Praktinė filosofija

TWO SOURCES OF MEANINGFUL LIFE: AESTHETICS AND ETHICS

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Abstract. *In this paper, we analyse two alternative approaches to the question of a meaningful life in contemporary philosophy: the aesthetic and the ethical. First, we examine Michel Foucault's aesthetic approach whereby he argues in favour of understanding life as a work of art. Here aesthetics is understood as a constant search for the new, as innovation, and discontinuity. Next we examine the ethical approach found in contemporary neo-Aristotelianism developed by Alasdair MacIntyre. The ethical approach is presented as a direct critique of Nietzcheanism and aims to reconstruct the ethical subject in terms of unity, continuity, and the good. By examining the relation between the two positions, we argue for the importance of neo-Aristotelian ethics in the postmodern condition.*

Keywords: *selfhood, aesthetics, genealogy, ethics, human good, Michel Foucault, Alasdair MacIntyre*

In this essay, we examine two conceptions of selfhood that developed in contemporary philosophy. One conception is influenced by aesthetics, the so-called aestheticization of the self, which is pivotal in neo-Nietzschean postmodernity. We broach this conception of the self through the works of Michel Foucault. In his genealogical works, Foucault refers to aesthetics as a model for a life worthy to live in contemporary societies. The other conception of selfhood is the ethical, developed by contemporary neo-Aristotelian philosophy seen primarily in the works of Alasdair MacIntyre. Ethical approach aims to reconstruct the notion of self that is unitary, continuous, and oriented towards the realization of the good.

Both positions contradict and criticise one another. While the aesthetic self is developed from the premise of the emptiness of moral language, the return to the ethical self is seen as a direct critique of the postmodern aestheticization of the self. Both propose alternative sources for a meaningful life in late modern societies. Foucault's and MacIntyre's understanding of modernity and subsequent critique provide the warrant for this key difference. Foucault develops his position as a critique of modernity and is an important source of inspiration for postmodernity, while MacIntyre develops his neo-Aristotelianism as a critique of *both* modernity and postmodernity. Hence, this paper develops the discussion between these two positions in order to highlight the limits of the aesthetic position, arguing in favour of neo-Aristotelian ethics and its relevance

for the philosophical debates concerning the meaningfulness of human life.

1. Genealogy and the Aestheticization of the Self

In this essay, we consider what normative sources Michel Foucault's work, particularly his genealogical approach, offers. What is the neo-Nietzschean answer to the question of a good and meaningful life? Foucault was reluctant for some time to give an answer to this question. His genealogical approach was an attempt to escape any reference to the subject. How people come to see themselves the way they do had to be historically explained without reference to any truth about the subject. This idea of 'truth' has to be explained exactly. The genealogist in his or her research discovers that truth and power are essentially connected: "'Truth' is linked in a circular relation with systems of power which produce and sustain it, and to effects of power which it induces and which extend it. A 'regime' of truth" (Foucault 1984b: 74). What we understand as a subject is a result of such truth regimes.

What the genealogical enquiry discovers is not the truth of the subject, but the falseness of the self. Its unity and continuity is pretended and fabricated:

> Where the soul pretends unification or the self fabricates a coherent identity, the genealogist sets out to study the beginning – numberless beginnings, whose faint traces and hints of color are readily seen by a historical eye. The analysis of descent permits the dissociation of the self, its recognition and displacement as an empty synthesis, in liberating a profusion of lost events. (Foucault 1984a: 81)

So the genealogist, engaged in historical research, finds no stability, no continuity, no proof of any human nature. History is the privileged tool of genealogy insofar as it rejects the "certainty of absolutes". While the traditional historian develops an account of beginning, continuity, and *telos*, the genealogist sees discontinuities, dispersions, separations, "shattering the unity of man's being". The historical research of a genealogist is not aimed at explaining world history or events. The fundamental aim is to uncover the processes and the forces that form our understanding of "the self". That is to say, genealogical research discovers that at the core of human subjectivity lies the fabrication of the self: "Nothing in man – not even his body – is sufficiently stable to serve as the basis for self-recognition or for understanding other men" (Foucault, 1984a: 87–88).

