

Is Life Nasty, Brutish, and Short? Philosophies of Life and Well-Being

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Abstract

Three studies examine the extent to which laypeople endorse Hobbes's (1651/1960) view of life as "nasty, brutish, and short" and explore the relationships between this philosophy and well-being. Participants answered two binary choice questions: Is life short or long? And, is life easy or hard? Across a series of studies, the majority of participants indicated that they believed that life is short and hard, while the opposite philosophy, that life is long and easy, was least popular. In addition, these philosophies were correlated with participants' views of their lives: the short-hard philosophy was associated with lower levels of well-being (Studies 1 through 3), civic engagement (Study 2), and optimism about the future (Study 3), compared to the long-easy philosophy.

Keywords

well-being, happiness, experimental philosophy, worldviews

Ask yourself two questions: Is life short, or long? Is life easy, or hard? If you are like most respondents in the studies we report below, you endorsed the depressing view suggested by Hobbes in *Leviathan* (1651/1960)—that the life of man is “nasty, brutish, and short”—by answering that life is both short and hard. Indeed, Hobbes's claim about the natural state of man was the starting point for a century-long debate among the most prominent philosophers of his time, with Kant (1795/1983) and Rousseau (1762/1968) supporting Hobbes's view, but Locke (1690/1967) in opposition; as such, Hobbes's view has been called “a staple of Western political theory” (Bergen, 2010). While the philosophical debate revolved around whether civic organization was required to safeguard people's well-being given their brutish nature, we take a different approach to this classic debate, instead asking whether laypeople's endorsement of the Hobbesian view impacts their well-being and their civic engagement. We expected that the majority of people would endorse Hobbes's short and hard philosophy, while only a small percentage would endorse the opposite and more optimistic view that life is long and easy; in addition, we explored whether holding the short and hard philosophy is associated with individuals being less happy with and engaged in their lives—again when compared to those individuals who hold the “anti-Hobbesian view” that life is long and easy.

Broadly speaking, people's views of their lives are an important predictor of their subjective well-being, over and above their objective life circumstances (Diener, 1984; Diener & Seligman, 2004; Ray, 2004). Indeed, while initial research focused on objective life circumstances—such as income and

marital status—as predictors of happiness, an influential new model of happiness suggests that just 10% of people's well-being is related to objective circumstances, while as much as 40% depends on how people choose to view and engage with the world around them (Lyubomirsky, Sheldon, & Schkade, 2005). This provocative theoretical notion—that the way people choose to view the world may be largely independent of their own objective experiences—has received support in numerous domains; for example, individuals' lay theories about the fairness of the world are often independent of the fairness of their own objective outcomes (Jost & Banaji, 1994; Lerner, 1980). Likewise, we suggest that people may hold lay theories about life that are independent of the extent to which their own lives have been easy or hard, short or long. Most importantly, we suggest that these lay theories manifest in the activities in which people choose to engage in their everyday lives—through civic engagement—and are predictive of their subjective well-being.

But are the two dimensions that Hobbes identified—easy-hard and short-long—those that laypeople bring to bear in

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Table 1. Life Philosophies and Happiness (Study 1)

		Long–Easy	Long–Hard	Short–Easy	Short–Hard
North America	% Endorsing this philosophy	13	18	18	51
	Average happiness	3.88 (.64)	3.64 (.67)	3.64 (.67)	3.06 (.73)
India	% Endorsing this philosophy	15	18	22	45
	Average happiness	3.89 (.60)	3.55 (.82)	3.77 (.73)	2.93 (.68)

determining their own philosophies of life? Certainly, psychologists have explored both temporal (short–long) and valenced dichotomies (easy–hard) as important predictors of well-being. First, people’s views of whether they have a lot or a little time left impact their strategies for managing friendships, thereby shaping well-being (Carstensen, Isaacowitz, & Charles, 1999; Kurtz, 2008; Liu & Aaker, 2007). In addition, thoughts of death—the ultimate marker of time being short—have been shown to impact a wide range of judgments and behaviors (Greenberg, Solomon, & Pyszczynski, 1997). Second, people’s views of life as effortful (i.e., hard) have been linked to their beliefs about what constitutes a good life (King, Hicks, Krull, & Del Gaiso, 2006; Scollon & King, 2004), while the feeling of conquering difficult tasks is an important component of people’s self-worth (Bandura, 1977).

