HUMAN AFFAIRS *18*, 133–138, 2008 DOI: 10.2478/v10023-008-0013-5

INTRODUCTORY: REFLECTING ON A GOOD LIFE

EMIL VIŠŇOVSKÝ

"The good life haunts us. Everything we do is directed, consciously or subconsciously, toward attaining it."
Yi-Fu Tuan

Who would not like to live a good life? But who is actually living it? Morever, who knows what it is to live a good life? Is it a life lived according to one's own private projections and plans or even most intrinsic dreams? Or is it a life lived according to others' expectations and generally acknowledged public standards and ethical values? Or could it be a life lived in accordance with some transcendental principles? Who decides whether one is living a good life or not and who, ultimately, has the right (or obligation, for that matter) to do so?

The nature of a good life is, undoubtedly, one of the most complex issues both theoretically and practically. It used to be a traditional topic in the Ancient era when most philosophers considered it to be their obligation as well as their competence to reflect on how various kinds of individuals lead their lives and, based on the confrontation of these with some more general ideas of what a human life should be, they provided some advice as to what is "good" (or even the "best") and/or not so good in the ways people carry out their lives. These philosophers have formed basic conceptions of the good life from "virtuous" and "righteous" ones to "blissful" and "happy" ones. What they have proposed, has mostly been a certain ideal, a pattern for which humans ought to strive. A good life is a life worth living, whatever its particular content may be. Thus, the philosophical concept of a good life has predominantly obtained a *normative* status—it is a normative concept, serving also as a measure of judgement, which includes certain structures or features that any human life should embrace if subjugated to some rational and/or emotional assessment. Philosophers as well as other intellectuals and artists have been attempting to suggest and argue various kinds of criteria, standards and norms or even paradigms that ought to be fulfilled in order for a human being to live a good life. Some of them, notably sages and saints, have always been ready to serve as the embodiments and living examples of how to lead a life that might deserve the highest label of "goodness" for the rest of population. We know that all such ambitions for the universality of any kind of a model

of a good life have crumbled in the end. There is no such thing as a universal ideal of a good life (see e. g. Kupperman 2006). All such ideals are historical, partial, contextual and even individual.

Human life is very complex and the criteria of its "goodness", like any other criteria for any kind of goodness, are very complex too. To judge a person's life as good or, for that matter, as bad is a very tricky pursuit. People, of course, naturally and quite readily adjudicate the lives of others rather than their own. However, a psychological paradox emerges, when others attempt to judge our lives; in such a case we naturally react indicating that it is not their business because no one can assess our lives better than we can. We think we have the exclusive right of and priviledged access to considering whether our life is good or not; but if this is the case, we have to allow the same right and priviledge to all.

* * *

The role of rationality in both designing and evaluating human life has been taken as crucial since Plato (see Taylor 1989, 20-23). The guiding "divine light" of reason is the guarantee of the moderatness and orderliness that are able to prevent us from any kind of excesses into which we may descend if seized by emotions or desires and cravings for pleasures. Even Epicurus, credited with the inauguration of *hedonism*—the doctrine that construes pleasure and delight as the main criteria of a good life—warned us that

> It is impossible to live pleasantly without living wisely and honorably and justly, and it is impossible to live wisely and honorably and justly without living pleasantly. Whenever any one of these is lacking (when, for instance, one is not able to live wisely, though he lives honorably and justly) it is impossible for him to live a pleasant life (Epicurus 1993, 70).

But perhaps we should speak of *wisdom* rather than of rationality, as the Stoics were inclined; the good life according to them necessarily involves wisdom to achieve self-control and other possible control over the outer resources and intervening conditions (see e. g. Irvine 2008). Wisdom, as recently defined by R. Nozick (1989, 267)

> is what you need to understand in order to live well and cope with the central problems and avoid the dangers in the predicament(s) human beings find themselves in.

