How do we assess a person’s life? Do we ask how successful the person was in terms of fame, achievement, acquisitions, or relationships? Do we consider what major problems that person faced with health, family, career, or society?

Yet even after these questions are answered, other fundamental ones remain: Was the person happy? Did the person treat others ethically? Did the person live well?

Many philosophers suppose that answers to this second set of questions depend on answers to the first. Our view, however, is that the two sets are independent. In other words, morality, happiness, and quality of life do not follow from activities, accomplishments, or acclaim.

Note that we do not defend a specific moral theory. Instead, we assume that any moral person cares about others, treats them with respect, and seeks to minimize their suffering. Further complications abound, but these are not our focus.

Nor do we distinguish various terms that indicate that a person’s whole life should be viewed positively. Thus we
treat as synonymous “achieving well-being,” “attaining meaning,” and “living well,” although most often we refer to the last.

Instead, we ask what are the connections between morality, happiness, and living well? Our answer is that moral behavior is not necessary for happiness and does not ensure it. Morality and happiness, however, are needed for living well, and together suffice to achieve that goal.

We shall explain this view and defend it against arguments of those contemporary philosophers who disagree with us. We include historical references, but unlike many others who have written on these topics, we do not present our ideas as commentary on the writings of Plato or Aristotle. We do, however, link our position to elements within both the Hellenistic and Hebraic traditions.

We begin by considering reflections on the good life offered by the late political and legal theorist Ronald Dworkin. Although we do not find his conclusions persuasive, his presentation offers a convenient gateway to discussion of our main subject.
In Dworkin’s posthumously published *Religion Without God*, he argues that an atheist can be religious. While this claim would come as no surprise to adherents of Jainism, Theravada Buddhism, or Mimamsa Hinduism, he has in mind not these Asian religious traditions but a viewpoint common to many Western thinkers who deny theism yet recognize “nature’s intrinsic beauty” and the “inescapable responsibility” of people to “live their lives well.” Dworkin considers such an outlook religious.

Leaving aside his curious line of thought that finds support for religious belief in such disparate phenomena as the Grand Canyon, prowling jaguars, and the discovery by physicists of the Higgs boson, let us concentrate on his view that we should all seek to live well so as to achieve “successful” lives and avoid “wasted” ones?

Does one model fit all? On this important point Dworkin wavers. He maintains that “there is, independently and objectively, a right way to live.” Yet he also recognizes “a responsibility of each person to decide for himself ethical
questions about which kinds of lives are appropriate and which would be degrading for him."

What sort of life did Dworkin himself find degrading? We are not told but suspect that for such a successful academic, a “degrading life” might have been one without intellectual striving, just as a famed athlete might find degrading life as a couch potato.

But of all possible lives, which are well-lived? To help answer this question, consider the following two fictional, though realistic, cases.

Pat received a bachelor’s degree from a prestigious college and a Ph.D. in philosophy from a leading university, then was awarded an academic position at a first-rate school, and eventually earned tenure there. Pat is the author of numerous books, articles, and reviews, is widely regarded as a leading scholar and teacher, and is admired by colleagues and students for fairness and helpfulness. Pat is happily married, has two children, enjoys playing bridge and the cello, and vacations each summer in a modest house on Cape Cod. Physically and mentally healthy, Pat is in good spirits, looking forward to years of happiness.

Lee, on the other hand, did not attend college. After high school Lee moved to a beach community in California and is devoted to sunbathing, swimming, and surfing. Lee has never married but has experienced numerous romances. Having inherited wealth from deceased parents, Lee has no financial needs but, while donating generously to worthy causes, spends money freely on magnificent homes, luxury cars, designer clothes, fine dining, golfing holidays, and extensive travel. Lee has many friends and is admired for honesty and kindness. Physically and mentally healthy, Lee is in good spirits, looking forward to years of happiness.

Both Pat and Lee live in ways that appear to suit them. Both enjoy prosperity, treat others with respect, engage in activities they find fulfilling, and report they are happy. Are both living equally well? In other words, are both pursuing equally meaningful lives? Or, alternatively, is either life wasted?

Dworkin offers little guidance to help answer these questions. He urges that we make our lives into works of art, but works of art.
typically contain complexities and conflicts not found in the lives of Pat or Lee. The story of each might be told in the form of a play or novel, but neither individual appears to have the makings of Medea, Hamlet, or Anna Karenina.

