# ARTS-OF-LIVING

Ruut Veenhoven

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**ABSTRACT**
*The term 'art-of-living' refers to capabilities for leading a good life. Since there are different views on what a good life is, there could also be a difference in the capabilities called for. In this paper I distinguish two main views on the good life: the 'virtuous' life and the 'enjoyable' life and describe variants of each. I explore what competencies are required for living such lives and conclude that these differ indeed. So there are different arts of living.*
*The set of capabilities required for leading a happy life can be identified by means of empirical research. This capability-profile comes close to the notion of 'positive mental health'.*

In the expression 'art of living' the word 'art' refers to *skill* and 'living' to a *manner of life*. (Webster's Collegiate Dictionary). The phrase denotes the capability of leading a good life. A life-artist is someone who makes the most of it, given external conditions for existence. The term does not specify what these capabilities are precisely. Since there are different views on the good life there is also difference in what skills are actually required for living well.

There are two main views of the good life: the moralistic view and the hedonistic view[1]. In the moralistic view, a life is better the more it meet moral tenets. Art-of-living is then the capability to live up to such principles. In the hedonistic view life is better the more we enjoy it. Art-of-living is then the capability to take pleasure from life. These views overlap when moral behavior results in pleasant experience, but they diverge where principled demands go at the cost of happiness, which is typically the case when creed contradicts with human nature. Below I will consider these views in more detail and consider the capabilities they call for. I will then inspect the similarities and differences in these arts-of-living.

## 1 THE ART OF VIRTUOUS LIFE

If the art-of-living is seen as the skill of living up to moral principles, the question arises what these principles are. There is no simple answer to that question, since there are

*Correspondence:* Prof. Dr. Ruut Veenhoven Erasmus University Rotterdam, Faculty of Social Sciences, P.O.B. 1738 3000 DR Rotterdam, The Netherlands www2.eur.nl/fsw/research/veenhoven
*Printed version:* www.SpringerLink.com

different ideas about the principles one should pursue and hence also different skill requirements. Each ideology has its own art-of-living.

## 1 .1 Living up to rules

Often the good life is seen as following a particular way of life, which involves adherence to quite specific behavioral rules. This is the case in religions where ritual and regimen is more important than abstract principle, for instance in some variants of Islam, which focus very much on daily prayer, dress code and abstinence of alcohol and pork. This focus on rules is also seen in cultures that lay more stress on 'norms' than on 'values', such as present day Japan where life is governed by a by a complex etiquette. In such cases, the art of living a good life is skill in living up to the rules.

This requires first of all an understanding of these rules. This is not always simple, since rules are often difficult. The Japanese spend a lot of time mastering the convoluted behavioral codes of their culture. Often, these behavioral rules serve to maintain social distinction and are therefore made difficult, for instance the table manners of European aristocracy. An extra problem is that the rules are often implicit and that one must master them without asking. So in this context, part of the art of living is 'knowing how to behave'. This requires both social sensitivity and willingness to comply.

Another problem is living with the rules. This is difficult when rules are harsh, for instance living up to the rules of good womanhood may require constant subordination and toiling. Living up to the rules is even more difficult when rules are extreme, such as in monastic orders that demand privation of sleep and food. In such cases, the art of living is in bearing such misery. This is often described as 'disciplining' oneself or 'overcoming' the imperfections of the flesh. This requires quite some determination and pain tolerance and possibly also a knack to find consolation in fantasy.

Lastly, there is the problem of dealing with contradictions in the rules. Though behavioral rules are meant to reduce choice, they can never rule out all choice. Even in the controlled conditions of monastic life, rules can sometimes contradict, for instance should a brother be waked up for prayer at midnight when he is seriously ill? The art of living is then deciding what the most important rule is or finding a creative way out of the conflict. This requires mental capabilities that typically remain underdeveloped in such contexts.

## 1.2 Living up to an ideal

The good life is also conceived as living up to an ideal, such as contributing to a better society or preserving nature. An example is the 'Protestant Ethic', which requires that one delivers 'good works' and thus shows oneself to be a good steward in the garden of God. In this perspective, the art-of-living is in fulfilling that mission.

This requires first of all that the abstract moral assignment be translated into concrete behavioral goals. That is not an easy task. Many children of the 1960s bothered a lot about how to add to the revolutionary cause and avoid being corrupted by the system. Often this problem is eased by the availability of prototypes. For instance, ecological magazines provide many examples of environment friendly life-styles. Seen in

this light, art-of-living requires a good understanding of the world and of the reality consequences of one's behavior.

