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The pursuit of the good life in the philosophical explorations of Immanuel Kant, Jean Nabert and Paul Ricoeur

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Abstract

This article will present the concept of "good life" in the ethics of I. Kant and its criticism by the representative of the philosophy of consciousness J. Nabert and P. Ricoeur. The identification of the pursuit of the "good life" with the pursuit of happiness comes from Greek eudaimonism. In Kant, the achievement of happiness was reduced to obedience to the law. The source of evil is immorality, identified by him as disobedience to the law. The limitations and erroneous assumptions of this formalistic concept were demonstrated by J. Nabert and P. Ricoeur. Nabert accused Kantian ethics of using an abstract notion of freedom and not considering the inner experience. On the basis of Kant's criticism, Nabert developed his own concept of evil as the unjustifiable and the possibility of overcoming evil through the desire for justification. Ricoeur, in turn, criticised, among other things, the Kantian reduction of all forms of emotionality to the sphere of desire, which closes the way to a meaningful discussion of happiness, suffering or evil. Moreover, he pointed out the flaws in the very reduction of happiness to the "good life." Against the background of these remarks, we discuss the contemporary limitations of philosophical reflections on good and evil and happiness and unhappiness.

Keywords

happiness, good life, good, evil, suffering, freedom

Introduction

The identification of the pursuit of the 'good life' with the pursuit of happiness derives from ancient eudaimonism. In the concepts discussed below, however, the notion of happiness appears rarely. Immanuel Kant, convinced of the evil will existing in man, replaces the pursuit of happiness with the pursuit of subordination to the law. In his view, such subordination is a prerequisite for a good life. Critical analyses by the leading representative of the philosophy of consciousness, Jean Nabert, and his pupil, the founder of hermeneutics, Paul Ricoeur, provide us with new light on the limitations and fallacies of this view. Both recognise the weakness of human nature but try to seek the possibility of overcoming the human "tendency to fall" by other means. According to these philosophers, the prerequisite for a good life is a sense of one's own agency (Nabert) and the attainment of self-awareness to eliminate obstacles that hinder a person's understanding of himself and of his own limitations and possibilities. In their writings, both philosophers therefore criticise Kant's dogmatic and formalist conception and undertake analyses of the structures of consciousness and the inner experiences that constitute these structures. In doing so, they point out that a good life is not possible without understanding oneself and one's own spiritual aspirations.

1. Kant: The good life is subordination to the law

Immanuel Kant was the most important ethicist of the rationalist movement and one of the first to reject the eudaemonistic tradition that dominated ethical thought in both ancient and medieval philosophy. He was inspired by both British empiricism and continental rationalism, recognised the complexity of human motives. Unlike classical conceptions that often focused on the pursuit of happiness as the goal of life, Kant emphasised the moral foundations of action. He assumed that human cognition has two complementary and mutually controlling sources: the senses and reason. The senses allow us to perceive the world, while reason enables us to understand it.

Based on these premises, he attempted to reach the apriori conditions, not always realised in the consciousness of the moral sub-subject, which constitute morality. In formulating his imperative conception of morality, Kant was convinced of the existence in human nature of a propensity to evil, manifested

through malice and the misappropriation of the norms of moral conduct. This leads, in his view, to the substitution of moral principles for motivation driven by personal interests or feelings. The denial of one's own reasonableness is also rooted in emotional weakness, which expresses itself in a reluctance to submit to rational maxims, because of the aforementioned emotional malice or a weak nature. Its deeper roots are to be sought in man's idea of what happiness is and the means by which it can be achieved. Kant recognised that man cannot achieve happiness in mortality.