Dworkin also remarks that “someone creates a work of art from his life if he lives and loves well in family or community with no fame or artistic achievement at all.” Here Dworkin, having urged us to live well by making our lives into works of art, unhelpfully suggests that works of art are those made by living well. This circular explanation sheds no light on how to live well, so Dworkin’s appeal to works of art does not help us choose between the lives of Pat and Lee.

Many other philosophers, however, have provided reasons for believing that Pat’s life is superior to Lee’s. These thinkers rate the pursuit of philosophical inquiry, playing the cello, or raising a family, more highly than surfing, a series of romances, or a luxurious home.

Yet not all philosophers agree with this assessment. Two who do not are Richard Taylor and Harry Frankfurt, each of whom would maintain that Pat and Lee are living equally well.

Consider first Taylor’s approach. He discusses the case of Sisyphus, who, according to Greek myth, was condemned for his misdeeds to the eternal task of rolling a huge stone to the top of a hill, only each time to have it roll down to the bottom again. Is the activity of Sisyphus meaningless? Taylor concludes that the answer depends on whether Sisyphus has a desire to roll stones up hills. Most of us don’t, but if Sisyphus does, then he has found “mission and meaning.” Therefore, according to Taylor, living well is living in accord with your desires. If your activities match your wishes, then your life is successful. Whether the activity is teaching philosophy, driving luxury cars, or rolling stones up hills makes no difference.

Frankfurt reaches a similar conclusion. He maintains that we infuse our lives with meaning by loving certain intrinsic ends and caring about the means to achieve them. Need the ends themselves be of a particular sort? Not according to Frankfurt. As he writes, “Devoting oneself to what one loves suffices to make one’s life meaningful, regardless of the inherent or objective character of the objects..."
that are loved.”7 Because Pat loves discussing philosophy, playing bridge, and spending time with family, while Lee loves surfing, golfing, and engaging in romantic adventures, both, according to Frankfurt, possess the essentials of a meaningful life.

As we noted, however, most philosophers reject this view of what makes a life significant.8 They maintain that certain activities are more worthy than others, so lives spent engaged in those more worthy activities are more worthy lives. But which activities have more worth and which less? And on what bases should we decide such matters?

We shall next consider in turn three much-discussed attempts to provide persuasive answers to these questions.
Susan Wolf maintains that “meaningful lives are lives of active engagement in projects of worth.” To be actively engaged is to be “gripped, excited, involved.” As for “projects of worth,” they are those that are “worthwhile,” a term Wolf recognizes as suggesting “a commitment to some sort of objective value,” while admitting that she has “neither a philosophical theory of what objective value is nor a substantive theory about what has this sort of value.”

She does, however, offer numerous examples of activities she believes are sources of meaning and ones that are not. Among those that yield meaning are moral or intellectual accomplishments, relationships with friends and relatives, aesthetic enterprises, religious practices, climbing a mountain, training for a marathon, campaigning for a political candidate, caring for an ailing friend, and developing one’s powers as a cellist, cabinetmaker, or pastry chef.

Among those that do not yield meaning are collecting rubber bands, memorizing the dictionary, making handwritten copies of *War and Peace*, riding a roller coaster, meeting a movie star, finding a great dress on sale, loving a pet goldfish,
lying on the beach on a beautiful day, eating a perfectly ripe peach, watching sitcoms, recycling, playing computer games, solving crossword puzzles, and writing checks to Oxfam and the ACLU. Wolf warns especially against “focusing too narrowly on the superficial goals of ease, prestige, and material wealth.”

Controversial cases for her include a life single-mindedly given to corporate law, one devoted to a religious cult, and, an example she takes from David Wiggins, a pig farmer who buys more land to grow more corn to feed more pigs to buy more land to grow more corn to feed more pigs.5

Individuals she cites as paradigms of having had meaningful lives are Mother Theresa, Einstein, Cézanne, and “Gandhi, perhaps.” Among those she mentions whose lives may lack meaning are “the alienated housewife, the conscripted soldier, the assembly line worker.”6

These lists, unfortunately, raise more questions than they answer. Why are involvements with religious practices clearly meaningful but not devotion to a religious cult? Why is caring for an ailing friend meaningful but not providing support for a sick stranger? Why is solving crossword puzzles not an intellectual accomplishment? Why is meeting a movie star meaningless? Does Wolf suppose meeting a famous philosopher would be more meaningful? Why is having met David Lewis more meaningful than having met W. C. Fields?