Following Friedrich Nietzsche (1910), who saw the will to power behind all moral language, Foucault develops his notion of power as the fundamental category of human condition. Foucault provided much broader understanding of power than domination or repression. According to Foucault, we have to get rid of this simple notion of power. Power is not located in one particular point or centre, nor is it external to the subjects it represses and controls. In the first volume of *The History of Sexuality* Foucault developed a notion of power that is positive and creative. Power not so much represses us as it produces our conceptions of the self. Thus power and knowledge is intimately linked: "Both knowing subjects and truths known are the product of relations of power and knowledge" (Rouse 2006:107). What we understand as the self, its "truth", is the product of this creative, discursive power. It is the power that individualizes and creates our "selves". Such understanding of power means that there is no standpoint external to

power relations. "Power is everywhere; not because it embraces everything, but because it comes from everywhere" (Foucault 1978: 93). Power is diffused and decentred, functioning through the variety of institutions and knowledges.

A genealogist documents different power-truth regimes and their production of subjectivities. It is not surprising then that Foucault's genealogy rejects modern notions of freedom and progress. Humanity does not move from bondage towards freedom, towards the liberation of man, as modern thinkers from Kant to Marx imagined. Rather, history's movement is circular; it moves among different power-truth regimes.

At this point it is necessary to return to the question of what normative resources for good and meaningful life could genealogy provide. If the subject is inescapably trapped in power relations and is produced by these relations, if the notions of freedom and progress, and even the 'self', are empty, how can we conceptualize any understanding of good and meaningful life under postmodern condition? If power and knowledge is so intimately linked, how can the critique of power and resistance be possible? Charles Taylor raised the objection to Foucault's notion of power by arguing it provides no justification for the struggle to change existing power relations. If there is no "truth" about subject outside power relations, the argument goes, any attempt to change the power relations in terms of some sort of 'truth' will end up instituting another regime of power-truth. If so, we are left without any normative resources to struggle against the particular power-truth regime: "This regime-relativity of truth means that we cannot raise the banner of truth against our own regime" (Taylor 1986: 94). Thus the essential question remains for Foucault: how to conceptualize a meaningful or good life if we reject any truth about the self? What can serve as a source for the resistance and construction of meaningful life?

Foucault himself, later in his career, accepted that a normative background is needed to justify his research. Mostly, in his many interviews, he began pointing to a normative position that was inspired by an aesthetic view of being. This view Foucault took from Nietzsche, who also understood human life through aesthetic notions. Aesthetics here is understood as a constant creative innovation. Jürgen Habermas argued how this aesthetical modernism that aims to expand the realm of art to encompass all aspects of human life is central to all Nietzschean postmodernity (Habermas 1997). Modernist notion of aesthetics proved useful for Foucault's project as it kept the decentred subject as a normative ideal. That is, as a source of critique, it provided the notion of the self that tries to escape any attempt at ethical unification:

> But the relationships we have to have with ourselves are not ones of identity, rather, they must be relationships of differentiation, of creation, of innovation. To be the same is really boring. We must not exclude identity if people find their pleasure through this identity, but we must not think of this identity as an ethical universal rule. (Foucault 1994b: 166)

Therefore the account of a meaningful life is not the ethical unity of the self; it is criticised by genealogy as a result of the relations of power. So what we think we are, how we think about ourselves, and what is normal or a good life is the product of such relations. Resistance thus means rejecting what we have been made in order to recre-

ate ourselves differently. If our notions of subjectivity are the products of power we must constantly subvert them by creating new forms of life. The model for this activity is aesthetics. The unlimited possibility of creative reinvention of ourselves is then proposed instead of ethics as a new universal measure of a good life:

> "What strikes me is the fact that, in our society, art has become something that is related only to objects and not to individuals or to life. That art is something which is specialized or done by experts who are artists. But couldn't everyone's life become a work of art? Why should the lamp or the house be an art object but not our life?" (Foucault 1994a: 261)

But where does the inspiration of the decentred subject and its aesthetic innovation come from? It cannot be something reached by speculation but found through particular practice. This inspiration comes from what Foucault, following Georges Bataille, Maurice Blanchot, and Friedrich Nietzsche, calls limit-experience (Foucault 2002: 241). It is the experience that aims at maximum intensity, at the impossible that 'tears the subject from itself' (Foucault 1991: 30–31). It is a way of escaping the self that was constructed by power-truth regime by aiming at those experiences that are denied to the 'normal' self. So Bataille was fascinated by a variety of sexual experiences, drugs, death, and insanity (e.g. 2001, 1987). Aiming at these experiences that were forbidden to the normalised subject serves as a trajectory for escaping oneself and finding new ways of living and experiencing life.

