

# Living and Dying Well

Thinking about Flourishing and Mortality with Ancient  
World Philosophical Traditions

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# An Overview

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# About us

- Matthew D. Walker is an Associate Professor of Humanities (Philosophy) at Yale-NUS College. His specialties include ancient Greek philosophy and comparative ethics. He regularly teaches in Philosophy and Political Thought (PPT), a first-year sequence in Yale-NUS's Common Curriculum.

# About us

- Dr Natalie Woong is a Consultant in Internal Medicine with subspecialty training in Palliative Medicine. As part of the Internal Medicine Supportive and Palliative Care Service, she works with a team to care for people with life-limiting illnesses.

# Objectives for this session

- (1) To introduce some historically influential views on flourishing and mortality from ancient world philosophical traditions.
- (2) To explore ways in which these views may
  - (a) broaden perspectives and
  - (b) provide resources for patients, healthcare workers, and family members in making meaning of the situations they face in palliative care contexts.

# The rationale for this session

- (1) Ancient world philosophical traditions have a strongly practical focus: in these traditions, philosophical reflection, even when abstract, connects with human concerns, including how to live and die well.
- (2) These traditions have proved influential, have stood the test of time, and perhaps have even informed some of our common sense views.
- (3) Yet these traditions are temporally distant from us: hence, they offer new resources for thinking about flourishing and mortality.

Setting a practical context:  
Questions that face patients, healthcare  
workers, and family members

# Some orienting questions

- Think about a time when you managed a dying patient. How did the family react? Was it challenging for you, and why?
- How do you think you would respond when faced with a terminal illness in a family member? What is important to your loved one? What is important to you?



# Scenario 1

- Mdm T is a 69 year old woman who has just been diagnosed with metastatic colon cancer.
- She is difficult to engage when approached and says that there is nothing that can help her. She just wants to go home and does not want to talk about further tests or treatment. She asks if there is an injection that can be given for her to “go faster”. She feels that every moment is full of suffering.

## Scenario 2

- Mr D is a 52 year old man who has peripheral vascular disease. He also has poorly controlled diabetes with retinopathy and nephropathy. He has developed wet gangrene of his left foot which requires amputation. However, he does not want to lose his leg and refuses the operation. He says that he would rather die than lose his leg. His wife hopes that he will reconsider his choice as they have two young children.

## Scenario 3

- Mdm V is a 90 year old woman who has severe pneumonia. She has dementia and has been bedbound for the last 4 years. Her 64 year old daughter has been her sole caregiver for more than 10 years. She is unable to bear the thought of her mother dying and wants everything to be done to prolong her mother's life.

Entertaining ancient ideas:  
Some classical Chinese, Greek, and  
Indian philosophical views on  
flourishing and mortality

# Part I: Classical Confucians and Daoists on the value of rituals, relationships, and filial piety

- Confucius (551-479 BCE)
  - Lives during the conflictual Spring and Autumn Period (772-481 BCE)
  - Seeks to revive “the way” of the sage kings of the Zhou dynasty
  - Sayings and exchanges collected in the *Analects (Lunyu)*
- Xunzi (4<sup>th</sup>-century BCE)
  - An early Confucian philosopher
  - Influence has increased/decreased in different periods
- Zhuangzi (4<sup>th</sup>-century BCE)
  - The nominal author of the *Zhuangzi*, a major Daoist philosophical work
  - A very puzzling author (and work)!

# Confucius and ritual and mourning

- “When the Master dined in the company of one who was in mourning, he never ate his fill” (*Analects* 7.9; trans. E. Slingerland).
- “Whenever the Master saw someone who was wearing mourning clothes, was garbed in full official dress, or was blind, he would always rise to his feet, even if the person was his junior. When passing such a person, he would always hasten his step” (*Analects* 9.10).
- “When he saw someone fasting or mourning, he invariably assumed a changed expression, even if they were an intimate acquaintance...” (*Analects* 10.25).

# Some themes

- Ritual (*li*).
- Humaneness (*ren*).
- Here, ritual is important for expressing humaneness – and for living well in human communities.
  - Consider the effects of social distancing on everyday rituals (e.g., handshaking).
  - Consider the effects of COVID on mourning rituals (e.g., funerals).

