

# Zest for Life

Xavier Vanmechelen

Sometimes it makes sense to exclaim ‘Live!’ to someone who lives. This sounds like a *koan*, but is not as puzzling as it seems. The speaker just wants to express that the addressee lacks zest for life. What is zest for life? It is an attitude towards life. It is the very basic attitude of embracing life and it manifests itself as vitality. A person having zest for life shows interest and enthusiasm. She is ready both to take action and to go through experiences. I owe the expression ‘zest for life’ to Bertrand Russell. In his *The Conquest of Happiness* he argued that zest is “the most universal and distinctive mark of happy men” (Russell 1930: 122). I believe that Russell has a point here. Zest for life is of utmost importance for a human being. Normative ethics – broadly conceived as the reflective activity in which one tries to answer the question what is really important when it comes to live the life of a human being – has to start with a plea for the virtue of zest for life. This at least is the claim I will be arguing for in this paper.

*Wrong place?* In Western imagery Caribbean culture is the archetype of zest for life. So the Cave Hill Campus of the UWI seems the wrong place to hold this plea. I would be a home match, so to speak, and therefore quite redundant. However, as always this imagery tells much more about who adopts it than about whom it concerns. Imagery is really not a fertile ground to start a dialogue. *Wrong topic?* A much more serious objection may be the inappropriateness of the topic in a world where the ethical deficit of global well-being – hunger and poverty claim 25,000 lives every day – and respect – think about the treatment of the Guantánamo detainees or about women’s world-wide deprivation of fundamental human rights – are much more precarious. I do not want to brush this objection aside. I only want to argue that the moral importance of zest for life is underestimated and I will indicate how it could be related to considerations of well-being and an attitude of respect. My starting point is the mental state in which zest for life has vanished completely: depression. Figures about the prevalence of clinical depression in the West are not the product of imagery, I fear.

## 1. Endemic depression: a Western concern?

Clinical depression is what psychiatrists call a mood disorder. The two major diagnostic systems for mental disorders – ICD-10 of the World Health Organization and DSM-IV of the American Psychiatric Association – are fairly in concert when it comes to describing clinical depression. A person affected by depression suffers for a long period a general loss of interest in daily and social activities she used to enjoy: she is listless, she is disinterested in life up to the point of feeling lifeless, her energy decreases, she is feeling tired, she oversleeps and loses appetite, she has difficulty concentrating and making decisions. It should be mentioned that this general loss of interest sometimes alternates with agitation or excitement: a depressive person can also be restless, feel anxious, keep moving around, be sleepless or overeat. Or, in my own terminology: either zest for life disappears or frenzy takes its place. A person affected by depression also feels sad: she is feeling empty, worthless and even guilty, she thinks she is helpless and hopeless, and she considers self-harm or even suicide. Clinical depression is a serious situation. It becomes even more serious when we examine its prevalence rate.

Depression actually affects 9,5 % of the Americans in any given year and 8,6 % of the Europeans at any moment. There is a remarkable gender difference in both regions: the prevalence rates for women are respectively 12 % and 10 %, for men 7 % and 6,6 % (NIHM; Ayoso-Mateos et al. 2001). 13 % of the people affected by depression commit suicide. According to the DALY-indicator<sup>1</sup> used by the World Health Organisation depression is the most important burden of disease in the United States and the third most important burden of disease in Europe. The prediction is that the relative importance of depression as burden of disease will increase. In non-Western regions the figures are less alarming (Üstün 2004). Of course one has to be wary of figures. The European study proves that there are huge differences between regions in Europe. And it is not true that depression is only a marginal problem in the rest of the world, especially not in the Middle East and the rest of the Americas. Moreover, it is well-known that symptoms of depression can vary by culture, so one should ask whether clinical depression is always diagnosed as such. Many more questions can be asked about this way of presentation. I only take these figures as an indication that Western society seems to struggle with a depressive state of mind (according to figures which are themselves the product of a Western approach).

Matters become still more slippery when we ask about the causes of depression. When it comes to explaining depression it is very common to take an 'ecumenical' stance. There are many factors explaining depressive periods in a human life: biological, psychic and social factors. The challenging question is: how do these factors relate? It is neither my aim to answer this question, nor to go into the different existing theories on depression. In line with the device of the symposium – "It is a function, indeed a duty, of philosophy in any society to examine the intellectual foundation of its culture." (Kwasi Wiredu) – I want to address the question: is there something in the attitude of Western culture towards zest for life which could help to explain the actual prevalence of depression in the West? I believe we can find a cue for an answer in Western ethics.

