

# NOTIONS OF ART-OF-LIVING

## Introduction to this special issue

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The term 'art-of-living' refers to the knack of leading a good life and is used in different contexts. In philosophy it denotes mostly living a virtuous life and is associated with morality and wisdom, whilst in psychology, the expression designates adequate coping and happiness. In daily language, the phrase indicates a joyous way of life. In lifestyle magazines it refers to a blissful jet-set life but the term is also used for the cultivation of more every day pleasures.

The idea of 'art-of-living' refers to a precondition for a good life in the first place, but is also seen as part of that. A wisely lived life is typically seen as a good life even if it ends in tragedy.

The notion can be elucidated when compared with other notions of 'quality-of-life'. I presented a fourfold classification of quality-of-life concepts in the inaugural issue of this journal (Veenhoven 2000); this taxonomy is summarized in **scheme 1**.

Scheme1  
**Four qualities of life**

	<i>Outer qualities</i>	<i>Inner qualities</i>
<i>Life chances</i>	<b>Livability of environment</b>	<b>Life-ability of the person</b>
<i>Life results</i>	<b>Utility of life</b>	<b>Enjoyment of life</b>

In this scheme, art-of-living belongs in the top row. The concept denotes an opportunity for a good life, but not necessarily a positive outcome of life. With bad luck life can become difficult, despite considerable art of living. Within the top row, the must be placed in the 'life-ability' quadrant. Art-of-living is an inner quality relevant for dealing with outer conditions. Still there are different variants of this concept. The scheme can also help to place these. There is a difference in the links with the two bottom quadrants and difference in the top-right quadrant. I will consider these variants below.

### Art for what?

The term 'art-of-living' is associated with different outcomes of life, sometimes it denotes a proficiency for leading a useful life in the first place (left bottom quadrant), while on other occasions the focus is on a knack for enjoying life (right bottom quadrant). Since these outcomes require different capabilities, these notions should not be confused.

#### *Useful life*

In moral philosophy, the term 'art-of-living' is often associated with living a morally good life and living in an exemplary way. Florence Nightingale is an icon of this notion. In a functional perspective, the goodness of such a life is in its usefulness for the environment and in particular for the social environment. The example of Florence Nightingale illustrates that such a useful life is not necessarily an enjoyable life, though she helped a lot of people and set an example, she seems to have been rather neurotic and unhappy. The slanted arrow left in **scheme 2** denotes the connotation between inner abilities and outer utility.

Joep Dohmen elaborates this variant in his paper '*Philosophers about Art of Living*', in particular in the section on 'value orientation'. He reviews modern philosophers who see art-of-living as living up to one's own, well considered, principles.

This meaning is also touched upon in my own paper on '*Arts of Living*'; especially in the section about abilities required for leading a 'virtuous' life. My argument is that different virtues call for different capabilities and hence that every ideology has its own art of living.

#### *Rewarding life*

In common language, the term art-of-living refers mostly to the ability to lead a rewarding life and carries connotations of sensory pleasure, practical wisdom and being fully functional. Casanova is exemplary for this notion. His case also illustrates that utility and enjoyment of life may diverge. The vertical arrow right in **scheme 2** denotes this hedonic variant. Most contributions in this issue use the term in this meaning.

Abbe, Tkach and Lyubomirsky address this variant in their contribution on '*The Art of Living by Dispositionally Happy People*'. The focus of this article is on happiness and in particular on how people maintain a positive outlook on their life. External utility of life is not an issue.

Tatzel's paper on '*The Art of Buying*' is also about the art of leading a rewarding life. The question is how consumer behavior affects wellbeing.

My own contributions in this issue are also about this art-of-living variant. My paper on '*Arts Of Living*' deals largely with the abilities required for a happy life and my paper on '*Happiness and Hedonism*' is about the effect of a pleasure-oriented lifestyle on happiness.

### What kind of arts?

In the broadest sense, the term art-of-living denotes all life-abilities and covers the entire right-top quadrant in **scheme 1**. In this all-inclusive meaning it is practically the same as what the biologists call 'fitness' and is tantamount to wide notions of 'health'. When used in this sense, the term covers various basic abilities, such as the ability to breathe, speak and eat. Mere physical health is then also part of the art-of-living. Mostly, the term denotes more specific capabilities.

#### *Mental skill*

Psychologists use the term mostly to denote the mental skills that are required for optimal functioning. In this use of the term, art-of-living is more than mere absence of mental

disorder; it denotes presence of competence. As such it is 'positive' concept, like 'vigor' and 'talent'.

The contribution by Abbe, Tkach and Lyubomirsky on '*The art of Living by Dispositionally Happy People*' is about this variant. The article describes how happy people think and decide, and how this helps them to take pleasure from life without losing control. One of the necessary knacks appears to be the independence of their judgments.

Mental skill is also central on Dohmen's paper on '*Philosophers about Art-of-Living*'. He shows that modern philosophers see the good life primarily as a matter of reflective autonomy and emphasizes that the art of living is in continuous development of one's ideas about oneself and one's place in the world. Philosophers tend to equate the good life with the life of a philosopher.

This meaning is also central in my own contribution on '*Arts-of-Living*', in particular in the section on psychological requirements for leading a happy life. I conclude that this set of mental skills equals current conceptions of 'positive mental health'.

### *Life style*

In daily language, the term is used for a way of life and in particular for a life style that maximizes rewarding experiences. In this sense, the French speak of 'bon vivant'. This notion is associated with pleasure seeking, but it also has connotations with refinement and originality. In this context, art-of-living is also linked to an active approach to life, rather than to passive indulgence.

Though the leading of a rewarding life requires mental capabilities, good mental skills do not automatically result in an appropriate life style. It is even possible that troubled people find a particular way of life that allows them to lead a satisfying existence.

This variant is addressed in the article on '*The Art of Buying*' by Miriam Tatzel, which compares consumer life styles and explores the probable effects on happiness.

This subject matter is also central in my own contribution on '*Hedonism and Happiness*'. This article deals with a longstanding controversy about the merits of pleasure seeking and in particular with the claim that a hedonistic way of life is harmful to happiness in the long run. As we will see, there is no empirical support for this ominous assertion.

Scheme 2  
**Notions of art-of-living**

	<i>Outer qualities</i>	<i>Inner qualities</i>
<i>Life chances</i>	Livability of environment	Life-ability of the person <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Physical health</li> <li>• <b>Mental skill</b></li> <li>• <b>Life-style skills</b></li> </ul>
<i>Life results</i>	Utility of life	Enjoyment of life

In the top row of the scheme we see livability of the environment (top left) next to the life-ability of the person (top right). These matters are of course related; specific environments require specific abilities. So there can be contingencies in the effects that are indicated by the arrows in the scheme. Possibly the skills required for leading a pleasant life differ somewhat across cultures. In that context, the reader should note that the papers in this issue concern present day western society in the first place. Variations in required abilities are only mentioned in passing.

**Aim of this issue**

This notion of art-of-living special issue is meant to introduce the notion of art-of-living in the study of happiness. The notion is promising since it can help to fill several white spots. First it opens another psychological dimension than the usual personality stuff and second it elucidates the relation between happiness and life-styles, which is ill understood as yet. Another promise is that art-of-living may be a practicable venue for intervention. Personality cannot be changed easily but appropriate skills can be learned to some extent. Hence it is worth knowing what these skills are and how they can be improved. The editors welcome further contributions on this subject.

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