If truly central to people’s philosophies of life, we would expect these dimensions to appear not just in the research of scholars, but in popular culture—the writings of philosophers, poets, and lyricists—and in laypeople’s reports of their everyday views of life. First, both dimensions are echoed in the writings of philosophers, poets, and lyricists; the Western canon is replete with such references, ranging from Hippocrates writing about the “*vita brevis*” around 400 BC, to Chaucer bemoaning “the lyf so short” in the 1300s, to George Gershwin penning that “the living is easy” in the 1930s. In 2009 alone, two renowned songwriters released songs endorsing opposing views, with David Byrne singing that “life is easy” but Bob Dylan that “life is hard.” As a preliminary empirical test of the centrality of these dimensions, we conducted a pilot study to examine whether these dimensions are reflective of people’s everyday views of life, asking participants ($N = 308$; 52% female, $M_{\text{age}} = 43.5$, $SD = 18.0$) to finish the statement “*Life is _____*” six times. While the range of responses was wide and occasionally amusing (with many people reiterating the wisdom of Forrest Gump), some 62% of participants listed at least one of our four keywords: short, long, easy, or hard. In addition to demonstrating the frequency with which these dimensions come to mind in an open-ended format, this pretest provided our first evidence that Hobbes’s view might be consensually held: Of the 112 participants who listed either easy or hard, some 96% listed hard; of the 73 who wrote short or long, some 86% listed short.

Overview

We examine both the relative popularity of the short and hard life philosophy and its associations with well-being and civic

engagement; as our comparison philosophy, we use the opposite philosophy, that life is long and easy. In Studies 1 through 3, we explore the prevalence of different life philosophies and their correlates with well-being by asking participants to answer two questions—one asking whether they think life is easy or hard, and a second asking whether they think life is short or long—before completing a measure of life satisfaction. In Study 2, we explore the link between these philosophies and people’s everyday lives, examining how these life views are related to civic engagement: charitable donations, volunteering, and voting. Finally, in Study 3, we explore whether endorsement of these different philosophies is more tightly linked to people’s *objective* life circumstances—how brutish their lives are—or their *subjective* life circumstances—how brutish they feel their lives are, as our account predicts.

Study 1: Philosophies and Happiness

In Study 1, using a diverse sample, we sought to establish that Hobbes’s view is consensually held and associated with lower happiness.

Method and Results

A sample of 121 individuals from North America ($n = 60$; $M_{\text{age}} = 31.1$, $SD = 8.6$) and India ($n = 61$; $M_{\text{age}} = 29.0$, $SD = 8.0$) were recruited for a survey about life in exchange for monetary compensation through Amazon’s Mechanical Turk service; this service has been shown to produce samples comparable to other methodologies (Buhrmester, Kwang, & Gosling, 2011). Participants answered the question “Do you feel happy, in general?” on a 5-point scale (1 = *no* to 5 = *yes*; Abdel-Khalek, 2006). They then answered two binary choice questions assessing their views of life: “Is life short, or long?” (and could select either “short” or “long”) and “Is life easy, or hard?” (and could select either “easy” or “hard”). Participants’ responses to these two binary choice questions results in four life philosophies: those who made choices indicating their belief that life is short and hard, short and easy, long and hard, or long and easy.

Philosophies. Across both the North American and Indian samples, the short-hard philosophy was most popular (48%) and long-easy was least popular (14%), $\chi^2(3) = 34.80$, $p < .001$, $\phi = .31$. This pattern was strikingly similar across samples, such that the difference in endorsement of philosophies within each sample was significant, $\chi^2_s > 13.32$, $ps < .01$, but the difference between samples was not, $\chi^2(3) = .49$, $p = .92$ (Table 1).

