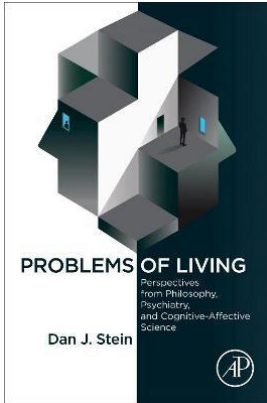




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Problems of living: Perspectives from philosophy, psychiatry and cognitive-affective science



AUTHOR:

Dan Stein

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REVIEWER:

Anton A. van Niekerk^{1,2}

AFFILIATIONS:

¹Philosophy Department, Stellenbosch University, Stellenbosch, South Africa

²Director – Centre for Applied Ethics, Stellenbosch University, Stellenbosch, South Africa

EMAIL:

aavn@sun.ac.za

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Interdisciplinary perspectives on the traditional 'big' questions of philosophy

Dan Stein, Professor and Head of the Department of Psychiatry at the University of Cape Town, is one of South Africa's most outstanding academics. His research output is beyond prolific. He is the most cited author in South African academia; his Google *h*-index is > 145. He holds doctorates in medicine, psychiatry and philosophy, and has built his department into an internationally acclaimed centre of excellence.

Problems of Living must be acknowledged as one of the most remarkable achievements to which his already acclaimed accolades attest. It is an excellent example of what can be achieved in terms of interdisciplinary work, when this work is the outcome, not of a dilettante, but of a true specialist in different fields – in this case psychiatry, philosophy and neuroscience.

That an author of such distinction writes a book of such erudition (308 pages, 1984 references and a voluminous array of footnotes – the latter mainly for the sake of acknowledging the possible literature that could be consulted on almost every topic that he covers) is enough to intimidate readers. Yet, that does not happen. Stein is knowingly or unknowingly a member of a growing group of leading academics (akin to the Dutch philosopher Paul van Tongeren) who write, not for the sake of displaying accomplished erudition, but primarily for the sake of producing work that is accessible to both an academic and a popular readership. Without claiming that Stein has achieved this consistently and throughout the entire book, the effort as it stands is a quite remarkable achievement.

What this reviewer appreciated more than everything else, is Stein's conviction that the traditional 'big' questions of philosophy – What is the relation between reason and passion? Is there any sense in pain and suffering? How can we distinguish between good and bad? When are we dealing with truth? What is the meaning of life? – are not only still valid, but can be approached from a variety of the interdisciplinary perspectives, and that significant (or at least notable) progress can be made with such an enterprise, without any claim that all questions have been definitively or adequately answered.

The book unfolds in nine chapters. After the introduction, which deals with general psychiatric and philosophical perspectives on raising the 'big questions', Chapter 2 deals with the enigmatic issue of the nature of and relationship (if any!) between 'brain' and 'mind'. His argumentation in this chapter brings Stein to the point where he decides that the distinction confuses more than it clarifies. He decides to move along with his newly coined notion of 'brain-mind' – a construct that accommodates both aspects without finally clarifying all the conceptual and anatomic conundrums of the original distinction.

Chapter 3 is about the relationship between reason and passion, followed by Chapter 4 on 'The pleasures of life'. Here he carefully analyses the philosophical and psychiatric dimensions of happiness and does not hesitate to push the analysis through to an effort to understand real concrete pleasures, such as food and drink, play and music, exercise and running, and physical and natural beauty. Chapter 5 deals with the perplexing matter of pain and suffering, Chapter 6 with the distinction between good and bad and the nature and challenges of morality, and Chapter 7 with the issue that formatted both classical and modern philosophy more than anything else, namely the difference between truth and falsity.

Any reader that has made it to this point, cannot but be overawed by the prospect of the second last chapter – Stein's analysis of the meaning of life itself. Space does not allow me to elaborate on the plethora of surprising and useful insights that this chapter delivers. What this reviewer appreciates the most, though, is Stein's achievement in breaking down to manageable proportions a question that many philosophers, particularly from the analytical tradition, deem unanswerable, due to both its complexity and its tendency to evaporate into subjectivity. One quotation will hopefully demonstrate the profundity of insight that, in this chapter, Stein so amply demonstrates: "One useful contrast is between approaches that focus on the understandability of life (or determining the *meaning of life*) versus approaches that focus on what makes a life worthwhile (or finding *meaning in life*)" (p. 200, Stein's italics).

This quotation is indicative of the way in which Stein diffuses the argument that reflecting on the meaning of life is a waste of time. We mostly know what we know on the basis of the analysis of issues into smaller, manageable parts, as happens in most of the sciences. The quote above, however, illustrates that philosophy does distinguish itself from the other sciences in that its questions neither coincide with the formal questions of mathematics, nor with the empirical questions of the sciences. Philosophy deals with another kind of question. The complexity of that other kind of question cannot now be fleshed out, except to insist that that question sometimes is about wholes rather than parts – wholes such as the (meaning of) the totality of life and the universe itself.

The last chapter is 'Metaphors of life'. Here the term 'life', which we also find in the title of the book, figures most prominently. We are thereby reminded of what the book in first and last instance is about, namely the investigation of a range of interdisciplinary foci from both the human and the applied sciences on the variety of actual problems that we encounter in our efforts to live the lives of ordinary people on a daily basis. Stein rightly acknowledges the significance of the phenomenon of metaphor – that remarkable cognitive disposition that, as Aristotle saw for the first time, enables us to see similarities in dissimilars, and to thereby access meaning via the juxtaposition of entities that seemingly and *prima facie* have nothing in common: 'Brevity is the soul of wit'; 'There is a tide in the affairs of men which, taken at the flood, leads on to fortune', to quote only two of these remarkable cognitive instruments provided by Shakespeare. In this last chapter, Stein investigates metaphors such as 'life as a game', 'life as a story or narrative', 'parenting as gardening', life as either a cycle or as growth, development and progression, and, inevitably, life as a journey.

Whether the journey metaphor is the most appropriate for our understanding of life, remains to be seen. There can, however, be no doubt that reading Stein's book is a journey through a masterpiece. It is one of the most enriching experiences that this reviewer has had in a long time.