Why is single-minded concentration on corporate law a controversial case? Would single-minded concentration on labor law, patent law, or constitutional law also be controversial? Does single-minded concentration on epistemology escape controversy?

Why is developing one’s powers as a pastry chef meaningful, but eating a peach is not? If we can find meaning by preparing food, why can’t we find meaning by eating it? Why is meaning found in campaigning for a political candidate who is an advocate of the ACLU, yet not found in providing funds to support the activities of the ACLU?

Why is meaning absent if one is drafted and then fights to defend one’s country? Is the problem supposed to arise from having been
drafted or from fighting a war? Why is launching a business to become rich considered superficial? Does an enterprise that generates large earnings thereby lose worth?

Wolf’s warning against a focus on achieving “ease, prestige, and material wealth” is ironic, given that, as any academic dean knows, the tried-and-true method of recruiting professors is to offer them the ease most of them find in a reduced teaching schedule, the prestige of joining other well-known colleagues, and a sizable increase in salary. Trying to persuade noted scholars to join a department without offering them greater ease, prestige, or material wealth is not likely to succeed.

As for hobbies, collecting rubber bands is no doubt unusual, but people have devoted their lives to collecting stamps, coins, baseball memorabilia, beer bottles, theatrical programs, medieval works in astrology, and comic books. Are some collections meaningful and others not?

One philosopher we know has devoted innumerable hours to practicing and playing golf. Another friend, also a philosopher, finds golf an utter waste of time. Is one of them right and the other wrong?

Wolf suggests that “mindless, futile, never-ending tasks” are not likely to be meaningful.” These criteria, however, are questionable. For instance, running on a treadmill is mindless, trying to persuade all others of your solutions to philosophical problems is futile, and seeking to eliminate all disease is never-ending. Are these activities, therefore, without meaning? Lifting heavier and heavier weights may be mindless, futile, and never-ending, but we see no reason to derogate weightlifting.

Why not allow others to pursue their own ways of life without disparaging their choices and declaring their lives meaningless? After all, others might declare meaningless a life devoted to philosophical speculation that leads to writing articles that leads to others reading those articles that leads to more philosophical speculation that leads to writing more articles that leads to others reading more articles. Why is such activity more meaningful than that engaged in by Wiggins’s pig farmers?
The tangle in which Wolf finds herself is apparent in her explanation of why Woody Allen, in his movie Manhattan, includes in the protagonist’s list of things that make life worth living the crabs at Sam Woo’s. She hypothesizes that Allen “regards the dish as an accomplishment meriting aesthetic appreciation.” A simpler, more obvious explanation is that he finds the crabs tasty.

Wolf herself admits that she enjoys eating chocolate, exercising in aerobics class, and playing computer games. Why, then, does she insist on devaluing these activities? After all, if a person can find delights that bring no harm, such a discovery should be appreciated, not denigrated.

A fundamental question about Wolf’s approach is whether in her view individuals are the best judges of the worth of their own lives. Here Wolf waffles. She speaks of a need “to see one’s life as valuable in a way that can be recognized from a point of view other than one’s own.” Yet “no one need accept someone else’s word for what has objective value.”

In what way, then, are we to decide which activities are of worth? Wolf’s suggestion is that “we are likely to make the most progress toward an answer if we pool our information and experience.” How to proceed with such a collaborative inquiry is unclear.

Even with all these problems, however, Wolf’s theory faces an even more daunting difficulty, which appears when she tries to address a criticism of her theory from psychologist Jonathan Haidt. As a counterexample to her claim that a meaningful life requires focus on “objects worthy of love,” he presents the case of one of his students, a shy woman who was passionate about horses: riding them, studying their history, and making “‘horse friends’” with others who shared her passion. Haidt argues that this woman found meaning in life through her interest in horses, but he recognizes that “all of her horsing around does nothing for anyone else, and it does not make the world a better place.” Thus, according to Haidt, in this case Wolf’s theory of objective value fails.

