

THREE THINGS ABOUT THE GOOD LIFE

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I

The motif of the “good life” was central within the philosophical tradition, particularly in the Greek ethical conception, before it receded, and the question of “how to live” was replaced by the question of “how to act”, which has now become fundamental. In the 20th century these issues arose within the pragmatist line of philosophical thought and were also pursued in humanistic psychology (which itself has existentialist roots), with respect to issues of life satisfaction, peace of mind, mental balance and health. These issues were pursued within the framework of having the courage to become “the Self” and lead an authentic life. By the end of the 20th century the good life had also reached the field of ethics (e. g. ethics of authenticity of Charles Taylor). According to the humanistic psychologist C. R. Rogers, current commercial culture determines, evaluates and maintains in humans a way of behavior that is directed against their human nature; it leads to alienated behavior and a bifurcation into incompatible behavioral systems, from which psychological and social pathology stem (Rogers 1999, 185–186). His conception of “a good life” has arisen out of his psycho-therapeutic practice and is characterized by a creative non-conformist attitude (Rogers 1995, 159). The desire to grow and create new opportunities for self-actualization (self-creation) is also the basis of a good life for American neopragmatist R. Rorty. In the spirit of a postmodernist outlook, he views self-creation through ever-renewing alternative narratives and alternative vocabularies as tools for self-perfection and self-development. Extraordinary people are able to create remarkably original self-creations, to make artistic pieces out of their lives, which are neither copies, nor replicas. A conformist life is not associated with a good life for Rorty either—an original and innovative life is, according to him, the result of the search for self-enrichment and self-creation which, however, does not exclude our solidarity with and compassion for the suffering of others in public life (Rorty 1998). Rogers also sees conformity as the result of a human lack of freedom in authentic expression, while on the other hand, such freedom means the autonomous ability to make decisions in life and to have a creative attitude toward one’s relationships with others; this, however, does not imply that freedom to become the Self must necessarily be incompatible with similitude to others. Another contemporary neopragmatist R. Schusterman argues that Rorty’s project of radical innovative self-creation is marked with an elitist extraordinariness and it should not be recommended as a general model of life to be

pursued by all in their search for private perfection and happiness (Shusterman 2003, 394-395). Even one of the founders of classical pragmatism J. Dewey believed that in a free and just society public ideals and the ideals of private self-perfection can be combined: "Conformity is a name for the absence of vital interplay; the arrest and numbing of communication... it is the artificial substitute used to hold men together in lack of associations that are incorporated into inner dispositions of thought and desire" (Dewey 1998, 440). Dewey sees individuality as a certain way of understanding the impact and ways of preferential reactions to these; thereof individuality is not something that is closed and takes its form and shape only through interaction with given circumstances. "Individuality is at first spontaneous and unshaped; it is a potentiality, a capacity of development" (Dewey 1998, 441). There is no stable world and static individual. If an individual disappears in the long term, this is caused by his/her choosing irresponsibility; and if an individual is completely excluded it is due to his/her choosing a path of easy parasitism. Rogers also supports this interpretation of individuality in terms of his belief that a human being is naturally capable of such responsibility. There is growing evidence of new approaches to these issues which provide greater support for the idea of the personal freedom of choice and a growing opposition to conformity and the acceptance of authority. There is growing opposition and aversion toward large organizations, institutions, corporations and bureaucracy as well. The humanization of institutions can be reached from within by ignoring nonsensical rules and rejecting hypocritical culture (Rogers, 1997). M. Foucault also describes the same situation when claiming that we are witness to the expansion of resistance toward authoritarianism; many refute abstract notions of economically and ideologically determined violence, scientifically based administrative inquisition, and maintain the individual's right to express difference, diversity and variability, and make a transversal impact, not simply restricted to a single country (Foucault 1991a, 45-47).

Whereas in the past it has been the intellectual fulfillment of life as well as the evaluation of human action with reference to work or mission or social utility or higher goal which have dominated, today attitudes to life are substantially influenced by the parameters of the market and evaluation with regard to the particularity and innovativeness of an image or way of life. The liberation of attitudes to life from more strictly set rules is associated with processes linked to an orientation to success and aestheticization, while the emphasis on ethical parameters is being weakened (Šulavíková 2005).

The three books reviewed in the following are the outcome of a research project on the issues of a good life carried out in Slovakia between 2006-2008. The authors focused on analyses of originality, creativity and authenticity with respect to the ideal of the "good life", which signal a shift toward aestheticization but also highlight more specific issues: Is the contemporary attitude to life characterized by the aesthetics of manifestation based on self-presentation, which gives individuals an opportunity for success? How has the claim for originality changed in the postmodern media era in comparison to the same claim in modern Europe of the 20th century? Has originality become the absolute claim of the era and the ability to apply it its signal? In what sense does the meritocratic world bring with it the challenge to be successful and to present oneself? Is the focus shifting toward performance and the perfect image, the cult of physical beauty, the rapid consumption of goods and the extension of delights? Can the aestheticization of the way of life (an orientation to grace and delight, to personal expression and private self-perfection) be taken as the dominant trend of the current era? Last but not least, in what way are these trends reflected in the value-hierarchies of the young generation?