Since happiness cannot be attained in mortality, this desire must be replaced by the pursuit of goodness, for "it is impossible to think of anything at all in the world, or indeed even beyond it, that could be considered good without limitation except a good will."[1] However, this good will is understood quite specifically. In Kant's view, reasonableness is the criterion of good and evil, and the subject's pursuit of good must coincide with the desire for reasonableness, which is revealed through the approval of law and duty. The moral value of an act performed in the name of duty, in this conception, is greater when one fulfils the duty by opposing the inclination. Thus, the less inclination we must fulfil a duty, the greater the moral worth of the act. In other words, if we do something good but it gives us pleasure, it is less valuable than if we find it unpleasant. To preserve life just for the sake of living is not wrong; it is only from the perspective of practical reason worthless. Only conduct that grows out of a natural predilection to spread happiness among others can "conform with duty and […] [be] amiable."[2]

Virtue is the supreme and unconditioned good of man "since it has no further condition above it, whereas happiness is something that, though always pleasant to the possessor of it, is not of itself absolutely and in all respects good but always presupposes morally lawful conduct as its condition."[3] Virtue and happiness relate to each other as a cause to affect. Happiness may be the consequence of an act resulting from good will, but it is, as it were, a by-product of the pursuit of duty.

Kant separated goodness from happiness; he believed that the most valuable motive for fulfilling a duty, the highest virtue, was the desire to fulfil it because

[1] I. Kant, *Groundwork of the metaphysics of morals*, Cambridge 2003, Cambridge University Press, p. 7.
[2] I. Kant, *Groundwork of the metaphysics of morals*, p. 11.
[3] I. Kant, *Critique of practical reason*, Cambridge 1997, Cambridge University Press, p. 93.

it was a duty, and that the possibility of choosing a duty over the pursuit of happiness was evidence of the freedom of the rational individual.

2. Nabert: The good life is causal development

Nabert's primary task was to find the sources of spiritual life that could reveal the formation and development of subjectivity. He tried to find in the contents of human consciousness the moral pattern towards which our most intimate desires are directed. The results of his research were to show the way to the realisation of this pattern, to the attainment of spiritual maturity, or, as he said, to the rebirth of the Self, which was to be the culmination of the pursuit of the 'good life'.

Much of Nabert's research was inspired by Kant's thoughts. Both philosophers criticised metaphysics. Nabert, however, sought to go further in his analyses by emphasising reflection on inner experience, which was lacking in Kant's theory. In his research, he focused on the concrete Self and tried to discover the ways in which this Self is constituted in order to pursue development.

Kant's conception leads to a fundamental dualism—in the world of phenomena, causes cause effects, whereas in the world of noumenal, the reality of free and creative acts prevails. These parallel worlds have nothing in common, and yet, according to Kant's conception, we must infer from the same act that it is both the foreseeable result of discernible causes and that it is free. This view is difficult to agree with. Common sense suggests that an act is either free or determined, and that therein lies the problem of freedom.

Nabert attempted to renew Kant's solution by clearing it of what he considered being fundamental errors. The first objection concerns purely moral freedom. Kant defined freedom negatively as independence from impulsive inclinations and positively as obedience to the moral law. Such a definition severely limits the scope of freedom. By identifying freedom with morality, Kant required us to share with him the theses obvious to him, which he attributes to the categorical imperative, to the absolute of law. Nabert sees the weakness of such a reduction of freedom to obedience to the law. He does not reduce freedom to morality; he seeks freedom not in a moral act, but simply in an act – and a causal act of the Self. For, in his view, only a sense of causality can induce the Self to develop, to attempt to improve itself and the world.

Nabert's initiative, considering freedom as a complex process rather than as an abstract concept, allows us to see that freedom and determinism are not

contradictory but complementary[4], and that what is at stake here are not two opposing realities but two complementary interpretations of reality. In Nabert's view, Kant was right when he described the causality of consciousness as irreducible to circumstances, as well as when he claimed that consciousness is subordinate to the power of reason. However, Kant, in his view, took too little account of the importance of the problematic of the inner experience of freedom and failed to consider its concrete, existential and personal character. Kant found it difficult to connect the 'I am' with the 'I think'. In his conception, it is difficult to find a justification for how the 'I am' could constitute real existence.