# Confucius on mourning and filial piety

- “The Master said, ‘When someone’s father is still alive, observe his intentions; after his father has passed away, observe his conduct. If for three years he does not alter the ways of his father, he may be called a filial son’” (*Analects* 1.11).
- “A child is completely dependent upon the care of his parents for the first three years of his life—this is why the three-year mourning period is the common practice throughout the world” (*Analects* 17.21).



# Some themes

- Here, ritual provides a way to realize another virtue, filial piety (*xiao*).
- Confucius makes sense of filial piety in relation to parental care: a return of care.
- Thus, filial piety and mourning rituals for one's parents provide ways of expressing and returning respect and care for our loved ones.

# Xunzi on the psychological function of ritual

- “In every case, ritual begins in that which must be released, reaches full development in giving it proper form, and finishes in providing it satisfaction. And so when ritual is at its most perfect, the requirements of inner dispositions and proper form are both completely fulfilled” (*Xunzi*, 19.119-123; trans. E. Hutton).

# Some themes

- For Xunzi, ritual releases certain emotions that seek expression.
- Ritual gives these emotions proper form (it expresses/articulates emotions instead of merely venting them).
- By doing so, ritual conduces to a certain satisfaction.
- Thus, ritual is conducive to human flourishing; it answers needs rooted in human nature.

# Xunzi on mourning rituals and filial piety

- “Ritual is that which takes care to order living and dying. Birth is the beginning of people, and death is the end of people. When beginning and end are both good, then the human way is complete. Thus, the gentleman is respectful of the beginning and careful about the end” (*Xunzi*, 19.201-205).
- “Causing life and death and beginning and end to be treated with one and the same care satisfies what people all wish for. This...is the height of being a loyal minister and filial son” (*Xunzi*, 19.227-230).

# Some themes

- For Xunzi, mourning rituals, like rituals welcoming the newborn, give structure to human life.
- Such rituals play an essential role in making marking the significance of birth and death.
- Hence, they play an essential role in making meaning of our lives and the lives of our loved ones.

# Some Confucian takeaways

- If classical Confucians are right, we may underestimate the value of rituals (including rituals for/at the end of life).
- But for patients and family members, rituals may play a beneficial (and underappreciated) role as a way of meaning making and expressing care for loved ones.
- It is important to find out if the patient had any last wishes or preferences for last rites.
- While there are circumstances where certain requests cannot be fulfilled (for example, not touching the body for 8 hours after death), we can work towards finding practical solutions that will give the family a sense of peace.

# *Zhuangzi*, ch. 3: A contrasting Daoist view on ritual and mortality

“When Laozi died, Qin Shih went to mourn him, cried three times, and left. A student asked, ‘Weren’t you our teacher’s friend?’

‘Yes.’

‘Then is it okay for you to mourn him this way?’

‘Yes...Our teacher came because it was time and left when the time had passed. If you are content with the time and abide by the passing, there’s no room for sorrow or joy” (trans. P. Kjellberg).

# Some themes

- Zhuangzi's worry: it's easy for rituals to become overly codified/rigid.
- Zhuangzi's view: death is an inevitable and inescapable manifestation of larger natural patterns or processes (the Way/Dao).
- Hence, viewing the death of a loved one as requiring extended mourning expresses an overly fixed and inflexible perspective.
- Perhaps a useful foil to a Confucian perspective; and similar to how some Greek thinkers view death and mourning....



# Part II: Plato and Epictetus on securing flourishing through reframing the significance of death

- Plato (~428-347 BCE)
  - Student of Socrates; teacher of Aristotle
  - Author of the *Republic* and other major philosophical dialogues
  - Plato's *Symposium*, set at a drinking party, features Socrates' account of love (which Socrates claims to have learned from a priestess named Diotima)
- Epictetus (~50s-130s CE)
  - A later Stoic philosopher (popular today)
  - Didn't write; conversations written down by Arrian
  - Collection of Epictetus' sayings compiled in the *Handbook (Encheiridion)*

# Plato's Diotima on immortalizing oneself through generation

- “For among animals the principle is the same as with us, and mortal nature seeks so far as possible to live forever and be immortal. And this is possible in one way only: by reproduction, because it always leaves behind a new young one in place of the old” (*Symposium* 207d; trans. A. Nehamas and P. Woodruff).

