

Practicing Philosophy as Experiencing Life

Essays on American Pragmatism

Edited by

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Prolegomena to Pragmatist Conception of the Good Life

Emil Višňovský

Philosophical Approach to the Good Life

Who would not like to live a good life? But who is actually living it? Moreover, 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 that is 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 indication of the highest norm 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

(cf. 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 privileged access to considering whether our lives are good or not; but if this is the case, we have to allow the same right and privilege to all.

The role of rationality in both designing and evaluating human life has been taken as crucial since Plato (cf. Taylor 1989, 20–23). The guiding 'divine light' of reason is the guarantee of the moderateness 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 his famous school 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 (cf. Irvine 2008). Wisdom, as recently defined by R. Nozick, "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" (1989, 267).

Philosophers may suggest various ideals of a good life (cf. 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 businesses or indulging themselves in the petty allurements 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 histories that provide 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 and Individual 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 ways 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 'show-biz'-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-fulfillment,' 'joy,' 'happiness,' or what M. Czikszentmihalyi (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 sadists or mass murderers 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 (cf. 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 lives for themselves, everyone is reliant on themselves finding a way of combining the 'objective' and the 'subjective' powers in order to create their own models 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 of and/or satisfied with.

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).

Good Life and Good Society

Be it as it may, the good life of a human individual can hardly be conceived, *a fortiori* on pragmatist terms, outside of what could be called a 'good society.' But who knows *what good society is*? No doubt, the answers to this question are so variable that one might be tempted to say that they answer nothing at all. It definitely depends on individual preferences as well as cultural traditions: each social subject may have their own ideas of a good society. However, we can certainly identify some common and cross-cultural features that apply to any good society, and which have been highlighted by classic modern philosophers such as Hobbes, Locke, and French Enlightenment *philosophes*, etc. These features include, at least: peace, prosperity, liberty, equality, justice, human rights and rule of law in addition to many others, such as a satisfactory living standard; quality healthcare and education; security including low levels of criminality (or none); friendliness and generosity in human relationships etc. The concept of a good society thus reflects fundamental social and political values and principles. Without analyzing this topic in great detail, let me just give you a few examples of explicit conceptions of a good society, all rather contradictory, but all with some relation to pragmatism, despite not being explicitly pragmatist.

Walter Lippmann (1937) described the good society in his book of the same title as a new modern society to which humanity is oriented; yet, it is not only

an idealistic project but also a realistic aim to be achieved by economic and technological transformations and which is to be based on both social reforms, leading to the reduction of exploitation and reconciliation of conflicts, and on moral virtues (such as responsibility, justice, etc.). His vision of a good society was a relatively standard modern liberal vision drawing on developments within the USA. Nonetheless, John Dewey dismissed it in his review of Lippmann's book as 'reactionary,' 'idealistic' and 'utopian,' resting on 'abstract simplification,' improper 'legalism' and 'economic determinism,' and above all, declared it a failed conception on the basis of the means proposed: "Every system of social thought which sets up ends without reference to the means by which they are to be brought about tends in effect to support the status quo, no matter how good the intentions of those who paint the picture" (Dewey 1987, 488). According to Dewey, the problem of any vision of a good society consists not so much in the features to be postulated and agreed on as goals, but in the means and ways in which they can be achieved: "Definite and systematic exploration of the means, compatible with a free society of free human beings as the end, is, to my mind, the central problem, intellectually and practically..." (*ibid.*, 495).

Another, more recent example of a theory on good society is the work of a liberal and Keynesian economist, John Kenneth Galbraith (1996). He insisted on a clear definition of what the good society is and considered it achievable. He wrote:

In the good society all of its citizens must have personal liberty, basic well-being, racial and ethnic equality, the opportunity for a rewarding life. Nothing, it must be recognized, so comprehensively denies the liberties of the individual as a total *absence of money*...nothing so inspires socially useful effort as the prospect of pecuniary reward, both for what it procures and not rarely for the pleasure of pure possession it accords. This too the good society must acknowledge; these motivations are controlling (1996, 4).

Therefore, according to Galbraith,

[T]he essence of the good society can be easily stated. It is that every member, regardless of gender, race or ethnic origin, should have *access to a rewarding life*... There must be economic opportunity for all... No one, from accident of birth or economic circumstance, may be denied these things; if they are not available from parent or family, society must provide effective forms of care and guidance (*ibid.*, 23).

For him it is clear that “[t]he role of economics in the good society is basic; economic determinism is a relentless force. The economic system in the good society must work well and for everyone. Only then will opportunity match aspirations, either great or small” (*ibid.*, 24).