Nabert, while accepting, following Kant, the impossibility of the Self grasping itself through the intuitive path, nevertheless recognises the necessity of turning to the world in order to return through the experience of the world to the source of experience and to find the constitutive conditions for this experience. Furthermore, Nabert seeks to analyse inner experience by showing those types of human action in which the subject affirms its desire to be and its possibility to create value. He points out that to investigate consciousness and find a fixed point of reference for psychological facts, Kant's noumenal Self is not sufficient. Kant emphasised the transcendental activity of consciousness, for his main emphasis was on building a foundation for the creation of science. However, this activity, according to Nabert, cannot be the basis for understanding a concrete and real self-consciousness, whose aspiration is to constantly transcend its own limitations.

In doing so, Nabert emphasises that consciousness can only arrive at a good (moral) life if it directs itself towards possibilities of existence that are not inscribed in its nature, because they transcend it. He points to the desire for existence that is constitutive of consciousness. The function of the desire for existence in Nabert's ethics is both to bring morality into contact with nature and to justify the possibility of transforming nature. The desire to exist in the psychological sense is opposed to other desires because it does not, like those, relate to empirical reality, but only to values based on the exercise of freedom. The spontaneity of this desire escapes reflection. For here we are confronted with a desire for the completely unknown, which manifests itself as some indefinable need, a lack that consciousness longs to fill. Reflective consciousness arrives at a rift between goals and values. According to Nabert, the sensation

[4] J. Nabert, *L'expérience intérieure de la liberté et autres essais de philosophie morale*, Paris 1994, PUF, pp. 147–151.

of this rift is the result of the subjective nature of consciousness, not knowing itself or the true meaning of its goals, which are beyond the goals of nature. As Nabert emphasised, limiting oneself to the realisation of these goals would negate the existence of the spiritual realm within us.

In this context, Nabert reproached Kant for replacing the development of existence with oughtness. Duty, which is a form of asceticism, by opposing nature, conceals from us the desire for existence and suppresses the individuality that this desire expresses. The good of man is consequently subordinated to the good of the institution. Nabert points to the danger of surrendering to duty. Consciousness then perceives that it is subjected to an order that appears meaningless because it does not correspond to its desires. Social life appears to consciousness as a kind of alienation, opposing its development. The disillusionment that obedience to duty entails can therefore generate an aversion to a given rule of conduct.

Nabert's ethics goes in two directions in its search for the essence of morality, which is to show the ways to achieve a good life. On the one hand, it addresses the question of whether man, in his quest for self-realisation, can go beyond the moral life and transcend his own nature. On the other hand, it seeks the limits to the development of the Self through an analysis of the experience of evil that restricts our freedom. Whereas Kant seeks to constitutionalise morality by substituting the pursuit of happiness for duty, Nabert's analyses indicate the reasons why man cannot achieve happiness, i.e., causal development.

The basis for moral reflection on the phenomenon of evil is, for Nabert, the experiences of guilt, failure and loneliness. These experiences initiate reflection on the nature of evil. Evil as experienced by us is experienced as having no explanation and, regardless of whether we see its causes within ourselves or in the world outside us, we are unable to find a justification for it. The experience of the in-justifiable is the reaction of consciousness to events encountered in the world with which it cannot come to terms and which cause it to protest. There is no justification for some acts, some social structures, or some aspects of existence, just as there is no justification for pain, death, or wickedness.[5] The unjustifiable sentiment, then, here defines all forms of evil and refers both to the imperfections of nature and to the moral evil arising from freedom. The unjustifiable is not itself evil, but is the experience of evil. The importance that Nabert

[5] J. Nabert, *Essai sur le mal*, Paris 1970, Aubier–Montaigne, p. 21.

attaches to the experience of evil is linked to the use of the reflexive method as one that brings with it a rejection, as his article in the French Encyclopaedia shows, of dogmatism replacing the problem of evil.[6]

The experience of evil through consciousness does not allow us to pose the problem of evil in the traditional way. Nabert refuses to treat evil as the absence or deprivation of something. He emphasises that evil is a real opposition, not reducible to any logical opposition. Nabert here poses the problem of evil extremely sharply; he does not seek to evade or conceal it by pointing to the sources of evil in external causes or by denying the reality of the existence of evil at all. For him, the existence of evil is an experiential fact, having its source in the inner causality of consciousness. Moreover, it is a constitutive element of being, for it relates to the positive causality of consciousness.