Happiness. We use planned contrasts to test the difference in happiness between these Hobbesian and “anti-Hobbesian” views. As predicted, the most popular philosophy—short-hard—was associated with the lowest happiness ($M = 3.00$, $SD = .70$) while the happiest people were those who held the opposing long-easy philosophy ($M = 3.88$, $SD = .60$), $t(73) = 4.70$, $p < .001$, Cohen’s $d = 1.35$. In both samples, long-easy participants were happiest and short-hard participants were least happy, $t_s > 2.87$, $p_s < .01$ (Table 1).

Study 2: Philosophies and Civic Engagement

In Study 2, we widen the lens of our exploration, examining how life philosophies relate to civic engagement in a nationally representative sample. We explore three behaviors associated with engagement, each of which has been explored for its link to well-being: Charitable donations (Dunn, Aknin, & Norton, 2008), volunteering (Thoits & Hewitt, 2001), and voting (Putnam, 2000). We expected that the short-hard philosophy would be the most popular but associated with low levels of engagement, while the long-easy philosophy would be the least popular but associated with high engagement. In addition, while the results of Study 1 suggest that the life philosophies that people endorse are linked to their happiness, this association may have been inflated because participants reported their life philosophy before rating their happiness. In Study 2, we counterbalance the order of the life philosophy and life satisfaction questions.

Method

A sample of 342 Americans (56% male, $M_{\text{age}} = 37.7$, $SD = 13.38$) completed an online survey, earning points redeemable for prizes; participants were randomly selected from a survey panel of 2.5 million respondents reflecting the gender, age, education level, and income distribution in the 2000 US Census. Participants reported whether they thought life was easy or hard, and short or long, and completed the Satisfaction With Life Scale (SWLS; Diener, Emmons, Larsen, & Griffin, 1985). To assess civic engagement, we asked participants whether they had volunteered for any organization in the last 2 years, donated money to any organization in the last year, and voted in each of the last three national elections. Item order was counterbalanced, and did not impact the analyses below.

Results

Philosophies. Most participants (61%) endorsed the short-hard philosophy, while the long-easy philosophy (6%) was again least popular, $\chi^2(3) = 240.41$, $p < .001$, $\phi = .48$ (Table 2).

Life satisfaction. Short-hard respondents reported significantly lower life satisfaction ($M = 3.95$, $SD = 1.41$) than long-easy respondents ($M = 5.34$, $SD = 1.26$), $t(338) = 4.46$, $p < .001$, Cohen’s $d = 1.04$.

Civic engagement. We found significant differences in self-reported acts of civic engagement between adherents of the two

Table 2. Life Philosophies, Well-Being, and Civic Engagement (Study 2)

	Long-Easy	Long-Hard	Short-Easy	Short-Hard
% Endorsing this philosophy	6	16	17	61
Life satisfaction	5.34 (1.26)	3.89 (1.48)	4.77 (1.11)	3.95 (1.41)
% Volunteering	80	50	36	48
% Donating	87	75	76	55
% Voting	85	60	66	57

Note: % Volunteering, % Donating, and % Voting indicate the percentage of participants endorsing each life view that reported volunteering for any organization in the last 2 years, donating to any organization in the last year, and voting in each of the last three national elections.

opposing life philosophies (Table 2). Those who held the long-easy philosophy were more likely to report volunteering and donating money than those who supported the short-hard philosophy, $t(172) = 2.34$, $p = .02$, Cohen’s $d = 0.70$, and $t(172) = 2.45$, $p < .02$, Cohen’s $d = 0.74$, respectively. Similarly, those who supported the long-easy philosophy also reported voting marginally more than those who viewed life as short and hard, $t(172) = 1.84$, $p = .06$, Cohen’s $d = 0.59$.

Study 3: Subjective or Objective Life Philosophies?