# Some themes

- Death is inescapable for mortal nature.
- Yet all mortal nature seeks to *approximate* the immortal and everlasting.
- Mortal nature has a mechanism for such approximation: reproduction (i.e., leaving something new in place of the old).

# Plato's Diotima on immortalizing oneself through generation

- “Now some people are pregnant in body, and for this reason turn more to women and pursue love in that way, providing themselves through childbirth with immortality and remembrance and happiness, as they think, for all time to come; while others are pregnant in soul...and these are pregnant with what is fitting for a soul to bear and bring to birth. And what is fitting? Wisdom and the rest of virtue, which all poets beget, as well as all the craftsmen who are said to be creative” (*Symposium* 208e-209a).

# Some themes

- Diotima identifies reproducing children as one way by which mortal nature aims to immortalize itself (pregnancy in body),
- Yet Diotima also identifies other modes of reproduction, viz., giving birth to wisdom and virtue (pregnancy in soul).
  - Such excellences can be embodied in works that we generate, e.g., poems and works of craft.
  - Such excellences can be embodied in other people on whom we have a beneficial influence.
- Thus, Diotima identifies two ways of *leaving a legacy* as a way of approximating the immortal. We can thereby both flourish and come to terms with mortality.

# Comparing Diotima and Confucius

- Recall Confucius: the filial son follows “the ways of his father” for three years after his father dies.
- Diotima suggests that our ethical influence on others can be a way by which we can live on posthumously.
- Thus, both identify ways in which we can pass on a legacy, viz., through care and education of others.

# A Platonic takeaway

- If Plato's Diotima is right, one who faces death might reflect on options one has to leave a legacy.
- Such legacies can encompass
  - one's actual children (if one has them);
  - the various works and achievements in life that will outlast one (one's "children" in an extended sense);
  - whatever personal influence on one's friends, family, children, and community by which one has exercised a positive influence on others (i.e., by which one has given birth to wisdom and virtue in others).
- In these ways, Diotima suggests, a mortal can transcend mortality as far as possible.

# Epictetus' key distinction

- “Some things are up to us and some are not up to us.”
  - Up to us: our opinions, impulses, desires, aversions.
  - Not up to us: our bodies, our possessions, our reputations, our public offices.
- “So remember, if you think that things...not your own are your own, you will be thwarted, miserable, and upset, and will blame both gods and men. But if you think that only what is yours is yours, and that what is not your own is, just as it is, not your own, then...you will not be harmed at all” (*Handbook* 1; trans. N. White).



# Some themes

- Recognize what's under your immediate control (e.g., your thoughts and judgments) and what isn't (e.g., the health and condition of your body; the thoughts and judgments of other people).
  - Cf. the serenity prayer.
- Flourishing results from choosing and acting in accord with this distinction; frustration results from viewing what is not up to you as if it were.

# Epictetus' Stoic perspective on mortality and loss

- “[D]eath is nothing dreadful...but instead, the judgment about death that it is dreadful—that is what is dreadful” (*Handbook* 5).
- “You are foolish if you want your children and your wife and your friends to live forever, since you are wanting things to be up to you that are not up to you, and things to be yours that are not yours” (*Handbook* 14).

# Some themes

- Your life and death are not wholly under your control. The lives and deaths of your loved ones are also out of your control.
  - Hence, thinking death is under your control is foolish.
- Your judgments about death, however, are up to you.
  - Hence, a wise approach to death (i) recognizes that death is out of one's control and (ii) views death as neutral.
- Keeping this outlook, you can confront death (your own/of others) with tranquility.
- Cf. Zhuangzi: death is part of the larger scheme of things; so, accept it and go with the flow of things.