II

The first book *Authenticity and the Good Life* by Blanka Šulavíková (Bratislava: Album, 2006), offers a view on the issues of human nature, not within the context of “homo naturalis” but in the context of “homo humanus”; it is thus not based on the perspective of human “naturalness” and it does not seek to move away from human natural characteristics towards cultural characteristics, but looks for the routes to and opportunities for realizing human uniqueness and its authentic self-expression. It does not understand human nature in the context of the English term *nature* but the Greek term *physis* (which precedes the right or habit).

The central feature of contemporary humanism is seen in the attempt to return integrity and meaningful content to human life. This is chiefly illustrated within the context of other approaches by providing examples of concepts from the domain of humanistic psychology (Rogers, Maslow, Frankl) and of the ethics of authenticity (Ch. Taylor); these regard the authentic expression of human nature as a psychological need and ethical challenge.

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The author also devotes her attention to the issues of self-interpretation and self-definition, from which the realization of self-expression is woven. In her opinion, the process of self-identification takes place on the basis of self-affirmation, on the relationship to the self and to what has to be re-created. This is accompanied by the experiences that follow on from potentiality, which is an important part of our involvement in life: whether it concerns experiences of freedom, non-freedom, power or powerlessness depends on the character of the various alternatives, which the “self” perceives as its possibilities.

The book also provides an outline of the modern discourse on authenticity, including the existentialist, pragmatist and postmodern approaches as well as its conservative critics. It subscribes to the ideas that still regard this ideal as legitimate based on the context within which the concept of originality is understood.

III

The second of the three monographs *The Good Life and the Cult of the Body* by Erich Mistrík and Luboslava Sejčová (Bratislava: Album, 2008) deals with the contemporary cult of the body that is characteristic of the present time.

In the first part of the this book titled “From the Cult of the Body to the Decay of Postmodernity” and written by Erich Mistrík, the author states that the postmodern era (postmodern culture) is a period in which the ideals of a good life and the ideas of the quality of life differ significantly according to regional, generational and social boundaries. At the same time, the collective conscience is being rapidly homogenized and standardized under the influence of the mass media and advertising. In contrast to previous cultural-historical periods, the desire to publish one’s (or reveal others’) life ideals has considerably strengthened: the mass

media and paparazzi disclose the intimate details of the private lives of celebrities and reality shows seek to reveal the innermost privacy of ordinary people in a similar way. Attempts to keep the intimate (psychological, family, sexual...) world within the narrow limits of one's private life and to ensure that none of them are made public have also increased.

Extravagance, self-presentation, exhibitionism, the disclosure of the intimate details of one's own and other's lives celebrate the triumphs because one can only sell that which goes beyond all that has hitherto existed. During the same period of time, there is a maximum conventional and enthusiastic submission to standards, current fashion, mental greyness and insipidness. The media persuade postmodern people to adopt ideals and to follow their aims or the goals of the industry ("Follow your image, drink Sprite"). They also enforce the idea of being different, yet through new products create a new standard ("And now brand new Cillit"). We live in a time of discrepancies. We can assume, however, that there are certain ideas of a good, quality life because such is human character: humans are unable to live without reflecting in some way, or without having certain goals. Looking for the manifestations of people's ideals, the author considers the existing or emerging ideals of a good life in postmodern culture.

In the second part of the book titled "Psychological Aspects of the Cult of the Body" and written by Luboslava Sejčová, the author concentrates on the preference for the values of "the cult of the body", which increasingly determine the behaviour of young people today and the position they hold in the value system in relation to other generally recognized values. Too much emphasis on physical beauty and appearance significantly determines behaviour and can lead to a reduction in the values associated with the body and its physique but also to the appearance of unhealthy eating disorders such as bulimia or anorexia. In her research, the author focused on the pathological perception of the body, how culture and cultural norms affect the individual's *dissatisfaction with their body*. She used data gathered from the Questionnaire on Universal Values and the Cult of the Body (2006). The research sample consisted of 508 respondents aged between 18 and 26 (292 women and 216 men) studying at the Philosophical Faculty and the Faculty of Mathematics, Physics and Informatics of Comenius University in Bratislava. The following basic hypotheses were confirmed:

1. Young people between 18 and 26 years of age are significantly dissatisfied with their body, women in particular.
2. The majority of adolescents confirmed that they had dieted, particularly women, and obese and overweight individuals.
3. Those individuals who were dissatisfied with their bodies and those on diets gave significant preference to the values of beauty and physical attractiveness.
4. The effect of age on values related to the cult of the body was confirmed. Young people aged between 15 and 18 years try to be original and are not afraid of being different from others but, on the other hand, they care more about being attractive and appealing to the opposite sex.
5. There are interindividual particularities regarding the cult of the body and the dietetic behaviour of adolescents in relation to sex, age, dissatisfaction with their body, dieting and being clinically overweight—BMI.