Foucault's genealogical research continues the focus on such limit experiences. His research in the histories of madness, of sexuality, and of institutional punishment illustrates decentring experiences. Foucault examines how normalized subjectivity is formed by excluding some experiences constructed as madness, criminality, or sexual deviation. Foucault's work focuses on the discontinuities, conceptual ruptures and theoretical shifts in the formation of subjectivity in order to denaturalize the limits that define the "normal" subject. Our attempts to tell a narrative of how we became what we are, according to Foucault, have to be transformed into a genealogical attempt to escape what we are. Therefore, his theoretical work, as Foucault claimed on a number of occasions, serves as an inspiration to establish new types of relationships (Foucault 1991: 32). History construed in genealogical terms becomes a tool to escape from history, from the unity and identity of the "self".

In this respect, aesthetics and ethics stand as two opposites. The self as the work of art has to be continuously reinvented to escape ethical unification. Through the relentless reinvention and experimentation with life experiences the aesthetically formed self resists the effects of power that tries to impose unity and continuity of the self.

The aesthetic approach conceptualized by Foucault, thus, provides a source for a new type of radical politics. By focussing on the novelty and intensity of individual experiences and their aestheticizations, it gives rise to the politics of the self. The aesthetic self no longer aims at understanding itself through the traditional divisions of class, race or gender. All these divisions are seen as limiting and have to be resisted. The aestheticization of life focuses on the reinvention of new types of subjectivities

that escape traditional ones. From this point of view, the good life, paraphrasing Alasdair MacIntyre's formulation in *After Virtue*, is the life spent in inventing new forms of living.

2. Reconstructing the Ethical Subject

The neo-Aristotelian ethical conception of selfhood provides an alternative to the aesthetic trajectory of resistance and construction of meaningful life. If the aesthetics of the self seeks to escape the unitary subject, neo-Aristotelianism conceptualizes the ethical subject in terms of unity, accountability, and the good. From a Nietzschean perspective, morality is only a mask for power, but both Charles Taylor and Alasdair MacIntyre argue that the conception of the good is essential for meaningful selfhood.

Taylor argued, in *The Sources of the Self* (1989), that human identity is constituted by reference to the good. Because the good is fundamental for orienting human life, any account of human life must clearly conceive of what this good is. Therefore, any theory that tries to avoid any reference to the good is flawed. Taylor argues that even those theories which have no explicit account of the good presuppose some notion of the good. It simply remains unarticulated and perhaps unacknowledged. Those moral sources, or fundamental visions of the good, must be articulated in order to escape moral confusion and disorientation.

In so arguing, Taylor makes a distinction between life goods and constitutive goods. Life goods are the components of the good life; they are defined by our actions, feelings, and our modes of life. There are, though, more fundamental goods or constitutive goods. Reference to these constitutive goods serves as the touchstone to recognize other goods as goods. So, for example, according to Aristotle, the essential human good – *eudaimonia* which is lived by practicing ethical and intellectual excellence – allows us to rank the variety of goods which people pursue in their lives in order to live flourishing lives. Taylor describes these constitutive goods as "something the love of which empowers us to do and be good" (Taylor 1989: 92). They are the fundamental moral source for human life. The subject constitutes his own identity through understanding and articulating those goods that orient him in his life.

MacIntyre similarly argues that human life must be understood in terms of our ability to understand what the good is. MacIntyre understands individuals as proto-Aristotelians that through their actions enquire into the nature of human good. They act by asking the question "What is my good" and move towards asking "what is the good of human life". This vision of the good gives direction to human life. So the ethical subject is understood in terms of teleology, that is, the subject's life is oriented towards achieving what he or she considers to be the good of human being.