## **2. A Western ethical deficit**

There is no doubt that an important strand in Western culture is hostile to lust for life, which will be seen to be quintessential for the zest for life. Think about Plato's attitude towards desire. In his picturing a human being as a driver (reason) trying to control two horses (honour/pride and desire), it is the desirous horse which seems the prime candidate for bringing a human being to ruin. Add to this the Christian tradition in which the earth is the vale of tears in which because of one's sinfulness one will work in the sweat of one's face and for which lust (usually understood as sexual desire) is one of the seven deadly sins, and we have a setting which is quite hostile to zest for life. It is the tendency in Western culture which feels suspicious about being open to enjoy the basic activities and experiences of human life (many of which are joint activities and experiences) – e.g.: to eat, to drink, to work, to dialogue, to sing, to dance, to have sex, to learn, to rest, to feel the morning sun and the evening breeze, ... – or about being curious or adventurous. In this tradition zest for life is something to be curbed instead of stimulated. Human flourishing is dependent on one's capacity to control zest for life. That is what morality is all about, is it not? I do not believe that this tendency totally covers Western tradition. There has at least been always a marginal tendency of opposing this suspicious attitude towards zest for life. Think about the Cynic Diogenes of Sinope who highly valued the immediacy and the simplicity which are characteristic of zest for life: he spoke frankly, satisfied his desires immediately, he was

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<sup>1</sup> Disability adjusted life years (DALY) is the sum of the years lost due to premature mortality (YLL) and the years lost due to disability (YLD).

undaunted by the authorities and did not give a damn about public opinion. Think also about Friedrich Nietzsche who strongly opposed an ethics of obedience which he wanted to turn into an ethics of the will to power – which he described as the will to live as well – and for whom morality is an instrument of weak people to control strong people. Both point to an important deficit in mainstream morality and ethics, which is in my view a lack of recognition of the moral importance of zest for life. I prefer a less provocative version of their plea for zest for life which is in line with a contemporary discussion in normative ethics.

Modern ethical theory has been dominated by consequentialism – defending some or other version of Bentham’s utility principle, e.g.: the right action is the action that promotes maximum well-being – and Kantian ethics – defending some or other version of Kant’s categorical imperative, e.g.: the right action is the action which unconditionally respects all persons concerned. In the 1970’s and 1980’s one objected to these two theories that they were not able to account for some aspects of a human life which we nevertheless consider very important. To put it differently: it is possible to act perfectly in accordance with the principles of consequentialism and/or Kantian ethics, without being an admirable person. According to Michael Stocker modern ethical theory does not account for the importance of personal relationships of love, friendship, fellow feeling, and so on. For that reason he thinks that there is a disharmony between normative ethical theory and what motivates people in moral practice (Stocker 1976). Susan Wolf argued that a person may be a moral saint according to the principles of utilitarianism or Kantian ethics, but fail to be the kind of person we want her to be: a person with projects, a person who is aiming at individual perfection (Wolf 1982). In a similar vein Harry Frankfurt repeatedly argued for the importance of personal ideals which are irreducible to morality: what we identify with and care about, what we love (Frankfurt 1982: 80-82; Frankfurt 2004: 5-8). And finally, there is Michael Slote, who used the Gauguin example to show that a person can be admirably immoral. From the point of view of utilitarianism and Kantian ethics Gauguin’s decision to leave his family and to go and live as an artist on a Pacific island cannot be morally justified. However, many will admire his resolution to leave his family, which turned out to be a quite successful choice artistically speaking (Slote 1983, chapter 4). All these objections point in the same direction, i.e. a deficit of modern ethical theories. To all appearances, there is something beside the promotion of maximal well-being and the unconditional respect for all persons concerned which is important. Depending on whether one has a broad or narrow conception of morality, the additional element will be included in or excluded from normative ethical theory. Since my conception is broad – see above for my approach of normative ethics – I will defend an inclusive view. The item to be added is some kind of interest. Whereas Stocker and co. are quite high-minded about this interest, I believe that we should start with a kind of basic interest in life.

The objection that a person may act perfectly in accordance with the principles of consequentialism and/or Kantian ethics without being an admirable person led to the recent revival of virtue ethics. Contemporary virtue ethics, like its classical predecessor, concentrates on what it means to be a good person. It is not action-centred but agent-centred. It argues for the importance of having excellent character traits. A character trait is more than a tendency (Hursthouse 1999: 10-14). It is a deeply embedded way to perceive and attend to situations, to feel about them, to evaluate them and to decide. Because of this a person with for example an honest character will reliably act honestly. However, a strong version of virtue ethics will not only give character traits pride of place, it will also say that it is impossible to codify virtues and to find a foundation of the excellence of the character trait outside itself. A strong version of virtue ethics is not only agent-centred but also agent-based (Slote 1997: 206-210). The

ultimate touchstone of moral judgement lies in the character trait itself, and does not refer to something like 'human nature' or to the principles of consequentialism and/or Kantian ethics (these moral theories might easily grant importance to character traits, but can never make them the norm). Essential to a strong version of virtue ethics is that the character fixes the moral norm: an action is honest because it is the action a honest person would perform. Contemporary virtue ethicists either agree with a whole bunch of classical virtues, or they try to sort out one, such as compassion, universal benevolence or caring (Slote 1997: 216-229) My proposal to give zest for life centre-stage is not inimical to the latter, but I simply find them too high-minded, just like the proposals of Stocker and co.