The communitarian sociologist Amitai Etzioni has dealt with the issue of a good society in a number of his works and provides one of the richest visions ever. He grounds his understanding of a good society in the concept of community (but completely ignores Dewey and pragmatism), and thus according to him, “[o]ne attribute of a good society is that it is one in which strong communal bonds are balanced by powerful protections of self. Such a society is not simply communal, but also firmly upholds both social ties and autonomy, social order and liberty.” In his search for the common good, Etzioni provides a number of signs of a good society such as the reduction of “inequality to a larger extent”; governance “not merely by contracts, voluntary arrangements, and laws freely enacted, but also by a thick layer of mores that are in turn derived from values”; bearing “heavily on such moral dialogues to determine the values that will constitute the shared cultures”; regulation “by reliance on the moral voice rather than on the law, and the scope of the law itself must be limited largely to that which is supported by the moral voice;” and again, “the good society is defined as one that balances two values, social order and autonomy, rather than maximizing one” (Etzioni 2002, 83–96).

However, Etzioni, strangely enough, rarely mentions democracy as a dimension of a good society, and even criticizes the liberal idea of civil society as not being a good society. He argues:

The civil society rests on classical liberalism and its contemporary offshoots. Given that this philosophy seeks to rely on each person to define the good rather than the society, liberalism seeks to leave value decisions as much as possible in the private realm, keeping the public realm thin and procedural and hence of very limited substantive normative moral content.

According to Etzioni,

The good society builds on communitarian philosophy. It assumes social definitions of the good, and that a well functioning society, let alone a good one, requires a core of substantive (rather than merely procedural) shared values which in part define not only public but also private proper behavior. To transmit these values from generation to generation, the

good society heavily relies on the family, schools, and the community (including its places of worship and civic associations).

ETZIONI 2000A, 355–377

He further claims that to achieve civil society is not enough. A good society, which is at the same time an ideal and a measure of progress, should be striven for. And this is a society in which Kantian norm is applied, to treat people “as ends in themselves and not merely as instruments; as whole persons rather than as fragments; as members of a community, bonded by ties of affection and commitment, rather than only as employees, traders, consumers or even as fellow citizens” (Etzioni 2000b, 11). Etzioni further suggests many more trends and provides greater details of this ideal within the framework of the ‘third way’ between capitalism and socialism (e.g. mutuality of social services; new orientations in education, partnerships, disarmament of population; diversity of cultures; spiritual pursuits, and the like).

A different conception of a good society with explicit inclusion of civil society and democracy, drawing substantially on Dewey, has been proposed by sociologist Robert Bellah and his fellow academics (Bellah *et al.* 1992). From their perspective on institutions, they cannot imagine how democracy and citizen participation could be eliminated from the concept of a good society. Despite the fact that they outline some of its features, their standpoint is that “there is no pattern of a good society that we or anyone else can simply discern and then expect people to conform to it”; it is central to their “very notion of a good society that it is an open quest, actively involving all its members” (*ibid.*, 9). These authors are well aware that democracy itself is “an ongoing moral quest, not an end state” and with reference to the democratic transformation in former Czechoslovakia they rightly expect “a long process of institutionalizing democratic participation” (*ibid.*, 20). They think of a good society much in terms of Dewey’s concept of ‘great community’ and apply his idea of creative democracy to the creation of democratic institutions whose purpose is to enable intelligent public opinion and the responsible social participation of all citizens. There is an organic relationship between active citizenship and the reshaping of institutions. In pursuit of a good society, they also call for a reshaping of democracy in theory and practice, based on the Deweyan conception of politics and a renewed public. Democratic citizenship for these authors is active democratic participation in all spheres of public life and democracy for them is paying attention to all the important things in life that matter that is to the self-cultivation of all citizens. A value-based approach, recognizing that “money and power are necessary as means, but they are not the proper measures of a good society” (*ibid.*, 272), is also essential in their

approach to democracy. Such values as cooperation, responsibility and trust are both the values of democracy and the vehicles of a good society. As to the meaning of a good society itself, it is “to sustain a good life on this planet for ourselves and the generations to come” (*ibid.*, 9). That it is hard to find any consensus amongst the theoreticians of a good society is clear from my last two examples.

One approach is exclusively positive and it sees a good society mostly as a ‘harmonious’ society whatever its characteristics may be. For instance, a good society is a society, where neither institutions nor people humiliate one another; it is a society based on the premise that human nature finds its key expression in *work*; and a society that does not lose its sense of shame at the wrongs it commits is a society that may also be called a ‘decent society’ (Margalit 1996).

