, the human species bears some remarkable similarities. This treatise considers a few of these, and its author is deeply appreciative of all those who contributed to our current understanding.

Contents

Ancient Views on the Quality of Life	1
Introduction	1
<i>Homer</i> (Eighth Century BCE)	4
<i>Hesiod of Ascras</i> (Late Eighth/Early Seventh Century BCE)	5
<i>Pythagoras of Samos</i> (c. 570–c. 490 BCE)	7
<i>Theognis</i> (Late Sixth and Early Fifth Century BCE)	10
<i>Heraclitus of Ephesus</i> (c. 540–c. 480 BCE)	11
<i>Anaxagoras of Clazomenae</i> (c. 500–c. 428 BCE)	14
<i>Empedocles of Acragas</i> (c. 492–c. 432 BCE)	15
<i>Protagoras of Abdera</i> (c. 490–c. 420 BCE)	18
<i>Antiphon of Rhamnous</i> (c. 480–411 BCE)	19
<i>Democritus of Abdera</i> (c. 460–c. 370 BCE)	21
<i>Hippocrates of Cos</i> (c. 450–c. 380 BCE)	26
<i>Antisthenes of Athens</i> (c. 446–c. 366 BCE)	33
<i>Aristippus of Cyrene</i> (“the Elder”, c. 436–356 BCE)	35
<i>Plato of Athens</i> (427–347 BCE)	39
<i>Anonymous Iamblichus</i> (c. 400 BCE)	55
<i>Diogenes of Sinope</i> (c. 400–c. 323 BCE)	57
<i>Aristotle of Stageira</i> (384–322 BCE)	61
<i>Epicurus of Samos</i> (c. 341–271 BCE)	70
<i>Zeno of Citium</i> (c. 333–261 BCE)	78
Summary	84
References	87
Life Timelines for Ancient Scholars, BCE	91

Abstract

The aim of this monograph is to provide a brief introduction to some ancient views on the quality of life in the period from about the eighth to the third century BCE, highlighting features of those views that have some relevance to contemporary social scientific research. Social scientists will be pleasantly surprised as I was to discover the ancient roots of some contemporary ideas about defining and measuring a good life and a good society. Progress in science can only be assured if scholars are familiar with what has been done before them. Indeed, progress for all societies can only be obtained if ordinary citizens and public officials are also aware of what wheels have already been invented and are determined to press on beyond them. If this little book helps anyone avoid reinventing wheels, its purpose will have been served and the quality of its author's life will have been improved.

Ancient Views on the Quality of Life

Introduction

While the quantity of our lives is notoriously limited to one per person, its quality is as varied as the perspectives or domains from which it is viewed. Viewed from one perspective, a person may be well off, but from another not at all well off. This fact of life is familiar to everyone. So, the whole research field of ‘quality of life’ studies might be more accurately called ‘qualities of life’ studies. In any case, the general sense of the phrase ‘quality of life’ is here understood as a good life all things considered. However, one of the first questions ancient philosophers addressed as early as the fifth century BCE is ‘What is a good life?’ As demonstrated in many essays in the *Encyclopedia of Quality of Life and Well-Being Research* (Michalos 2014), the question and its proposed answers continue to intrigue us.

In very broad strokes one may think of the quality of life of an individual or community as a function of two variables, the actual conditions of that life and what an individual or community makes of those conditions. What a person or community makes of those conditions is in turn a function of how the conditions are perceived, what is thought and felt about those conditions, what is done and finally, what consequences follow from what is done. People’s perceptions, thoughts, feelings and actions, then, have an impact on their own and others’ living conditions.

Taking the two main variables together (conditions of life and what people make of them), one can construct four scenarios which, with some exaggeration, may be described as different kinds of paradise and hell.

1. If people’s living conditions are good, and people accurately perceive and think about them, feel good and act appropriately, we may describe that as Real Paradise.
2. If people’s living conditions are bad, and people accurately perceive and think about them, feel bad and act appropriately, we may describe that as Real Hell.