Nabert does not seek to reconcile or reconcile evil, understood as a kind of clear or real disorder, with some deeper order, eg legal. Evil defies all norms and leads to the failure of reflection that would like to define it, it is unjustified because it cannot be included either in the order of the world or in the becoming of subjectivity. In this sense, the doctrine of Kant is confirmed, which does not allow us to include evil in a rational dialectic, nor to explain it with some ontological finality.

Evil cannot be justified, for justification, to be powerful, must reconcile freedom with nature and consciousness with itself and simultaneously with the whole world. Unfortunately, for the single self, there is no such act or the possibility of complete rebirth that can justify it. For how could it rise above its individual acts and make judgments about its whole being?

The feeling of the unjustified questions morality. This does not mean that it denies morality in favour of some immoralism; moral categories can only be transcended if we rely on them at the same time. It is even necessary to transcend them, and for this purpose one must free oneself from moral rationalism, since it proclaims the self-sufficiency of morality and seeks to confine it within itself. This is the argument for rejecting Kant's autonomous morality and all kinds of speculative idealism. The difficulty lies in defining the ratio cognoscendi of evil as unjustifiable in understanding this reason, which is beyond any rational reason. In this context, Nabert shows that the experience of evil has an intrinsically religious significance. This idea is classical in itself, for if evil has been

[6] J. Nabert, *Les philosophies de la réflexion*, in: *Encyclopédie française*, vol. 19: *Philosophie–Religion*, Paris 1957, Société nouvelle de l'Encyclopédie Française, 19–06–1.

invoked as an argument against the existence of God, it remains a valid reason for the affirmation of God as well.

For Nabert, the desire for the divine is equivalent to the necessary to justify one's existence, "the desire to overcome evil."[7] Divinity for Nabert is "an essential form of consciousness"[8], not just an idea among many. Man would not be able to affirm himself without the affirmation of the divine, which, in his conception, appears as a constitutive factor in the formation of consciousness. It makes it possible to overcome the alienation necessary for the formation of subjectivity, that difference between aspirations and possibilities of fulfilment. The unjustified, or sense of lack of agency, limiting the possibilities for the development of consciousness are the elements of such alienation, constituting the Self. Only the idea of divinity implies the abolition of the fundamental alienation, which manifests itself in the experience of finitude.

Man, as a result of Nabert's reflective research, turns out to be a dependent, fragile being, condemned to the realisation of impossible desires and unsuccessful attempts to overcome the qualities that constitute him. Here, the disproportion between man's aspirations and his capacities is revealed. To pursue the good life alone is doomed to failure. Through reflective analysis, consciousness discovers that it has no hope of being able to satisfy its deepest desires by its own efforts: the desire to be and the desire to justify. Only the Divine leaves hope for the realisation of our desire to be and its justification as being good.

Analysing deep layers of consciousness, Nabert programmatically opposed 'top-down', speculative solutions. His work, despite being written over many years, constitutes a remarkably coherent whole, as a thematically and methodologically homogeneous field, and developed under the influence of problems and doubts arising in the course of research, even the most difficult and painful ones. The questions he posed, to which no clear answers could be found, provoked attempts to find solutions at higher levels or in other research perspectives. This path, inspired by Nabert, was followed by his pupil Ricoeur.

[7] J. Nabert, *Le désir de Dieu*, Paris 1966, Aubier–Montaigne, p. 56.
[8] J. Nabert, *Le désir de Dieu*, p. 57.

3. Ricoeur: A good life is a good story

Paul Ricoeur is the philosopher who most fully and interestingly combined the issues taken up by Nabert with those raised by phenomenology and existentialism. In Ricoeur's work, we find all the characteristic elements of the paradigm of the philosophy of consciousness, the priority of existential issues over cognitive ones, the distinction of human existence in the totality of being and the interest in concrete existence. Philosophy, according to the founder of hermeneutics, has ethical tasks to fulfil, it is supposed to lead from a state of alienation to freedom and happiness, restoring to man what has been lost by him in the course of his development.