# Epictetus on grieving with others

- “When you see someone weeping in grief at the departure of his child or the loss of his property, take care not to be carried away by the appearance that the externals he is involved in are bad, and be ready to say immediately, ‘What weights down on this man is not what has happened (since it does not weigh down on someone else), but his judgment about it.’ Do not hesitate, however, to sympathize with him verbally, and even to moan with him if the occasion arises; but be careful not to moan inwardly” (*Handbook* 16).

# Questioning Stoicism

- To consider: Even if Epictetus is right that we should recognize the difference between what is, and what isn't, under our control, does the Stoic outlook go wrong in not according *any value* to what is out of our control?
- To consider: Diotima suggests that we can transcend mortality, in a way, through approximation. Epictetus suggests that we should accept mortality as inescapable, but not dreadful. Does one of these approaches seem more appealing than the other? Do other approaches seem still more appealing?

# Part III: The *Bhagavad Gita* on equanimity through discipline in performing duties

# The dramatic setting of the *Bhagavad Gita*

The events on the battle field, recounted by Sanjaya to Dhritarashtra:

*Dhritarashtra:*

“Sanjaya, tell me what my sons  
and the sons of Pandu did when they met,  
wanting to battle on the field of Kuru,  
on the field of sacred duty” (*Bhagavad Gita* 1.1; trans. B. Stoler Miller)

# Arjuna's crisis in a nutshell

- Arjuna – who occupies the social role of warrior – is duty-bound to fight battles: Arjuna's performing his role plays a part in holding the society together (just as other people's performing their roles does the same).
- Yet Arjuna foresees the horrors that will result from his fighting a battle against his treacherous cousins (the Kauravas).
- Arjuna's temptation: to hide out on the sidelines and not go to battle.
- Krishna – Arjuna's charioteer – faces the task of convincing Arjuna to fight.



# Krishna's exhortation to Arjuna: *Bhagavad Gita* 2.11-12

“You grieve for those beyond grief,  
and you speak words of insight;  
but learned men do not grieve  
for the dead or the living

“Never have I not existed,  
nor you, nor these kings;  
and never in the future  
shall we cease to exist.”

# Krishna on the true self: *Bhagavad Gita* 2.18

“Our bodies are known to end,  
but the embodied self is enduring,  
indestructible, and immeasurable;  
therefore, Arjuna, fight the battle!”

# Some themes

- Arjuna thinks that the self is bodily: the destruction of the body brings about the destruction of the self.
- Krishna argues that the self is actually non-bodily and indestructible.
- Hence, to destroy a body in battle is not to destroy the self.
- NB: If Krishna is right, then perhaps we're not mortal, after all.
  - Influential commentators on the *Gita* debate whether Krishna thinks that there exists (i) a plurality of individual indestructible incorporeal selves or (ii) only one indestructible incorporeal self.

# Krishna on the discipline of action (*karma yoga*): *Bhagavad Gita* 2.47-48

“Be intent on action,  
not on the fruits of action;  
avoid attraction to the fruits  
and attachment to inaction!

“Perform actions, firm in discipline [*yoga*],  
relinquishing attachment;  
be impartial to failure and success—  
this equanimity is called discipline.”

# Some themes

- Krishna's diagnosis: Arjuna is focused not on his action as such, but on the *fruits* of his action.
- Krishna's view: focusing on the fruits of action is misguided.
- Krishna's advice: Arjuna should take up a new outlook on his action.
  - Arjuna should detach himself from outcomes.
  - Instead, Arjuna should perform his action *as* the sort of action that is fitting for Arjuna, *as* a warrior, to perform, in the context in which he is duty-bound to perform it.

# Action and equanimity

- Like soldiers, we all have roles that are essential to our societies.
- Yet performing these roles can sometimes be difficult. We often foresee unpleasant outcomes. (Thus, we want to avoid our duties.)
- Krishna's thought: "For you to fail to perform the duty that pertains to your role is for you, to that extent, to throw society into disorder. Don't forget the big picture!"
- Krishna's advice: "Don't fixate on outcomes that are outside of your sphere of concern. Instead, stand up, perform your duty properly, and do what your role requires, even if the results are unpleasant."
- Performing one's role in this disciplined way conduces to equanimity.

Scenarios for discussion and sharing