Our account suggests that life philosophies are based not on people’s objective life experiences, but on their subjective views of life and the ways those views shape how they engage with the world (Lyubomirsky et al., 2005). In Study 3, we gather additional support for this proposition by asking participants to indicate whether a series of positive and negative events have happened to them in the *past*, and to rate their beliefs about whether those events are likely to happen to them in the *future*. If endorsement of different philosophies is driven by objective life circumstances, we would expect occurrence of previous events to track with philosophies; if our view is correct, however, past positive and negative life events should not predict these life philosophies, but these life philosophies should predict beliefs about the likelihood that positive and negative events will occur in the future.

Method

A sample of 171 students in Boston (69% female, $M_{\text{age}} = 20.2$, $SD = 2.9$) and Vancouver (54% female, $M_{\text{age}} = 22.7$, $SD = 5.3$) filled out an online survey about life in exchange for monetary compensation. As in the previous studies, participants reported whether they thought life was easy or hard, and short or long. In addition, they completed a series of questions that asked them about their past experiences of negative and positive events, and their beliefs about their likelihood of experiencing these events in the future (based on Weinstein, 1980; Table 3). Participants reported whether they had experienced each event in the past, and rated their likelihood of experiencing each event

Table 3. Life Philosophies and Actual and Predicted Experiences of Negative and Positive Life Events (Study 3)

	Long–Easy	Long–Hard	Short–Easy	Short–Hard
% Endorsing this philosophy	14	19	14	53
% Negative events experienced	29	29	35	34
Likelihood of negative events	3.11 (.93)	3.51 (.98)	3.65 (.58)	3.69 (.70)
% Positive events experienced	39	37	35	37
Likelihood of positive events	4.29 (1.22)	4.17 (.89)	4.42 (.69)	3.88 (1.03)

Note: Means for negative and positive events are averaged across items for negative events (break a bone, get the flu, insomnia, tooth decay, automobile accident, diabetes, sunstroke, food poisoning, unexpected death of a loved one, accident at work/school, laryngitis, ulcer, mugging, arthritis) and positive events (get married, win the lottery, receive an award).

compared to their peers in the future on a 7-point scale (1 = *much below average* to 7 = *much above average*). We counterbalanced whether these items with the life philosophy questions; item order did not impact the analyses below.

Results

Philosophies. The short–hard philosophy (53%) was most popular and the long–easy philosophy (14%) tied with short–easy for least popular, $\chi^2(3) = 69.10, p < .001, \phi = .37$ (Table 3).

Past and future events. As expected, the actual occurrence of past negative and positive events did not vary between adherents of the long–easy and short–hard life philosophies, $t(163) = 1.19, p = .23$, Cohen's $d = .34$, and $t(163) = .46, p = .65$, Cohen's $d = .12$, respectively. Consistent with our account, however, short–hard people saw themselves as more likely to experience bad things in the future ($M = 3.69, SD = .70$) than long–easy people ($M = 3.12, SD = .93$), $t(162) = 3.18, p = .002$, Cohen's $d = .69$; they also viewed themselves as marginally less likely to experience good things in the future ($M = 3.88, SD = 1.03$) than long–easy people ($M = 4.29, SD = 1.23$), $t(162) = -1.79, p = .07$, Cohen's $d = .36$.

Study 3 offers evidence that the philosophies we identify reflect broad subjective views of life, rather than objective life circumstances. A majority of people endorsed the short–hard philosophy, and their experiences of actual positive and negative events did not predict differences in their philosophies—but these philosophies did predict their subjective views of what life would hold in the future.