On the other hand, does it mean that contradictions, controversies, conflicts, various kinds of struggle and power games should be eliminated from any type of a good society? The well-known post-Marxist Chantal Mouffe poses the question as follows:

What is a ‘good society’? Is it a society pacified and harmonious where basic disagreements have been overcome and where an overlapping consensus has been established about a single interpretation of common values? Or is it a society with a vibrant public sphere where many conflicting views can be expressed and where there is the possibility to choose among legitimate alternative projects? I want to argue in favor of this second view because I am convinced that, contrary to what is usually taken for granted today, it is a mistake to believe that a ‘good society’ is one where antagonisms have been eradicated and where the adversarial model of politics has become obsolete (2004, 42).

This is the claim that Mouffe espouses particularly in her conception of democracy which she calls ‘agonistic pluralism.’ She considers the dominant liberal model of democracy to be impotent in understanding the nature of dissensus and antagonism, which are linked to the ways in which power operates in a democratic society. Since this can by no means be eliminated, it means

[T]hat the democratic society cannot be conceived any more as a society that would have realized the dream of a perfect harmony or transparency. Its democratic character can only be given by the fact that no limited social actor can attribute to oneself the representation of the totality and claim in that way to have the ‘mastery’ of the foundation (*ibid.*, 44).

The substance of this is that power relations are constitutive of society, so “the main question of democratic politics is not how to eliminate power but how to constitute forms of power that are compatible with democratic values” (*ibid.*). She has proposed (along with Ernesto Laclau) an alternative conception of democracy which does not privilege consensus. The second point that Mouffe considers important in changing current conceptualization of a good society is globalization.

There are seemingly a lot of points in these conceptions with which we, pragmatists, can agree. But we should develop our own specific pragmatist conception of a good society (and of a good human life). It can also be shown that: 1. To contrast civil society with good society is a mistake since civil society is part of a good society; 2. There is an alternative conception of a civil society to the liberal one denounced by Etzioni, that is the pragmatist conception; 3. Pragmatism is the middle ground between the unhelpful controversy between liberalism and communitarianism. 4. Pragmatism includes, but should further develop, a contemporary conception of social conflicts (Caspary 2000); 5. Pragmatism includes, but should further develop, a contemporary conception of social and political power (Rogers 2009).

Pragmatism and Philosophy of Life

The philosophy of pragmatism has been accused of many failures, such as the distorted or even missing conception of human life. On the other hand, pragmatism is very often considered as radical ‘anthropocentrism,’ relating all issues to human beings and for the sake of human beings. But philosophical anthropology and ‘philosophy of life’ have European, mostly German, roots. These are the areas of philosophy that deal with issues such as the ‘nature of human being,’ the ‘value of human life,’ the ‘meaning of life,’ the ‘good life,’ and the like. The major proponents of these issues in modern times have been philosophers such as M. Scheler, H. Plessner, A. Gehlen, M. Landmann, E. Rothacker, but also K. Jaspers, M. Buber, E. Cassirer, as well as the classics such as S. Kierkegaard, A. Schopenhauer, F. Nietzsche, M. Heidegger, H.-G. Gadamer, and also some French philosophers, such as G. Marcel, J.-P. Sartre, M. Foucault, and J. Derrida. Their insights concerning human life are considered to be unrivalled and the deepest in comparison to all other philosophical currents and approaches.

However, pragmatism, too, is certainly one of those philosophies that do not resign to problems of human life and the human world. The opposite is in fact true. Ample evidence could be amassed along these lines starting from such

'proto-pragmatists' as Emerson and Thoreau. It was Emerson who, not unlike Nietzsche, in his famous "The American Scholar" (1837) called for "philosophy of life" and considered life to be "our dictionary" and "the quarry from where we get tiles and copestones" (Emerson in Atkinson 2000, 55–72). And it was likewise Thoreau, who in his *Walden* (1854), when famously making the contrast between philosophers and philosophy professors, claimed: "To be a philosopher is not merely to have subtle thoughts, nor even to found a school, but to so love wisdom as to live according to its dictates... It is to solve some of the problems of life, not only theoretically, but practically" (Thoreau in Bode 1982, 270). Even Peirce, who strongly opposed any connection between philosophy and life and thus condemned not only James but also the whole Hellenistic conception of philosophy mingling it with ethical and esthetic practice, respected ethics as a way to a good life. Peirce, the Darwinian, was also an Epicurean in his 'metaphysics of life' as expressed in his tychism.