Philosophers may suggest various ideals of a good life (see e. g. Graham 1990; Cottingham 1998), the issue, however, is whether people have *real opportunities* to implement them. Also, different individuals may hold different conceptions of a good life, but despite this plurality, the question may be posed as to whether the good life is exclusively in their sphere of control or to what extent, that is whether they are free to choose the way of life they consider as best for themselves. The fact namely may be that the majority of people do not live the life they have chosen but rather the life they can and even must live. These people need not necessarily be "the insulted and humiliated" or the poor and vulgar, who may not have ever heard of the idea of a good life, but also the common people preoccupied with their everyday business or indulging themselves in the petty allurments seducing them. The actual path human life takes is always the result of precedent agencies, circumstances, conditions and potentialities as well as decisions and their consequences, which all accumulate and add up to the kind of "life-structure", that is neither so easily torn down nor reconstructed. It is not only our personal history that provides limits to any of our current resolutions to start living a better life than that we lived before, but

also the socio-cultural conditions that are the frames of individual forms of life. Therefore any meaningful account of a good life should include the concept of "social forms of life".

Social forms of life are represented by clusters of life activities and their rules that are practiced either by certain social groups (e. g. professional, ethnic, gender, etc.) or transversally by many social groups in certain areas of life (e. g. housing, dressing, leisure, etc.). These forms are as a rule historical and local but modern technology and globalization may turn them into something more generic and universal. They are concerned not only with "how" people do things but also "what" they do in their lives. In modern society and culture we may observe—despite any kind of *individualization*—the powerful tendencies towards the *unification* and *standardization* of lifestyles on a global scale. The social pressure on *conformity* to prevailing social forms of life is at odds with the generally declared liberty of an individuals' right to choose their own way of life.

* * *

Thus the good life in practice for every individual is the resolution of several, often contradictory and even conflicting, factors, traditionally called "subjective" and "objective". It lies on the "crossroad" between "life chances" and "life projects"; or to put it in other words, it is the "matching" of "life chances" and "life projects". On the one hand it is obvious that socio-cultural factors provide both uneven chances for as well as impediments to individual projects, on the other hand without individual effort and choices there is no such thing as a good life.

Notwithstanding, in modern society the *etalon* of a good life has become the individual's success in the competition for a social position. In this respect there is no substantial difference between modern and pre-modern societies, despite the fact that the structures of social positions were different, since from the point of view of an individual's lot this has always been a central issue. It is this achieving of a lucrative social position, notably a master's position of any kind, either through personal performance or its simulation, that brings the most promising chances for the good life to individuals, at least from the "objective" (or "outer") standpoint. And this is why modern people are so eager to invest the most and the best of their energies in acquiring such a position. Living in such a position gives not only relatively sufficient resources for fulfilling the individual's existential needs, but also the "glittering" outer gratifications such as luxury, leisure, signs of a membership to a "higher society", and the like.

The current media provide us with ample evidence of the lifestyles of so called "celebrities", both self-styled and officially declared, as the best of all possible good lives. The emotional side of a "Hollywood" style is strongly attached to their presentation. Any other alternative models of a good life, e. g. an ancient ideal of a harmonious inner life or a medieval ideal of an ascetic life remain, of course, eclipsed or depicted as out of date. The dominant modern pattern of a good life in terms of its attractiveness seems to be the life of a socially successful individual, who has acquired a position in one of the lucrative social spheres. This conception somehow presupposes that along with social benefits and admiration the inner satisfaction of such a life comes too.

However, the "subjective" side of the issue is no less complex and no less important. It may be best expressed through such terms as "satisfaction", "self-fullfilment", "joy", "happiness", or what M. Cziksentmihalyi (1990) calls the "flow". To lead a successful and socially significant life is not necessarily identical with a good life. Whatever the achievements of an individual might be, unless they feel some of these, there can be few who would say they are pursuing a good life. Inner satisfaction is a necessary component of a good life, alas, not a sufficient

one since the obvious counter-argument might be raised: how about mass murderers like Hitler or Stalin who find inner satisfaction in their perverse activities? Here, again the issue of normativity comes to the fore—unless the norms of a good life are usurped and distorted by power itself to the effect that mass murders, crimes and other evils are accepted as its components, it is the socio-cultural context that sets criteria for the "objective" side of what may be acceptable as a good life. Normally this includes socially positive and useful practices as its components. The good life is identical to ethical life (see Singer 1997).