In *After Virtue*, MacIntyre expounds the vision of the self in neo-Aristotelian terms. It is the self that understands his or her identity through a narrative that unites human life into a continuous whole: "a concept of a self whose unity resides in a unity of a narrative which links birth to life to death as narrative beginning to middle to end" (MacIntyre 2007: 205). It is the vision of the good that unites such narratives and reveals their essentially teleological nature.

From the neo-Aristotelian perspective, human beings are "story-telling animals"

(MacIntyre 2007: 216). Their lives and actions are intelligible only as narratives. This does not mean that the story is always told explicitly. But the intelligibility of life depends on the agent's ability to articulate his or her narrative. When we give an account of our lives either to ourselves or to others, we engage in constructing narratives of our lives and in so doing we attempt to answer the question about those goods that orient our lives. Human life thus has the nature of a quest:

> The unity of a human life is the unity of a narrative quest. Quests sometimes fail, are frustrated, abandoned or dissipated into distractions; and human lives may in all these ways also fail. But the only criteria for success or failure in a human life as a whole are the criteria of success or failure in a narrated or to-be-narrated quest. (MacIntyre 2007: 219)

Such unity is the goal to be achieved. It depends both on the agent's ability to realize it in his or her ethical development with respect to the virtues one possesses or fails to possess. Yet it also depends on social institutions and circumstances which may enable or frustrate our attempts to live out our narratives. The narrative unity of life is also social because no one lives his or her life in isolation. Through an attempt to tell the story of my life I soon realize that my story is intertwined with the stories of others. So, these narratives are elements of the broader narratives of the various communities whose member the agent is.

The good which provides a *telos* for a neo-Aristotelian narrative can never be imagined in isolation of the good of various social relations and communities in which and through which the agent acts. The good is never just an individual good. It is the good of the particular individual, but it is connected to common goods in such a way that the one cannot be described without reference to the other: "So the good of each cannot be pursued without also pursuing the good of all those who participate in those relationships" (MacIntyre 1999: 107).

It is here that a preliminary conclusion can be drawn. History is central both to the genealogical and to the neo-Aristotelian accounts of the human self. While for a genealogist history serves as a tool to unmask power as well as to break from the past, MacIntyre employs an historical reading of moral philosophy to understand how such Nietzschean position became historically possible in the first place; it also provides resources for an alternative, ethical vision of the self.

If decentralization of the subject was a solution for Foucault, it is a problem that must be addressed for MacIntyre. The developments of modernity present a challenge to the unity of the self. MacIntyre observes that it is not just the philosophy (neo-Nietzschean postmodernity is one case) that rejects the unity of human life, but also strong social obstacles that make such unity hard to conceive exist. Life in contemporary societies is compartmentalized: "modernity partitions each human life into a variety of segments, each with its own norms and modes of behaviour" (MacIntyre 2007: 204). In such compartmentalized social conditions the individual can no longer function as a unitary self acting in different spheres, but one is faced with irreconcilable demands of various spheres: economic, political, family life, etc. So the neo-Aristotelian unity of the self is also restricted by the nature of contemporary social relations. Once again, the ethical subject is a goal to be achieved.

MacIntyre presents a philosophical story of how the Nietzschean standpoint became possible for a moral agent. In the essay, "Plain Persons and Moral Philosophy" (1998), MacIntyre gives an account of what he considers to be a reasoning of a plain person. This argument is a continuation of MacIntyre's philosophical account of the history of moral reasoning he presented in *After Virtue*, but this time from the perspective of a single agent who confronts the question of human good. The narrative presents moral reasoning as passing through several stages, which can be summarized as follows. The protagonist starts to enquire what is his or her good and the good for human being in an environment where the answer to such questions is possible. There exist rules of how to act and order the variety of human goods so as to achieve this fundamental human good. The protagonist, though, later faces the situation when various goods claim the status of the final good and he or she can see no rational justification to any of these goods to have the status of the final good, until the notion of the one final good finally disappears from view. It is then that the rules of conduct are separated from the notion of the good or are understood from an instrumental point of view, as an effective way to achieve whatever is understood to be good. The protagonist is faced with a variety of ethical theories and involves himself in a conflict on these issues regarding the nature of goods, rules, and the place of virtues in these different theories. Later he or she discovers that the conflict is not resolvable, that each of the contending parties gives completely different justification schemes, leaving no common background that would make a solution possible. In such situations, it becomes possible for the protagonist to distance himself or herself from any of the ethical positions and reject all of them as mere masks of the will to power (MacIntyre 1998: 145–146).