Of course, it was Dewey and James from among the classical pragmatists who were primarily the 'humanists' or 'anthropologists' and whose philosophy can plausibly be termed as a 'philosophy of life.' It is so not only because they declared that the purpose of philosophy is to solve the 'problems of men' (and women) rather than the problems of philosophers (according to Dewey), and because it cannot avoid solving the question of why 'is life worth living?' (according to James); but also because of their personal ways of lives, which in many ways embodied their philosophies that sought the betterment of humanity and its lot.

David L. Murray, the now forgotten American philosopher, very succinctly summarized this in the final chapter of his book *Pragmatism* (1912):

The mission of pragmatism is to bring Philosophy into relation to real Life and Action. So far from regarding Thought as a self-centered, self-enclosed activity, Pragmatism insists upon replacing it in its context among other functions of life, and in measuring its value by its effect upon them (2001, 70).

Murray refers to Ferdinand C.S. Schiller and he himself advocates the transition from pragmatism to 'humanism' based on a different conception of "the place of knowing in human life at large" (*ibid.*, 71–72).

From among contemporary pragmatists, we can, of course, include Richard Rorty and Hilary Putnam whose philosophical projects are quite clearly directed, albeit in the subtext, toward the pragmatist philosophy of life. Rorty, trying to solve his lifelong question of 'what is philosophy good for?,' once mentioned that "pragmatism is based on the idea that nothing is more important than human happiness, which cannot be transcended by any other idea

including the idea of human grandeur” (1998, 549). According to Rorty, philosophy’s role is to provide “the imaginative re-description of human situation” through which it can serve either as therapy or as poetry, but in both cases it aims at self-creation rather than self-understanding (Allen 2004, 145–162). His interest in the ever-continuing richness of human life and in becoming more fully human in every possible way was his main concern as a philosopher and as a human being. He was also a true pragmatist meliorist when surmising that “we all have, given sufficient security, wealth, education and leisure, the capacity to be the artists of our own lives” (Rorty 2010, 20).

Hilary Putnam sees philosophy in general as having “a double task: to integrate our various views of our world and ourselves..., and to help us find a meaningful orientation in life” (Putnam 1989/1999, 82). In particular, he sees pragmatism, and especially its Jamesian version, as a school for which “the central philosophical question is how to live” just as it was for Socrates and his followers, so “the opposition between philosophy which is concerned with how to live and philosophy which is concerned with hard technical questions, is a false opposition” (Putnam 1995, 22; Putnam 2008). He accepts that the “great insight of pragmatism” is the insistence on the idea “that what has weight in our lives should also have weight in philosophy” (Putnam 1999, 70).

Similar claims, which explicitly confirm a pragmatist orientation to life problems, can be found in a number of recent works. John Lachs, concerned with the menace of the irrelevance of philosophy to life generally, urges that

“philosophers have...an obligation to address the problems of daily living” and that “philosophical reflection can yield results” in “the service of improving life.” He himself devotes his writing entirely to becoming “clear about persistent problems of human happiness” and “in the way of understanding human life” (Lachs 1995, xiii–xvii).

The pragmatist philosophy of life as developed in the works of Lachs, balanced with a Stoic approach, are perhaps the best example today of how this philosophical mission could be fulfilled (Lachs 1998; 2003; 2012).

Another example might be the work of Sami Pihlström who in his numerous publications tries to develop pragmatist anthropology. He takes pragmatism to be “a vision of the fullness of human life in the world” (1996, 37). In his first monograph, despite focusing on ontology, he dealt with anthropology when he wrote: “Pragmatists...have constantly argued that philosophy does not merely aim at a deeper understanding of the world, but also at making human life meaningful” (*ibid.*, 17). The understanding of the world has a practical, i.e. anthropological purpose: we humans do not care about the world just

in itself; we care about it because of ourselves and our good life, which, on the other hand, we cannot achieve without understanding the world. Ontology should be transformed via anthropology, not replaced by it, nor abandoned for the sake of it. Pihlström writes:

The tradition of pragmatism has been guided by the fundamental conviction that philosophy – as well as science and any other practice – is in the service of good life. Ontological discussions and arguments, which aim at a philosophical conception of what exists, of what is real, of what there is in the world, should also serve this ultimate human purpose (*ibid.*, 379).

We are responsible for our practices; that is for our way of life and art of life, which also includes responsibility for the world we create by our practices (*ibid.*, 409).