A second problem is to select goals that one can handle. Even if one picks from available models that are actually practiced, there is still the chance that such models are not well suited. So, the Calvinist who aims at good works should select the kind of works that fits best with his endowments. This requires also an understanding of oneself and even an understanding of one's preferences. The idealist who fails to see his limitations will fail his cause. So art-of-living also calls for some self-knowledge in this context.

A third problem is again to put the ideal to practice. Like in the case of living up to rules, this may involve self-sacrifice and spiritual motivation to maintain devotion. It also requires various worldly competencies, such as creativeness and social skills. The nature of these skills will differ somewhat with the cause pursued. The Calvinist who does his good works by building a successful business will need less compassion than a missionary will, but success in most missions requires sound reality command.

### 1.3 Living deliberately

Now that the great ideologies loose attraction and values become ever more pluralistic, conceptions of the good life shift to the notions of living up to one's own life-plan. The 'post-modern' philosophy of life sees little value in living up to rules or ideals, since these are all mental constructs, which have only meaning in a certain discourse at a particular time and place. In this view there is only value in the expression of oneself. A good life should be 'authentic' in the first place, and since everybody is unique it should also be 'original'. In this view, the art-of-living is in discovering one's true self and living accordingly.

The first problem is then to establish who one really is. This is partly a matter of introspection, so in this context the art-of-living is largely in reflective skills, such as self-awareness and emotional differentiation. Discovering one's true self requires also that one can recognize how others see you and that one is aware of social forces to see oneself in a particular way. So this art-of-living also involves critical thinking, if not thinking against the grain. Mere contemplation does not suffice; we learn most of ourselves in interaction with real life. In order to know one-self one must engage life. So this art-of-living further involves some guts and common sense.

Here again there is a problem of giving concrete form. Getting to know oneself is one thing, but choosing how to live is something else. Picking from standard models is less appropriate in this case, since one is assumed to be fairly unique. Hence the art-of-living is in developing one's own unique life-style or at least making a personalized composition from existing life-style elements, so called 'bricolage'. This involves some creativeness and again some guts. It is not easy to be an eccentric.

## 2 THE ART OF ENJOYING LIFE

The hedonistic view on the good life holds that enjoyment of life makes life worth living. One argument for that position is that enjoyment is the final thing we seek for its own sake and another holds that enjoyment signals that we thrive well.

There are two main variants of hedonism[2]: a narrow one that focuses on pleasurable experiences and a wider variant that concerns overall life-satisfaction or 'happiness'. Though related, these are different strategies, which require different skills.

## 2.1 Living pleasantly

Narrow hedonism sees the good life as a life full of delight; the focus is on things one does for pleasure and not on the pleasures that accompany the pursuit of other matters. Narrow hedonism is in fact a leisure philosophy. Two approaches can be discerned in this tradition: one focusing on maximizing pleasure, the other on minimizing pain. Also these variants entail different arts-of-living.

*The greedy life*

People like Casanova and Don Juan personify the maximizing approach. Both are renowned for their gallant life at noble courts, where they had trilling romances, took pleasure in arts and refined conversations, while enjoying good wines and the best foods. Their life histories read as a concatenation of delights, both of the mind and of the flesh.

This kind of life requires a set of capabilities that is typically cherished in leisure classes: First of all a good taste, since the enjoyments are typically quite sophisticated. The bustling life requires also considerable social skill, and in particular good manners, because much of the enjoyments are social in nature. It also calls for the guts to violate some rules and to neglect ascetic admonition. Yet some discipline is needed as well for the sake of keeping out of serious trouble and avoiding addictions. The art of this kind of living is in stylish indulgence.

*The serene life*

Epicure personifies the minimizing approach. He renounced wealth and honor and retreated from public life. Instead he practiced a contemplative life in the friendly community of his garden. Though Epicure was positive about sensory pleasure he advised against indulgence and thrills, since that would create dependency and cause pain in the long run (Boot 2003).

This style of life seems to be less demanding, in particular with respect to competitive social behavior. Still it does need some social skill, at least the ability to avoid conflict with fellow retirees. Since the pleasures are mainly derived from contemplation and gentle discussion, some intelligence is also called for, though Epicure himself did not deem education very high. Further some discipline seems to be required for resisting the temptations of wordily life.

## 2.2 Living a happy life

A common objection against narrow hedonism holds that mere pleasure is not everything and that we can experience deeper satisfactions, in particular when ‘actualizing’ our-self in mastering new challenges and when finding meaning in what we do. Broad hedonism assumes that much of these satisfactions are found in productive activities and in social involvement. While acknowledging that such involvements may bring considerable discomfort, it is assumed that these pains are balanced by deeper and more lasting satisfaction. In this view, the quality of life is not in the number of passing delights reaped, but in enduring satisfaction with life-as-whole, in other words, in ‘happiness’.