General Discussion

Our research adds to other recent empirical investigations exploring the psychological underpinnings of philosophical assertions (e.g., Greene, Sommerville, Nystrom, Darley, & Cohen, 2001; Knobe & Nichols, 2008) by examining the psychological correlates of one of the most cited and contentious philosophical assertions. While the philosophical debate about the extent to which the natural state of human life is nasty, brutish, and short remains unresolved, and despite the fact that Hobbes—even in 1651—was looking back to a time when life for our ancestors was bleak and brief, our studies demonstrate that the personal philosophy of life as short and hard continues

to be popular. In contrast, the converse life philosophy (long and easy) remains a comparatively niche view. Across diverse samples, people who endorse the short–hard philosophy are least happy, while those who hold the opposite long–easy philosophy are happiest (Studies 1 through 3). These philosophies are associated with civic engagement, in the form of donating money, volunteering, and voting (Study 2), and appear to reflect general, subjective views of life, rather than the objective circumstances of people's own lives (Study 3).

While we have argued that the dimensions we explore (long/short and hard/easy) reflect fundamental philosophies of life, it is conceivable that these dimensions simply reflect a more general view of life as good or bad. To establish the unique contribution of our dimensions, a separate group of participants ($N = 91$; 44% female, $M_{\text{age}} = 31.3, SD = 10.9$) completed a survey via Amazon's Mechanical Turk in which they answered three counterbalanced questions about their life views on 7-point scales—"is life easy or hard?" (1 = *easy* to 7 = *hard*); "is life long or short?" (1 = *long* to 7 = *short*); "is life good or bad?" (1 = *good* to 7 = *bad*)—and rated their happiness on the scale used in Study 1. Participants' ratings of life as long/short and easy/hard were not correlated with their ratings of life as good/bad (all $r_s < .10$, all $p_s > .10$); most importantly, when we entered the three dimensions into a regression equation predicting happiness, we found that ratings of life as short/long, $\beta = -.21, p = .03$, and easy/hard, $\beta = -.26, p < .01$, significantly predicted happiness when controlling for views of life as good/bad, $\beta = -.10, p = .03$. These analyses suggest that our dimensions of length and difficulty are uncorrelated with, and predict happiness over and above, views of life as good or bad. Because our primary interest was in contrasting the popular Hobbesian philosophy (short–hard) with its converse (long–easy), we used planned contrasts in each study, but these supplementary data demonstrate that difficulty and length predict well-being independently (as does the good–bad distinction). As a result, we also conducted 2×2 analysis of variance (ANOVAs) with the two dimensions—difficulty and length—as factors. In Study 1, we observed main effects of both difficulty and length ($p_s < .01$), but only main effects for difficulty ($p_s < .01$) but not length ($p_s > .20$) in Studies 2 and 3; there were no significant interactions (Study 1: $p > .23$; Study 2: $p > .12$; Study 3: $p > .66$). Thus, although we observed the most striking and

consistent patterns by contrasting the dominant Hobbesian philosophy with its converse, more research is needed to further explore the unique impact of each dimension using continuous measures.

The patterns that we observe are particularly surprising in that the majority of people across our samples endorse the life philosophy associated with the most negative outcomes—in apparent contrast to the large body of research demonstrating that people hold positive illusions (Alicke & Sedikides, 2009; Myers & Diener, 1995; Taylor & Brown, 1988). We note that overall, our participants do express positive beliefs: Across all the studies, participants reported well-being near or above the midpoint of our measures, while in Study 3, participants saw themselves as more likely to experience future positive events ($M = 4.07$, $SD = 1.01$) than future negative events ($M = 3.57$, $SD = .80$), $t(165) = 4.80$, $p < .001$. Within these overall patterns, however, we still find consistent evidence that short-hard people are least likely to hold these optimistic views, and long-easy people most likely. In Study 3, for example, adherents of all philosophies believed that they would experience significantly more positive than negative events, all $t_s > 3.10$, all $p_s < .01$, except for those endorsing the short-hard life philosophy—who believed that positive and negative events were equally likely, $t(87) = 1.36$, $p > .17$.

In sum, we show that by assessing people's life philosophies with two simple questions, we can predict a great deal about how they view their lives—in both the present and the future. Our results demonstrate that viewing life as short and hard is associated with lower levels of well-being, civic engagement, and optimism about the future, when compared to viewing life as long and easy.

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