### **3. The virtue of zest for life**

Let me specify the nature of zest for life. Valuing zest for life is not simply valuing life. Some particular moral traditions value life without valuing zest for life. Zest for life is the attitude of embracing life. It is the attitude of taking interest in or being enthusiast about the activities and experiences which basically constitute a human life. What is important is not the precise list of these activities and experiences (they can take many shapes: see last section for an arbitrary tryout), but their uncomplicated nature. They have nothing to do with some idealised image – imagery again – of what a human being should aim at. Let us not begin with creating lofty ideals which cause the usual exaltation surrounding ideals. Zest for life is an attitude of openness towards these uncomplicated activities and experiences. It is the capacity to undertake action, to take initiative or to make a first move, as well as the capacity not to be hostile to being overcome by events, to count oneself fortunate when events turn out to be good and not to be completely upset when they turn out to be bad. Although zest for life relates to the uncomplicated activities and experiences constituting a human life, it is itself a complex attitude. Zest for life has the structure of a mood with a strong conative and a hedonic component. It is the mood of being positive towards human life which pervades your *Lebenswelt*: it is a way of looking at things, events, situations, courses of action, encounters, and of evaluating them. It is the kind of mood to which a strong desire belongs. It requires lust for life. Call it the will to live. Therefore it is a kind of basic vitality or basic energy to do or to experience what belongs to a human life. Moreover, someone having zest for life enjoys life. This means that activities and experiences are seasoned with pleasure.

Might zest for life be a virtue in the strong version of contemporary virtue theory? Definitely. First, zest for life is a candidate for being a virtue because it is a deeply embedded character trait which makes someone act reliably in a certain way. Although it is basically a disposition to enjoy uncomplicated human activities and experiences, I have just demonstrated that it is a rather complex disposition. It implies a reliable way of looking at the world, of evaluating actions, of feeling, desiring, acting: when someone has this disposition, it ensures that to some extent he will show vitality and enjoy life. Secondly and more importantly there is this: although one can give some general description of what zest for life consists of, it cannot be codified, nor is there a principle outside the attitude itself which accounts for its importance. When one wants to find out whether some action or reaction gives proof of zest for life, one should ask: would a person having zest for life do this or adopt this attitude? In other words, it is the disposition of zest for life itself which fixes the norm, and that is crucial for being a candidate virtue in a strong sense of virtue.

Now comes the crucial question: *is* zest for life a virtue of basic importance? Why should normative ethics begin with the quite unusual plea for zest for life? I have two reasons. The first is that it fills the ethical deficit which can be attributed to mainstream ethics. Like other

proposals it points to the importance of taking interest in something. So far I am in line with the widespread objection that consequentialism and Kantian ethics leave something out. The second reason is that zest for life fills the ethical deficit better than rival proposals. Whereas most critics have high-minded ideas on what should be added, my answer is much more down to earth. The attitudes of caring, benevolence or compassion and personal ideals or perfection have the disadvantage that they risk to maintain the ethical deficit they are meant to fill. They are lofty ideals threatening to overlook the importance of taking interest and being enthusiastic about the simple things of life. To that extent they join the long tradition of suspiciousness of the lusty life. Let me put it in another way: compared to other proposals, zest for life is the better candidate for being a virtue in the strong sense. Whereas caring, benevolence, and so forth have components which can easily be accounted for by considerations of well-being or an attitude of unconditional respect for persons, this is not the case for zest for life. Zest for life is important regardless of considerations of well-being and of the unconditional basic attitude of respect. Zest for life is not a good to be promoted in the name of well-being, nor is it a duty one has out of respect towards oneself or other persons. The importance of zest for life lies completely in itself. Highlighting anything more than the attitude of interest and enthusiasm is futile. (Compare Solomon 1998 and Blackburn 2003.)

Here is an important additional remark: of course I am not arguing that zest for life is the only important component of a moral attitude. I am only arguing that ethics should start with the affirmation of the importance of the attitude of zest for life, which is itself nothing else than an affirmative attitude towards life. This does not exclude that we should also live up to principles of mainstream normative ethics. It is also of the utmost importance to live well, i.e. to promote human well-being. This holds as well for the unconditional basic respect for the human person, i.e. to give everyone a voice, and so on. And I agree that conditions of well-being and of respect can become so bad that a person loses zest for life, although it is the last straw to cling to. However, what is the point of considerations of well-being and of an unconditional respectful attitude when there is no zest for life?