Remembering the long list of activities whose worth Wolf does not accept, we might anticipate that she would dismiss horses as an
inappropriate subject on which to build a significant life. Surprising, however, she agrees with Haidt that horses might contribute to the meaningfulness of the woman’s life. The reason Wolf offers is that a person’s liking some activity, whatever it may be, can lead to its becoming valuable for that individual.

But then what becomes of objective value? Wolf senses the problem and admits that her discussion “may leave others either disappointed by what they see as a watering down of what is distinctive about my conception of meaningfulness or confused about what the point of it is, if it is to be understood so broadly.”

Such confusion is understandable, especially when Wolf goes on to find the possibility of objective value in lawn mower-racing, being a basketball fan, and even solving crossword puzzles, the same activity she had previously declared meaningless. No wonder Wolf warns us that her views “will be of little or no practical use.”

This limitation is clear if we try to apply Wolf’s views to the cases of Pat and Lee. After all, if riding horses, racing lawn mowers, being a sports fan, and solving crossword puzzles might give meaning to life, then Pat can surely find meaning in teaching, playing bridge, and practicing the cello, while Lee can find meaning in swimming, driving luxury cars, and traveling to distant locations.

Is one of these individuals living a more worthwhile life than the other? Trying to resolve this question by determining who has undertaken projects of worth does not provide the answer we seek.
Another strategy is adopted by Richard Kraut, who identifies living well with “flourishing.” He uses that term to characterize a human being “who possesses, develops, and enjoys the exercise of cognitive, affective, sensory, and social powers (no less than physical powers).” Those who flourish develop “properly and fully” the “potentials, capacities, and faculties that (under favorable conditions) they naturally have at an early stage of their existence.”

This approach, however, raises a series of problems. First, not all our potentials can be actualized in a single lifetime. An individual who might have the talents to succeed as an organist, football player, surgeon, stockbroker, or engineer does not have the time to fulfill all these goals at a high level. Choices need to be made, and in every case some possibilities will remain unfulfilled.

Furthermore, how do we know at an early stage of a person’s existence which abilities that individual may develop later in life? Consider Anna Mary Moses (1860–1961), who was a farmer’s wife in Virginia and New York and did embroidery of country scenes. At the age of seventy-five she began
to paint, achieving worldwide fame as “Grandma Moses.” She was not born to be a painter or a farmer’s wife. She had a range of abilities and opportunities, and over time made her choices.

No appeal to what is natural will demonstrate what ought to be. As Sidney Hook writes, “What man should be is undoubtedly related to what he is, for no man should be what he cannot be. Yet a proposition about what he is no more uniquely entails what he should be than the recognition of the nature of an egg necessitates our concluding that the egg should become a chicken rather than an egg sandwich.”

Furthermore, not all our abilities are worthy. As Kraut himself puts it, “some natural powers are bad for the person who has them.” Skills as a liar, cheater, and hypocrite are presumably among those Kraut believes should be “extirpated.”

Which abilities, then, should we develop? Kraut answers that we should develop those that lead to flourishing. But which ones lead to flourishing? Those that are good. And which are good? Those that lead to flourishing. This circularity doesn’t help us choose from among the options we face.

To illustrate the problem, consider the real-life case of Phil Saltman, a jazz pianist in the 1930s and 1940s, whose extraordinary talents could have propelled him to international renown. After appearing as soloist with the Boston Pops Orchestra, however, he decided that life as a touring musician was not to his liking. He chose instead to open a summer camp for boys and girls who enjoyed playing music, even if they did not plan to pursue the activity professionally. The camp succeeded, and he never doubted his choice to give up the opportunity for a distinguished solo career in order to guide youngsters and play music with them in amateur combos.

Did he make a mistake? Did he limit his chances for a successful life? Did he waste his significant talents?

Kraut would have answered that he should have chosen to flourish. But would he have flourished more by pursuing a concert career or by becoming a camp director? Some of his friends thought he had made a serious mistake; others agreed with his choice. No appeal to the concept of flourishing, however, would have helped settle the matter.
Perhaps more insight can be found in the specific examples Kraut offers. Let us, therefore, consider the activities he cites with strong approval, as well as those about which he shows much less enthusiasm.