The following main trend relating to the cult of the body and dietetic behaviour in adolescents was also confirmed:

It is not true that people have different aesthetic ideals of the male and female figure. They generally perceive a cultural ideal, while an individual understanding of physical beauty is exceptional. At the same time, this ideal in terms of cultural norms is sought after (particularly by women).

IV

The third book *The Ideal of a Good Life in Personal Perspective* by Blanka Šulavíková and Luboslava Sejčová (Bratislava: Album 2008) is based on combining of the philosophical and psychological perspectives on the issue of a good life.

The first part of the book titled “The Ideal of a Good life in the Philosophical Perspective” and written by Blanka Šulavíková, focuses on the philosophical perspective, enhanced by many psychological aspects, without which philosophical thinking on this issue would be more limited. The introductory chapter titled “Potentiality in Human Life” confirms this: questions regarding the spatial and temporal perspective on human life and the way in which these two are related are raised. These two aspects should be regarded as inseparable: the former dominates particularly in psychological and psychiatric practice, while the latter may play a key role mainly in philosophical counselling. A philosophical dialogue between the two may help lead the two perspectives to a more adequate or constructive position. The chapter also describes experiences of potentiality and of freedom which are closely connected with the narrative and spatial perceptions of life. Perception of potentiality in relation to one's own life is accompanied by experiences and our feelings of freedom and personal power rely on these experiences. Whether they are stronger or weaker, positive or negative, depends on the character of different alternatives perceived by man as potentialities. These experiences, within which humans determine themselves with respect to the future, are an important part of our interest in life. Humans can thus be regarded as beings focused on the future and on the accumulation of potentialities. In humans, the values that are involved in the decision-making process can also be regarded as such internal potentialities.

“The Value Structure and Integrity of Life” is the title of the second chapter. Its focus is on the issues associated with the factors that are currently relevant to fragmentalization and the discontinuity of human identity. The chapter is mainly concerned with a strong ideal of flexibility, present in all areas of our life, which works against (in our opinion) the natural need for integrity. The integrity of the self (as the narrative focus) relies on the narrative aspect of life, and the psychological and social aspects of identity are bound to a certain concept of values, to the integrated value structure. Spiritual divergence, fragmentalization and indifferentism are a result of the strong ideal of success and the cult of welfare in our culture. Without integrity, based on a solid and consistent value concept and holistic identity, a very important factor—the meaning of life—is no longer present in human life. If the focus on the meaning significantly weakens, then the psychohygiene of humans deteriorates and the number of frustrating effects increases and neurotic and depressive tendencies strengthen. The meaning of life is thus one of the prerequisites of a good life. Integrity is not only a precondition of a good life, it also has a tradition of understanding as a virtue. The second chapter ends with the statement that it is up to us to ensure that integrity does not withdraw into the background and that we do not yield to the strong ideal of flexibility that asserts itself in the contemporary culture and penetrates our environment.

The title of the last chapter of the first part of the book is “The Research on the Ideal of a Good Life of Adolescents and Young Adults”. The ideal of a good life at a personal level includes psychological, ethical, and aesthetic parameters. It concerns both the spiritual and the material sphere. It can be divided into the level of the self and the level of the world since it contains a component of the relationship to the self and to the (closer or wider) world around.

The aspects described are complemented by the second part of the book tutled “The Psychological Aspects of Value Priorities” and written by Luboslava Sejčová. The first chapter

offers a detailed survey of the systems used to classify life values and the research into the value preferences of the young people. The second chapter titled “Research into Value Priorities of Adolescents and Young Adults” covers the research focused on the manifestations of the current trends in the approach to life. It explores how the contemporary cult of physical beauty and the trend of aesthetization focus on success and wealth, how the ideal of flexibility or the denial of the conformist and the preference for the original lifestyle are reflected in the value preferences of the young generation. The research showed that the majority of young people created an idea of who they want to be, how they want to live, as well as their ideal of a good life in a broader context. A private, introspective focus dominates in their idea of a good life and a passive relationship to the world is preferred over a more active relationship. We understand the research presented in both parts of the book more in terms of “probes” into the image of an ideal of a good life and the value framework of the young people around us. Although we present the statistical processing of the respondents’ answers, we do not draw any far-reaching conclusions; the authors present the information chiefly as a stimulus to inspire readers.

V

The research team succeeded in fulfilling their research goals although the issue of the good life is a large subject area and as such has many other aspects. The authors have not been able to focus on those aspects for reasons of time. It is hoped that they will continue in their research and that they will be able to explore these issues with the inventiveness they have shown in the monographs published so far.

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