* * *

Society establishes the norms and the context but the burden of a good life lies on the shoulders of each individual. Since everyone must live their own life for themselves, everyone is reliant on themselves finding a way of combining the "objective" and the "subjective" powers in order to create their own model of a life worth living and bringing about both social usefulness as well as personal satisfaction. This is such a hard task that there is no wonder that not everyone succeeds and many are left with just the dream of a good life. Not so few might feel the disillusion of their failure to get their lives on track leading to at least some of the features of which they could be proud and/or satisfied with.

For some, achieving a good life may perhaps be a matter of "good luck" but for the majority of those who are aware of such a concept at all, this is a matter of hard work and creation. It is a matter of the art of living (see e. g. Nehamas 1998). It is a life-long searching and selecting from among the options available and even the creating of new options previously nonexistent or hidden. Striving for a good life is an intentional project and living a good life means a constant re-thinking, re-assessment and re-creation of the achievements in accordance with the current situation and the future goals. Such is, for instance, the pragmatist conception of a good live, which is flexible, imaginative, pluralistic, anti-dogmatic and non-hedonistic rather than a ready-made instruction of how to live well. For a pragmatist philosopher, the issue of a good life is an open question, whose solution consists in the selection as well as formation of certain life practices. There is no form of life that is pre-given in advance. According to Peirce's fallibilism and Dewey's instrumentalism, the worst thing would be to block our road of inquiry as to which form of life could be the best for anyone of us (see Peirce 1931–1958; Dewey 1978).

The primary condition for a good life is to have a chance to choose one's own life with all the risks such a choice might involve. Then no one, other than the subject involved, could be blamed for any kind of failure in terms of a wretched, damaged life. Final satisfaction might be given in the way Wittgenstein could have replied to Nietzsche's question of eternal recurrence:

> What, if some day or night a demon were to steal after you into your loneliest loneliness and say to you: ‚This life as you now live it and have lived it, you will have to live once more and innumerable times more' ... Would you not throw yourself down and gnash your teeth and curse the demon who spoke thus? Or have you once experienced a tremendous moment when you would have answered him: ‚You are a god and never have I heard anything more divine' (Nietzsche 1882/1974, §341).

The last words Wittgenstein uttered before losing consciousness for good were the following: "Tell them I've had a wonderful life" (Monk 1991, 579).