Among those he favors are walking, dancing, traveling, playing tennis, swimming, attending the opera, writing poetry, reading novels, basking in the warmth of the sun, cooking, doing crossword puzzles, playing chess, running an organization, philosophizing, and enjoying our sexual powers. Ones he finds of lesser value include bowling, playing checkers, watching inane television programs, accumulating wealth, achieving fame, holding socially isolating jobs, and remaining single.

As with Susan Wolf’s account of meaningful and meaningless activities, Kraut’s lists raise more questions than they answer. Why is tennis better than bowling? How do both compare to badminton, archery, or quoits? Why is chess better than checkers? Perhaps Kraut would find checkers more challenging if he had lost game after game to a checkers champion. Which game’s value is more akin to that of Scrabble? What’s the matter with socially isolating jobs? Serving as a lighthouse keeper, exploring a rainforest, writing fiction in a remote cabin, or doing research in a library cubicle are surely worthy activities.

Why does Kraut, as did Wolf, denigrate fame and wealth? We doubt either of them would reject a professorial position on the grounds that the institution offering it provides too much status or an excessively high salary.

Why does the study of philosophy invariably appear on philosophers’ lists of worthwhile activities? Indeed, the study of such subjects as sociology, geology, Asian religions, ceramics, and finance are rarely cited with enthusiasm.

Kraut contrasts checkers and literature, finding little value in the former but much in the latter. If a person delights in playing board games, however, and does not particularly enjoy reading the novels of Henry James or Thomas Hardy, should we conclude, as Kraut does, that the individual “is handicapped by a cognitive or linguistic
disability”? Should we also say that anyone not fond of lieder is handicapped by a musical disability?

Why is Kraut against the single life? He suggests that a person might wish to marry because of thinking that “the complex affective and interactive skills needed by a good marriage partner are ones that he will enjoy acquiring and exercising.” (Perhaps such words would not be the most inspiring to recite at a wedding.) Could the single life also have advantages? Kraut doesn’t suggest any. However, he strongly supports sexual activity, maintaining that “The extinction of sexual desire, in favorable circumstances—that is, when there are attractive and likable people to whom one can give and from whom one can receive sexual pleasure—would be a great loss.” The dubious implication is that chastity, whether for moral, religious, or personal reasons, is not conducive to flourishing.

Do all Kraut’s examples help decide whether Pat or Lee is living a more worthwhile life? Kraut, not surprisingly, expresses much enthusiasm for what he terms “the thrilling process of acquiring a body of knowledge about a subject that fascinates us.” Thus we can assume he would judge that Pat the philosopher is flourishing, especially because Pat is married, plays the cello, and enjoys strolling the beaches of Cape Cod.

Perhaps surprisingly, however, many of Kraut’s criteria for flourishing also fit Lee’s life. Lee enjoys swimming and the warmth of the sun. Lee’s physical powers have been developed by surfing and golfing, while Lee’s cognitive and sensory powers have been increased by travel. Moreover, Lee’s social powers have been enhanced through many friendships, and Lee’s affective powers are developed from numerous romances. As to “enjoyment of sexual powers,” Lee’s accomplishments in this area likely have exceeded those of Pat.

How, then, are we to weigh Lee’s advantages against Pat’s devotion to teaching, research, family, and hobbies? Assuming Lee sometimes reads literature and does not spend much time playing checkers, Lee, like Pat, would meet Kraut’s criteria for flourishing. Thus we have made no progress in deciding which of the two, if either, is closer to living well.
Assuming that lists of more and less worthwhile activities offer too easy a target for criticism, why not avoid specifics and simply assert that living well is pursuing goals of intrinsic value? Such a strategy is adopted by Stephen Darwall, who claims that “the best life for human beings is one of significant engagement in activities through which we come into appreciative rapport with agent-neutral values, such as aesthetic beauty, knowledge and understanding, and the worth of living beings.” These values are “intrinsically worthy of esteem and admiration.”

Darwall here fails to take into account John Dewey’s insight that any activity can have intrinsic value. In Dewey’s words, “We can imagine a man who at one time thoroughly enjoys converse with his friends; at another the hearing of a symphony; at another the eating of his meals; at another the reading of a book; at another the earning of money, and so on. As an appreciative realization, each of these is an intrinsic value. It occupies a particular place in life; it serves its own end, which cannot be supplied by a substitute.” In other words, depending on the specific situation, any good may