#### **4. Two objections**

I will consider two objections against promoting the virtue of zest for life to a basic moral attitude. These objections also explain the opposition by moral practice and ethics to the recognition of the moral value of zest for life.

The first objection is that zest for life tends to be excessive and as a consequence immoral. Lust is considered to be a deadly sin because one leaps to the identification of sexual desire with excessive sexual desire, as if appetite were always gluttony. The supposition is that the strong desire belonging to zest for life must, by its very nature, end up in excess. This is a deep-rooted idea, also very popular in some intellectual circles. Desire would tend to transgression and the object of desire would be infinite, impossible to realise and so on. I have two replies to this objection. First, I agree that the desire to live may become excessive. It is possible that zest for life ends up in a kind of frenzy in which one insatiably jumps from one activity to another, from one experience to the next. The question is whether this is necessarily the case. Is desire by nature unbridled? I do not think so. Why would a sense of moderation or measure be completely alien to desire? The idea that a human being always wants more or never gets what he really wants is the very idea I am questioning here. The view that human desire is inherently excessive is a moralistic view abused to mould people. Excess is definitely not part of the attitude I was thinking about when I described zest for life as taking interest in and being enthusiast about activities and experiences constituting human

life. I am not saying that excess is no problem. It is a huge problem, but one related to the *absence* of zest for life much more than to its presence (think of the periods of excitation which are often part of depression, and of the excesses of Western ‘enjoyment’ industry). What I am saying is that I oppose intruding excess into the concept of desire (see also Blackburn 2003: 27). My second reply is that excess is no less problematic for mainstream normative ethics, on the contrary. Think of the demandingness of consequentialism and of the unconditional character of Kantian ethics. Both lead quite directly to excess. How many generations does one have to count in promoting the well-being of humanity? Is it really so that one is never allowed to lie or that one is never allowed to do something which does not have the consent of all persons involved? So, even unquestionable principles of ethics turn out to be vulnerable to excess. That is why I think it is also necessary to hold a plea for a second virtue in the strong sense of a virtue, viz. detachment. It is the capacity to let things go in due time and in this way the antidote to our susceptibility to excess. As an attitude towards life it is as important as zest for life. Since it falls outside the scope of this paper I will not go into it. However, I want to note that detachment is not the opposite of zest for life. It does not oppose being interested or being enthusiast. It only requires to become detached from life when necessary, in the same way that it requires to become detached from the promotion of well-being and equal basic respect when necessary. It protects one from excess. It is in fact an attitude which safeguards the other components of a moral attitude. Like zest for life it is rarely considered part of a moral attitude (many would consider it rather a religious attitude).

The second objection is the following: having zest for life is something that happens to one. It is a character trait which is highly dependent on ones genes. Perhaps most of us are programmed to have zest for life and will naturally manifest it. So, it is something one is not responsible for. Or: zest for life precedes morality. One should count oneself lucky if one has it. There is no need to be angry if one does not, for nothing can be done about it. Compared to the first objection, this one goes in the opposite direction. Whereas the first put zest for life in the realm of vice, this one puts it in the realm of innocence. You are not accountable for having zest for life. How to reply to this objection? It is a complex problem because it concerns the question of how events, actions, attitudes for which we hold each other accountable relate to what can be blamed on ‘nature’ (compare to the relation between biological, psychic and social causes for depression). Therefore, I can only reply in a general way. Let me admit that to some extent zest for life is a biologically determined matter. To that extent it is a matter of moral luck. Does this exempt us completely from responsibility? Compare this to the excessive behaviour of an addict. It has been proven that to some extent the inclination to addiction is genetically determined. Does that mean that the addict is completely cleared of accountability when it comes to the use of psychoactive substances? Of course not. Similar things can be said about zest for life. More importantly, zest for life is not at all an ‘innocent’ attitude. It is a complex attitude including ways to look at situations, to feel about them, to evaluate them, and so on. This complex disposition can be sustained or undermined. It is possible to encourage someone’s interest and enthusiasm or to discourage this attitude. Being interested is something that we can teach our children by showing them the enjoyments of a common meal, by arousing their curiosity, by teaching them to dance and to sing, and so on and so forth. It is also possible to run counter to their enthusiasm by pointing immediately to risks or to the lurking threat of excess. Zest for life (and its absence) is something that can be cultivated.

## Conclusion

I am no friend of hasty generalisations about cultures. Nevertheless, this paper tries to show how the actual endemic depression in the West could be related to a longstanding deficit in Western ethics, reflecting to an important extent everyday morals: its underestimation of the value of taking interest in something. I argued that this ethical deficit is primarily filled by being enthusiastic about basic activities and experiences constituting human life (caring, compassion and so on may be derived from zest for life). I am eager to learn whether this undervaluing zest for life really is typical of Western culture and whether it is possible to converge on the idea that zest for life is a universal virtue, as Bertrand Russell thought it was.

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