Thus for MacIntyre the neo-Nietzschean notion of the self is not a true account of the nature of the self, but merely an option made available for a plain person due to the disintegration of moral reasoning in compartmentalized modern societies. The Nietzschean position does not reveal the truth that moral language is empty, but that morality has been radically transformed in modernity and thus there is some truth in the postmodern distrust of moral language. However, what is important is the essential question posed by MacIntyre: should we continue travelling on the Nietzschean road or should we look for the resources that enable us to reconstruct the ethical unity of the self.

3. The Individual and the Collective

Foucault rejects historical collective identities in favour of radical individualism that breaks the chains of historical continuity. This position was and still continues to be influential by proposing the conception of a decentralized and constantly self-recreating individuality as a standpoint for the criticism of contemporary societies and the source for emancipatory activity.

The self as a work of art stands outside any essential relation to collectivities. This does not mean that the self conceptualized in aesthetic terms is not part of any collectivity. But these collective identities are not essential to one's self-understanding. They are created by individuals, exist as long as they find it necessary, and are as easily destroyed as formed. To attach or not to attach oneself to any collectivity is the

free decision of individuals. Jean-François Lyotard's description of the postmodern social bond illustrates this thesis well. Lyotard uses the term 'language-games' to refer to the nature of social relations in postmodernity. Social bonds understood as games means that they are flexible and non-essential. They are based on the creation of unexpected moves where partners in a game can be easily replaced by other partners or groups (cf. Lyotard 1984, esp. chapter 5). They are a part of the aesthetic self-creation so much that the self can form collective identities from the same impulse to live his life as a piece of art. But the same logic of aesthetic creation dictates that the individual is always at a distance from these self-created collective identities and is always ready to denounce them or form new collective identities.

Radicalised individuality of aesthetic postmodernity also considers resistance in terms of the individual. It is the individual that resists what it perceived as unjust power relations and not the individual as a member of a particular community. To liberate oneself in order to create one's life as if it was a piece of art is something that an individual has to achieve himself or herself. The principle for the aesthetic creation is the unique experience of creating individuality. Thus, there is a strong impulse toward elitism, as was certainly the case with Nietzsche. It is evident that not everyone has the strength needed to live the life of aesthetic self-creation. This position becomes more troubling when one considers how the aesthetics of the self is related to the totality of social relations. There is no necessary link between the identity of the aesthetics of the self and the particular type of social relations. The aesthetic self can feel at home with the injustices of capitalism as long as one has enough resources to lead his or her life outside the injustices of these social relations, however fictitious his or her being outside the totality of social relations may be.

The ethical subject does not exist in his relation to collectivity uncritically. But the emphasis is rather different. Both subjects start from enquiring into their historical roots. The aesthetics of the subject, on the one hand, uses history in order to break the historical continuity. Discontinuity and rupture are the constitutive moments in the self-creation of the aesthetic subject. The ethical subject, on the other hand, enquires into various histories he is grounded in as a part of the quest for the good life. Without this knowledge of his historical roots, the quest for the good is hardly possible. The ethical self aims at the unity and continuity of one's identity.

The ethical subject cannot understand himself or herself without the knowledge of history of those social relations and communities of which he or she is a member. Criticising and even rejecting the historical continuity is always possible and sometimes necessary. But the rejection comes not from the unrestrained freedom of self-creation but from the narrative quest for the human good. Rebellion can be a source of one's moral identity, but how it is justified and accounted for is what provides rebellion its moral source.

MacIntyre argues that the self that rejects his history or sees the historical circumstances of his existence as mere accidents also readily rejects any responsibility for the past or present actions of those communities of which he is a part. MacIntyre gives an example of the attitude

of a white American claiming that the effects of slavery have no effect on his identity because he himself has no responsibility for the past (MacIntyre 2007: 220). But more just relationships can be formed only by acknowledging the past and learning from its mistakes: "I am born with a past; and to try to cut myself off from that past, in an individualist mode, is to deform my present relationships" (MacIntyre 2007: 221). If the ethical subject is grounded in histories of which he can be justifiably critical, this criticism should remain as an element of these histories and traditions, and should not be used for a dogmatic rejection of any historical ground.