* * *

The papers contributed to the symposium of the present issue on the ideals of a good life reflect on its topic from a range of perspectives: philosophical, aesthetical, psychological, and therapeutical. However, there is one common focus in the majority of the papers—the importance of the human body for the good life. Such a focus has been by no means intentional, but may be explained by the fact that all authors deal with contemporary issues in their "postmodern" contexts rather than with historical conceptions of past philosophers. *Richard Shusterman* in the lead paper applies his theory of somaesthetics to show that any conception of a good life should include the concept of the "embodied life". The narrow mentalistic approach, which has dominated modern Western philosophy (with some exceptions like e. g. M. de Montaigne, F. Nietzsche, W. James, J. Dewey and M. Merleu-Ponty), has taken care of the self just like the soul, and the examined life just like the self-examination of the disembodied mind. Contrary to this tradition, Shusterman shows "the value of somatic self-examination—reflection on one's bodily feelings and bodily means of action". He also points to the Asian philosophical tradition suggesting the importance of somatic cultivation for the good life. In the next paper, *Erich Mistrík* critically examines what he calls the "pseudo-concrete ideals of a good life". His focus is on the current socio-cultural practices of manipulation and fetishization, consumption and seduction, which all exert an almost unsurmountable pressure on individuals via the mass-media and current technological devices. The result is the passive, uncreative and alienated subject, whose way of life is far from any traditional ideal of a good life. Contrary to Shusterman, Mistrík also points to some controversial cases of the current "corporealization of pleasure—the transformation of mental pleasures to physical pleasures". In the third paper, *Blanka Šulavíková* also focuses on a critical account of some features of contemporary Western culture in which flexibility as an ability to cope with "a continuous stream of innovations" is considered as one of the general components of the good life. She shows how the tendency to rapid change in lifestyles, value plurality, the social pressure on the social success and well-being, as well as some other features like the cults of beauty, juvenility and "the perfect body" not only lead to a rise in psychological difficulties (e. g. frustration) but also endanger traditional and more stable ideals of human identity, authenticity and personal integrity. In such a condition, people have to undertake huge efforts in case they wish to create and preserve their own life projects. The fourth paper authored by *Ľuboslava Sejčová* makes use of empirical research on values and the current "cult of the body". Her interpretation shows that extreme and unhealthy attitudes to the body distort not only the real value of the human body but also lead to eating disorders such as *bulimia* or *anorexia nervosa*. The body has become the subject of social formation via market forces, which create the false image that the nature of the good life consists primarily or even exclusively in the slim and beautiful body measured by the norms of the "beauty industry". The main idea of the fifth paper written by *Peter Tavel*, is that the good life also includes the processes of good aging. In particular, old age is the period of life in which "the fruits of life" are sensed much more intensely and the subjective feelings of satisfaction are meshed with the evaluation of one's meaning of life. The author provides an account of some of the most relevant theories of coping with these life issues at this stage. Finally, in the sixth paper the author *Chukwugozie Maduka* shows in his an analysis and interpretation of a host of funeral orations as being held within the *Igbo* people of South-East Nigeria, how various kinds of tributes paid by close family members to their deceased fellows may serve as a very rich source of ideas of a good (or not so good) live lived by them all; he also argues that the central criteria by which a human life is being assessed within this particular culture are the concepts of duty and obligation towards community.[1]

[1] This work has been sponsored by VEGA grant No. 2/6043/26 and COPART SAS.

References

Cottingham, J. Philosophy and the Good Life. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998.

Csikszentmihalyi, M. *Flow. The Psychology of Optimal Experience.* New York: Harper and Row, 1990.

Epicurus. *The Essential Epicurus: Letters, Principal Doctrines, Vatican Sayings, and Fragments.* Amherst, NY: Prometheus Books , 1993.

Kupperman, J. *Six Myths About the Good Life: Thinking About What Has Value.* Indianapolis, IN: Hackett Publishing, 2006.

Dewey, J. *Ethics.* In: *The Middle Works 1899–1924*, vol. 5: 1908, ed. J.A. Boydston. Carbondale, IL: Southern Illinois University Press, 1978.

Graham, G. *Living the Good Life: In Introduction to Moral Philosophy.* New York: Paragon House, 1990.

Irvine, W. B. *A Guide to the Good Life. The Ancient Art of Stoic Joy.* Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008.

Monk, R. *Ludwig Wittgenstein. The Duty of Genius.* London: Vintage, 1991.

Nietzsche, R. *The Gay Science.* London: Vintage Books, 1974.

Nehamas, A. *The Art of Living. Socratic Reflections from Plato to Foucault*. Berkeley: University of California Press, 1998.

Nozick, R. *The Examined Life. Philosophical Meditations.* New York: Simon & Schuster, 1989.

Peirce, C. S. *The Collected Papers of Charles Sanders Peirce*. Ed. By C. Hartshorne and P. Weiss (1931–1935, vols. 1–6), and A.W. Burks (1957–1958, vols. 7–8), Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1931–1958.

Singer, P. *How Are We to Live? Ethics in an Age of Self-interest.* Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1997.

Taylor, Ch. *Sources of the Self. The Making of the Modern Identity.* Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1989.

Yi-Fu Tuan. *The Good Life.* Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 1986.

Department of Social and Biological Communication
Slovak Academy of Sciences
Klemensova 19
813 64 Bratislava
Slovak Republic
Tel.: 00421-2-54775683
E-mail: ksbkemvi@savba.sk