In reflexive philosophy, the aim of research is to explain as fully as possible the reality of human consciousness and existence. However, Ricoeur draws conclusions from Nabert's research and comes to the conviction that pure reflection does not guarantee the realisation of this goal. The main reason is that "we are constituted by what happens to us"[9], so existence, not being something given to consciousness, cannot be controlled by the Self: the sources of consciousness must be sought outside itself.

Moreover, as he highlights, also following Nabert: "The subject […] is never the subject one supposes."[10] We must accept that what we can grasp from among the contents of consciousness is not all that influences our actions and the judgments we make. We are not able to fully understand ourselves, we are not able to answer the basic questions of "who am I" or "how to live well."

Hermeutical studies of the symbolism of evil, inspired by Nabert's analyses of evil, proved to be extremely important for the critique of reflexive philosophy. In these studies, Ricoeur attempts to understand the situation of man, who is not only capable of going astray, but is also a fallen being, as Kant suggested. How, then, can one point the way to a good life to a man who is unable to realise his motives, who often deceives himself and, on top of this, is unable to free himself from the evil ingrained in him?

Ricoeur here seems to have learnt from the impossibility of solving the problem of evil in Nabert's attempts and recognised that progress could only

[9] P. Ricoeur, *Towards a hermeneutics of the idea of Revelation*, in: P. Ricoeur, *Essays on Biblical interpretation*, Philadelphia 1980, Fortress Press, p. 107.

[10] P. Ricoeur, *Freud and philosophy. An essay on interpretation*, New Haven and London 1970, Yale University Press, p. 459.

be achieved by a change of method, i.e. by examining the many levels of existence and the traces, the messages it leaves behind, deciphering these meanings and analysing them philosophically. His analyses go further than the research of anthropology to unveil the meaning of the message of the myths concerning the fall of man, showing this fall in a concrete and at the same time comprehensible dimension. This hermeneutic analysis of the weakness of the human structure is intended as an attempt to explain the possibility of the appearance and existence of evil in the world.

At the same time, Ricoeur notes that traditional ethics starting from the alternative of good and evil, as existing in reality, "arrives too late."[11] Here, too, we find a theme inspired by Nabert – according to Ricoeur, already between possibility and existing reality is what we call the fall. The intermediate area in which the fall reveals itself contains intrinsically an act of freedom, and the only way to make sense of freedom is through another act of freedom, which amounts to admitting one's own weakness – one's own fall. Only when we admit that the decisive transition from weakness, as the possibility of error, to the reality of concrete evil has something really to do with us, are we able to seriously consider our passions as freedom enslaving itself.

Ricoeur notes that it is only by recognising the holistic incompatibility of man with himself, as Nabert postulated earlier, that we can grasp the meaning of essential human reality. In any other case, we are in danger of losing what is important, concrete and unique in this reality, what gives meaning to individual existence. Ricoeur emphasises that self-consciousness is not a given but is the task of coming closer to what is lost.[12] Man's acquisition of consciousness can be realised in a historical process and cannot end. Self-consciousness leads us from meaning to existence, from reflection to being in the world, i.e., to grasp the fundamental human way of being. The only way for the subject to achieve self-consciousness turns out to be through interpretation, or rather a multiplicity of interpretations, relating to the various dimensions of existence, the aim of which is to understand oneself ever better in the face of a world of signs. The results of these interpretations are incorporated by an ever-forming narrative identity into a story that allows the subject to define himself and his goals.

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[11] P. Ricoeur, *Fallible man. Philosophy of the will*, Chicago 1965, Henry Regnery Company, p. 219.

[12] D. E. Klemm, *The hermeneutical theory of Paul Ricoeur. A constructive analysis*, London, Toronto 1983, Bucknell University Press, p. 60.