Thus MacIntyre is critical of collectively imposed identities as well. He rejects both classical Marxist emphasis on class identity as well as the nationalistic sentiments of large modern states. But the lesson of Macintyre's account of moral reasoning and the nature of selfhood is that the ethical subject is dependent on the type of social relations in which he finds himself. One's ability to understand the nature of the human good and to live one's life as a unity oriented toward the good is not the question of a correct attitude but is also a social question. If the well-being of the ethical self is dependent on the well-being of social relations, then the central problem is how to sustain these relations that makes the achievement of human good possible. Ethical self cannot but understand himself as a part of a broader collective on which his well-being is dependent. The creation and defence of those social relations, though, that allow the individual to pursue his individual and collective goods is hardly possible for the aesthetic self, who understands the break from any community as a source of the life worthy to be lived.

From the neo-Aristotelian perspective, the modernity's compartmentalizing tendencies shatter the unity of the self making it impossible to experience life as a unitary whole. Postmodernist aestheticization of the self only continues and radicalizes this tendency. Neo-Aristotelian proposal to reconstruct unitary self is not the return to some uncritical forms of life. On the contrary, this reconstruction requires the critique of past and present forms of life in order to articulate those goods that allow individuals and communities to flourish. This ethical unitary self is not a passive object of power-truth regime as genealogy would suppose. It is born from the criticism of modern forms of life and collective struggle to construct meaningful social relations.

Conclusion

The postmodern aestheticization of life radicalized the individualistic tendencies of modernity. It aims at the final disengagement of the subject from any essential connection to social relations and collective identities in favour of the self that can live one's life as a form of art. But another road is offered by contemporary neo-Aristotelian philosophy. It challenges postmodernity by pointing to the need to reconstruct the ethical subject. Instead of radicalizing modernity, neo-Aristotelianism provides a source of how to remain critical of both modern and post-modern tendencies. The neo-Aristotelian approach not only reconceptualises the possibility of the ethical self that can rationally understand the nature of human good but also provides an historical account of how the postmodern self became a possible option for contemporary indi-

viduals. It points to the possibility and the need to challenge the Nietzschean rejection of ethical discourse.

The neo-Aristotelian account is based on the premise that human identity is understood only through the reference to the good. Self-understanding requires the ability to articulate those goods that constitute human identity. But this ability, as it was argued, depends on social relations. Thus, while the aestheticization of the self is an option for individual resistance in compartmentalized contemporary societies, neo-Aristotelian approach argues for the need to create those social relations that allow individuals to live their life as a unity and to realize those goods that constitute their identities. Instead of rejecting history and collective identities, the ethical self learns how to engage critically with one's past and learn those goods that constitute one's well-being as well as to learn from his or her mistakes in order to create better social relations that allow for a more fulfilling life.

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DU PRASMINGO GYVENIMO ŠALTINIAI: ESTETIKA IR ETIKA

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Santrauka. Šiame straipsnyje analizuojami du skirtingi požiūriai į prasmingo gyvenimo klausimą šiuolaikinėje filosofijoje: estetinis ir etinis. Pirma, aptariamas Michelio Foucault estetinis požiūris, kuriuo remdamasis jis siūlo gyvenimą suvokti kaip meno kūrinį. Estetinis požiūris čia suprantamas kaip nuolatinė naujumo, inovacijos, pertrūkio paieška. Toliau aptariamas etinis požiūris Alasdairo MacIntyre'o išplėtotoje šiuolaikinėje neo-aristotelinėje filosofijoje. Etinis požiūris pristatomas kaip tiesioginė nyčiškos filosofijos kritika, siekianti rekonstruoti etinį subjektą per vientisumo, tęstinumo ir gėrio sampratas. Aptariant abu požiūrius, straipsnyje argumentuojama neo-aristotelinės etikos svarba postmoderniajame būvyje.

Pagrindiniai žodžiai: savastis, estetika, genealogija, etika, žmogiškas gėris, Michel Foucault, Alasdair MacIntyre

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