



## What is the Good Life?

Is the good life a happy life? A life of material wealth? A life of pleasure? A moral life? A life of individual purpose?

“The good life” is a term used to denote an ideal state of human happiness and contentment, used in English translations of classical philosophy and contemporary pop songs alike, an idea simultaneously informed by long-standing intellectual traditions and colloquially referenced as though it were something we all recognize. There are more ways of defining it than there are academic disciplines: some political philosophers argue that it is life in a just society; some social utilitarians argue it is life that minimizes want and pain; Aristotle and many others after him conceived of “the good life” (*eudaimonia*) as an ethical life, marked by virtuous living and guided by reason. So how should we think about the good life if we want to live in the world as it is now? Is happiness the goal of human life, or is there something else that makes it worth living?

The Berkeley Institute is devoting the Spring 2023 semester to “The Good Life” and the questions it raises: What does it mean to live the good life? How do different intellectual and religious traditions apprehend it? Is the good life an end in itself? And, lastly, is the good life attainable despite the contingencies of human life? Our **Spring 2023 Community Read** will help us think through these questions together: Tracy K. Smith’s Pulitzer Prize winning book of poetry, *Life on Mars* (2011).

## Why Poetry?

A line from W. H. Auden’s elegy for the poet W. B. Yeats is frequently quoted to remark on the supposed uselessness of poetry: “For poetry makes nothing happen: it survives/ In the valley of its making...” And when considering how best to think about the good life, disciplines like philosophy or economics might spring to mind before poetry does. In fact, western intellectual traditions have long been suspicious of poetry’s ability to theorize or actualize human happiness. In Plato’s *Republic*, Socrates famously banishes the poets from his conception of the ideal city, a community that would ensure the best and most just life for its citizens. Socrates argues that he is justified in doing so because of the supposed threat poetry poses to the good life of the city and its citizens: just as chaos ensues if “ruffians” overthrow the authorities in a city, poetry “corrupts” its audience’s minds by overcoming their reason and promoting their passions. So why read a book of poems when considering the good life? Perhaps we shouldn’t take Socrates at his word, considering he is a character in a work that is as poetic as it is philosophical. And we should think, too, about that often misquoted

line from Auden, which claims that poetry “makes nothing happen” in a poem that attempts to do quite a lot: to mourn the death of another poet as well as reflect on what human happiness is possible in the run-up to a second world war. Tracy K. Smith similarly uses elegy—poems that lament death and loss—to reflect on deep philosophical questions. *Life on Mars* deals with personal loss by elegizing Smith’s father, a scientist who worked on the Hubble Space Telescope. But it also considers what the good life could mean in the face of collective tragedies: racism, poverty, the heat death of the universe. What does human happiness look like from this cosmic scale? Is there a hospitable home, an ideal city, for us in a universe that is vast, cold, dark, and, above all, mutable?

As you read, consider whether *Life on Mars* (and poetry in general) provides anything like straightforward answers to these questions. Do these poems teach us about the good life and how to achieve it? Should we expect poetry to be a source of knowledge like philosophy, economics, or another academic discipline? Or is its function something different, something more like what the poet Emily Dickinson described as “tell[ing] all the truth but tell[ing] it slant”? Poetry is often thought of as a special use of language, one that estranges ordinary language while paradoxically renewing or “clarifying” (one way of translating Aristotle’s word *katharsis* in the *Poetics*) our emotions, senses, thoughts, and desires, bringing us into a fuller understanding of our experience of the world and apprehension of ourselves.

## Some Guiding Questions

### What is the good life?

Is the good life free of illness, pain, and want? The result of technological and scientific progress? Is it even possible on planet Earth? Playing on science fiction tropes, with references ranging from *2001: A Space Odyssey* to David Bowie’s Ziggy Stardust, *Life on Mars* explores the assumptions and fantasies we often hold of a better, fulfilled life—including the fantasy that life on a different planet would allow us to escape the problems that seem inextricable from human experience. But what is sacrificed in our visions of the future where there are “no edges but curves/Clean lines pointing only forward” (“Sci-Fi,” 7) and in which concepts like “love” and “illness” are nothing more than seasonal museum exhibits (“Museum of Obsolescence,” 14)? In a poem that is pointedly titled “The Good Life,” the collection also wonders why the satisfaction of basic needs like hunger and security don’t necessarily make us happier; the speaker is provocatively nostalgic for a time when she walked “to work on payday/Like a woman journeying for water/From a village without a well.” Once material conditions are met, why does life remain unfulfilling?

### How do we imagine it, or what tools do we have for apprehending it?

Aristotle claims nearly everyone agrees that the point of human action is to achieve happiness, but that we disagree about what happiness means (Nicomachean Ethics 1.4). In the Spring

2023 semester, the Berkeley Institute will explore this disagreement with a special series called “Disciplinary Knowledge and the Good Life.” We’ll ask faculty from the humanities, sciences, and social sciences how their disciplines understand or theorize human life; what types of knowledge they produce; and what ways of life they tacitly promote. We’ll also investigate the limits of these disciplines: what *can’t* they tell us? And where do their tools and methods fall short of apprehending the good life?

*Life on Mars* is similarly interested in the limits of human knowledge: can we know what will truly make us happy? The book juxtaposes scientific inquiry with poetic forms of contemplation; both scientists and artists scrutinize the universe for answers, motivated by shared impulses. Smith, for instance, describes her father’s work on the Hubble telescope as “bowing before the oracle-eye, hungry for what it would find” (“My God, It’s Full of Stars,” 12). What unites these different forms of inquiry? Can we learn anything from their differences and disagreements? We’ll think, too, about what other practices and commitments can step in when we reach the limits of human knowledge. Where do imagination, faith and religious belief participate in our pursuit of the good life?

### **What about death, loss, privation, and the contingency of human life?**

Last year William Shatner, the actor who played Captain Kirk in the original *Star Trek* series, became the oldest person to travel to space. He was surprised by his experience, which lacked the confidence, optimism, and adventure that had marked space travel on his TV show. Instead what Shatner says he saw in space was “death.” “I realized I was in grief,” Shatner said. “What I would love to do is communicate as much as possible the jeopardy, the vulnerability. *It’s so small*. This air which is keeping us alive is thinner than your skin. It’s a sliver. It’s immeasurably small when you think in terms of the universe.”

Shatner here sounds remarkably like Blaise Pascal, the author of our Fall 2022 Community Read, *Pensées*. Pascal sometimes appears hauntingly disenchanted with life, a limited good that is ultimately dwarfed by the eternity that follows death. He reflects on the vastness of the universe and the fragility of human beings to argue for how and why we should commit ourselves to certain metaphysical stances (e.g., belief in the existence of God) — but how do such commitments affect our lives as we currently live them? By reading Tracy K. Smith’s *Life on Mars* and thinking about the concept of the good life, the Berkeley Institute hopes to connect metaphysical questions to social and political ones. Is the idea of the good life ridiculous from the perspective of an indifferent, and largely hostile, universe? Or can contemplation of our overwhelming vulnerability itself teach us the value of investigating how we should live together? Can we get the good life ourselves or must we achieve it cooperatively with others? Or is the very idea of the good life made specious by the unequal distribution of goods that seems to be a constant of human existence? Does the good life only exist in some deferred or hoped-for future, a religious after-life or techno-scientific utopia? Or is it something we can achieve now?