

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.

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