Here it is worth noting that the question of identity is a creative development of the problem of the split between nature and freedom that Nabert signaled. Ricoeur solves the problem by pointing to two types of identity that are relevant to understanding subject development. One is identity, the basis of which is "character [which] designates the set of lasting dispositions by which a person is recognised."[13] Such an identity corresponds to what we consider being our own nature, to 'who/what' we are. However, as Ricoeur notes, this type of identity is not immutable, since many of these 'lasting dispositions' are the result of habits, or acquired patterns of response, as well as 'acquired identifications' that we owe to others.[14] In the latter case, the response to the other opens up a perspective for us to explore another type of identity, one that also involves Nabert's signalled desire for causal, free development and his conclusions about the role of others in our development.

This second type of identity involves a time perspective. It is not only important who we are, but also who we would like to be, what goals we would like to pursue and, finally, how we would like to be perceived (both by ourselves and by others). This is where identity comes in, which we only build in life, based on our character and capabilities, based on the role models we identify with and, finally, based on the projects we create and would like to realise. It is mainly from these ingredients that we create our own story, with which we identify and according to the requirements of which we try to live well, in our conviction. Recognition of ourselves, of our own limitations, of the quality of the patterns we adopt influences the quality of our story and the life shaped according to the narrative we adopt.

Ricoeur, following a similar approach to Nabert, does not construct philosophical concepts. In his research, he defends himself from outlining more general syntheses and summaries, and those he does make always turn out to be provisional and are challenged by the next steps of reflection. This is also the case when he polemicises against Kant's account of the role of duty in the realisation of the good life. In doing so, he formulates a hypothetical proposal that perhaps the categorical imperative should be understood and formulated somewhat differently: "Act solely in accordance with the maxim by which you can wish at the same time that what *ought not to be*, namely evil, will indeed

[13] P. Ricoeur, *Oneself as another*, Chicago 1992, University of Chicago Press, p. 121.
[14] P. Ricoeur, *Oneself as another*, p. 121.

not exist."[15] This is a proposal that not only helps to better understand the idea behind the formulation of the categorical imperative but also indicates a new, much less dogmatic, norm of action. It is a kind of imperative for anyone trying to create his or her story of how a good life should be lived.

Conclusion

Kant pointed out, contrary to the optimistic ancient and Christian traditions, that the evil will constituting man should be curbed so that man could lead a decent, good life. The pursuit of happiness, in his view, led to the satisfaction of only low motives and therefore had to be replaced by submission to the law. The free act of a man's decision to submit to duty was supposed to free him from his bad will. He identified living a good life with responsibility for one's own actions, but recognised that man was not a sufficiently self-contained entity to be able to decide for himself what was good and what was evil.

Nabert and Ricoeur, while recognising the vulnerability and non-selfhood of man that Kant signalled, point out that these are the constitutive sources of humanity's subjectivity, through which man can develop and transcend his limitations. They too affirm that to live a good life is to live a responsible life, but they emphasise that we can gain responsibility for our decisions and actions by understanding ourselves. They stress that Kant's conception is not sufficient to understand man because it does not reach the most intimate sources of spirituality – the sphere where we find man's deepest aspirations, such as the desire to understand his place in the world, the desire to be, and the desire to overcome evil. Only by becoming aware of the sources of alienation and understanding the meaning of the deepest desires can all the dimensions of being itself be revealed to the Self. This is the basis for realising a causal, responsible, full life, which, as Ricoeur points out, is the story we try to create with our lives. It seems that for both philosophers, the very act of embarking on this path of seeking self-understanding, motivated by the desire to be better, is the same as living a good life.

Living a good life is not the same as living a happy life. Especially with today's understandings of happiness. It is not a carefree or prosperous life. It is a difficult

[15] P. Ricoeur, *Oneself as another*, p. 218.

life because it is a life of responsibility. In it, we respond to the problems that come before us and for the gift of our existence, the meaning of which we are still seeking. However, it is a life that gives a sense of self-acceptance, something that modern man often lacks.

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