This view of the good life is figured in classic utilitarianism (Mill 1861) and revives in the modern psychology of optimal functioning (Csikszentmihalyi, 1975, 1990) and in this Journal of Happiness Studies.

What arts does such a happy life call for? The answer is less evident than in the foregoing cases that concerned fairly specific ways of life. In this instance, the question is rather what ways of life are most conductive to happiness and it is therefore less easy to see what capabilities are required. Since there may be multiple ways to a happy life there may also be multiple arts for this purpose. Still, the following generalizations seem plausible.

First of all one would think of general capabilities to cope with the problems of life, such as common sense, energy and some frustration tolerance. Since happiness depends heavily on the realities of life, happy living entails considerable reality-control. This capability will be required for almost any way of life.

Social competence seems particularly important. As we are social animals, we have strong needs for social contact, but the maintaining of such contacts requires considerable skill, in particular the keeping up of love-relationships. Moreover, because we live in organized society, our situation depends very much on our position in social networks. Achieving a good position is mostly not so easy either. In most human societies, these capability requirements are enhanced by competition.

The condition of present day individualistic society seems to call for additional capabilities, in particular for sound self-knowledge. Since we have much to choose, we must know what we want and what we can. All this requires an insight in who we are and an ability to learn from experience. Good awareness of one's emotional reactions seems of utmost importance, since that informs us about how well a chosen way of life really fits us. The conditions of individualistic society also call for a good deal of autonomy. Since there is so much to choose we have to choose and lingering social control requires that we control our-self.

Unlike the foregoing cases, we can check these suppositions. There is now a considerable body of research on concomitants of happiness and much of these findings are readily available though the World Database of Happiness (Veenhoven 2002).

A look at these data shows indeed considerable correlations between happiness and indicators of reality control. The happy tend to be more active than the unhappy (WDH section A 1) and have been observed to cope more adequately (Ormel 1980: 350). Though the happy tend to be optimistic and prone to positive illusions (Taylor & Brown 1988), there is no evidence for unrealistic optimism (Friedman et. al 2002) and the happy score high on all indicators of mental health (WDH, sections M 7 and P 13).

The data are also in line with the assumption that social competence is particularly required. The happy do clearly better in social relationships, more of them find a spouse and the quality of their marriage tends to be better (WDH sections M2 and M 3). The happy get also better along with family and friends than the unhappy (WDH, sections F 3 and F 6). On personality tests happy persons rate as more kind, sociable and cooperative, while they score lower on measures of aggression and egoism (WDH sections P 4). Not surprisingly, happy people are also found to be more popular (WDH

section P 9). Interestingly not all competencies are equally needed: happiness appears to be unrelated with intelligence as measured by common IQ tests (WDH, section I 3).

There is also some empirical support for the contention that happiness requires considerable self-knowledge in the conditions of modern multiple-choice society. On personality tests the happy appear as less defensive, though they do not stand out as more open (WDH, section P 4). There are weak indications that the happy are more aware of their moods (Choi 2003). The measurement of self-understanding is difficult and hence scarce. There is more research on the relationship between happiness and psychological autonomy. These data show that the happy are typically more assertive and controlled than the unhappy and that they are more persistent and efficacious (WDH, section P 4)

**SCHEMATIC OVERVIEW**

| Views on the good life | Required 'arts' of living | | | | | | |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| | **Compliance** | | **Understanding** | | **Control** | | **Sociability** |
| | *Discipline* | *Manners* | *of one-self* | *of the world* | *Autonomy* | *Creativeness* | |
| **Virtuous life** | | | | | | | |
| Living up to rules | ++ | ++ | | | | | |
| Living up to ideal | + | | + | + | | | |
| Living deliberately | | | ++ | | ++ | ++ | |
| **Enjoying life** | | | | | | | |
| Living pleasantly<br>• Greedy<br>• Serene | +<br>+ | +<br>+ | +<br>+ | + | + | | + |
| Living a happy life | | | ++ | + | ++ | + | ++ |

++ = Much required, + = Required

## 3 THE ART OF HAPPY LIFE

Since this Journal is about happiness, I will now focus on the art of happy living. How does that compare to other conceptions?

### 3.1 Difference with other arts-of-living

To what extend does this profile of competencies differ from the repertoires called for by other kinds of good life? The scheme on page 7 helps to get an overview. Though at the cost of some simplification this diagram represents the main talents involved.

A first difference that strikes the eye is that the ability to comply with external demands is not mentioned as a requirement for a happy life, while that capability does figure in all the other proficiency-profiles, except the profile of 'deliberate living'. The difference is strongest in the case of 'living up to rules'. This obviously calls for self-sacrifice, while a happy life rather requires that one fulfill one's needs as much as possible. This is not to say that happiness does not need any compliance, but a particular aptness is not required for this aim; at least not for the average citizen in present day society.

A second noteworthy is that sociability figures most prominently as a requirement for a happy life, but is not mentioned as a particular requirement for the 'virtuous lives' considered. This is partly due to the limitations of this presentation, if the virtue is in bringing more love in the world, sociability is obviously required. Yet the main difference is that a happy life always requires some social ability since we have a strong innate need for social contact, while in conceptions of virtuous living it is only required when it fits rule or plan.

A third thing to note is that the happy life calls for more varied skills than the other cases of good lives. This could be due to my presentation, but one can also see logic in it. Being happy requires the gratification of different needs, though we do not know what these needs are precisely it is evident that evolution has left us with many, among which the needs for companionship, recognition and self-actualization (Maslow 1965). These multiple needs require varied competencies. The other conceptions of the good life address in fact parts of this motivational repertoire; for instance, the 'greedy life' focuses exclusively on our repertoire for sensory experience, which logically requires less competences.

Lastly, one can see a considerable similarity in the skills required by the 'deliberate life' and the 'happy life'. This is because conscious living is mostly conductive to happiness, at least in the conditions of present day multiple-choice society. One of the differences is in the amount of creativeness required. The ideal of authentic originality requires that one creates a unique life, while for a happy life it suffices that one finds a model that reasonable suits. Another difference is in sociability. In the egocentric ideal of 'deliberate living' good contact are not really required, whereas for a happy life the rubbing against consorts is essential.

### 3.2 Similarity with concept of 'positive mental health'

How do these views on art-of-living fit current concepts in psychology? The presumed arts for a happy life bear a remarkable similarity with concepts of 'positive mental health'. In her famous review of current concepts of positive mental health, Jahoda (1958)

mentions six aspects of positive mental health, four of which concern capabilities mentioned in the bottom row of the scheme on page?

Firstly Jahoda mentions 'self-understanding' as an aspect of positive mental health. In her view this involves accessibility of the self, a correct view of one-self, a sense of identity and a positive evaluation of oneself. This description fits nicely with the self-understanding I deem required for a happy life.

The second aspect is 'autonomy', which Jahoda describes as the ability to make decisions, the ability to take care of one-self and as independent behavior, which may involve 'nonconformity when necessary'. This description also fits the above described art of living autonomously.

The third aspect mentioned by Jahoda is 'perception of reality' which she describes as undistorted perception and the ability to assess others thoughts and feeling. This fits my category of 'understanding of the world', while empathic skills are also part of what I call 'sociability'

Lastly, Jahoda mentions 'environmental mastery' as an aspect of positive mental health. Under this heading she mentions the ability to meet situational demands, skills for modification of selection of environments to fit needs and problem solving. This all fits my notion of 'control', in particular 'creativity'. Under this same heading Jahoda also mentions the ability to love and adequacy in interpersonal relations. In my scheme these capabilities figure under the heading of 'sociability'.

How about the two aspects of positive mental health that did not show up in my presentation of art-of-happy-living?

One concerns a 'drive for development', such as the want to sharpen one's abilities, future orientation and interest in the world. These are motivations rather than capabilities and where therefore left unmentioned in my presentation above. Still one can imagine that such a drive is conductive to happiness, in particular if one assumes that happiness draws on fully functioning.

The aspect other is 'psychological integration', which involves balance of psychic forces and a unifying outlook. These characteristics are not skills and were therefore not mentioned as art-of-happy-living, though they have been found related to happiness. Under this title Jahoda also mentions 'resistance to stress', which fits the above notion that a happy life calls for sound reality control.

One can of course opt for a wider definition of art-of-living that does include these traits. Yet that involves the danger that one ends up covering all personal characteristics that are conductive to happiness and also include physical health and good looks. Therefore I stick to my definition of art-of-living as 'skill'.

## 4 IN SUM

Elsewhere I have argued that there is little sense in speaking about 'quality-of-life', since that term denotes different qualit*ies* of life that can better be named separately (Veenhoven 2000). Likewise I show in this paper that one can better not speak about *the* art-of-living, since different kinds of good lives call for different capability profiles. So

we better speak about art*s*-of-living and are explicit when we speak about the 'Art-of-Happy-Living'.

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NOTES

[1] Some authors on art-of-living see the good life as a' piece of art' (Dohmen in this issue). Since it is typically unclear what aesthetical qualities are involved, I do not discuss this variant.

[2] More variants of hedonism are discussed in Brülde (1998) chapter 2 and 3.