In conclusion of this section, we may summarize in a generalized way: the contemporary pragmatist turn in philosophy has brought about a change in order to “promote a style of philosophizing more apt to dealing with the problems of everyday life” (Eggington and Sandbothe, 2004, 120). This is an important change not only in having an alternative understanding of what philosophy is but also in understanding its purpose and mission: philosophy should directly help people to live a good life, a better life, which includes the construction of a good society as well as good practices in terms of the art of life. Pragmatism is the successor to Sophists, Socrates, Stoicism and Epicureanism in terms of conceptions of philosophy – of what philosophy is good for and what philosophers should do: to provide an understanding of the human condition at one with its transformation. I prefer to see pragmatism as a “philosophy of transformation” based on the experience of “life as an ongoing process, capable of transformation” (Eldridge 1998, 107) as our human response to ever changing natural and socio-cultural conditions.

Pragmatist Understanding of Human Life

Sidney Hook put the question appropriately: “What, if anything, has philosophy to tell us about human condition, about the fate of man and his works?” (Hook, 1959–1960, 5). What, then, does pragmatist philosophy tell us about this issue?

Firstly, pragmatism understands human life (or existence) within the broadest framework of naturalism. Human beings (organisms) have evolved naturally and live within a natural environment, which is “unstable and precarious,”

from which they “must gather all the resources they can muster to survive” (Eames 1977, 8). Their primordial task is to ‘adjust or die,’ as W. James was contending, but if “human beings are to live and to live well, they must understand the kind of world in which they exist and the kinds of values appropriate to that existence” (*ibid.*). However, according to pragmatism, “the nature of the world can only be described philosophically by referring to human practice, experience, and culture, after all” (Pihlström 1996, 362–363).

What is most fundamental for life is “the validity of valuations,” i.e. our classification of “all objects as ‘good’ and ‘bad,’ according as they are ends to be pursued or avoided, or means which further or frustrate the pursuit of ends” (Murray 2001, 72). As Dewey has shown, the process of human adjustment to nature has two forms: 1. accommodation within conditions we cannot change, and 2. adaptation within conditions we can change (cf. Dewey 1934, 15–16). Given this situation, human life depends crucially on our ability to find out what we can and what we cannot control (exactly as Epictetus made the starting point of his conception of the art of living as applied to each human being). Life experience has shown that change which is beyond our control is the greatest danger to life and, based on this, humans have come up with an initiative for permanently extending the limits of their control. The more we can control the better, as to the life that we can get. However, experience also shows that there is and can be no absolute human control over nature, such that would eliminate any kind of change. “In a world of change and instability there is no basis for an absolute, fixed mode of life, but neither is there a basis for complete resignation” (Eames 1977, 11). Despite the fact that humanity has embarked on the road from ‘precarious to stable,’ on a quest for certainty and security, in which they see guaranteed survival and life, it is flexibility rather than rigidity of life forms, and selectivity rather than fixation of means, that have proved to be the effective ways to these goals.

Secondly, pragmatism understands human life in terms of action (activity) and experience. Human life is practical throughout; the human world is the sum of socio-cultural practices. To solve their life problems, humans must act, be active and utilize their practical experience. Human life itself is nothing other than action understood as the complex interactions and transactions between humans and their environment, which is not just natural (the one not created by humans) but is equally socio-cultural (the one created by humans). To adjust to nature human beings create ‘second nature,’ or transform nature into culture. Human action, and *eo ipso* human life, is intelligent, that is purposive, goal-directed, intentional, rational, instrumental, creative, reflective, examined, emotional, symbolic, social, etc. There are many purposes and evaluations of them: ethical, aesthetic, intellectual, etc.,

and the *summum bonum* is “the ideal of the harmonious satisfaction of all purposes” (Murray 2001, 72). It is an intelligent action through which human beings in principle create the human world and in which they live their lives as human beings.

Thirdly, pragmatism understands human life in terms of “the immediate flux” (James 1912, 93–94), which is potentially unstable, precarious, and full of conflicting, problematic, even tragic situations. This is closely allied with the pragmatist concept of contingency as one of the ‘generic traits of life.’ There is no natural law, no kind of necessity that would guarantee human beings their good life or happiness. “Life is a chain of problems, so we are born into trouble...” (Lachs 1998, 25). Life is a rat race “that has more casualties than a war” (*ibid.*, 42). Therefore, no one should be bewildered that pragmatism incorporates “the tragic sense of life as a feature of human experience” (Hook 1959–1960, 10). This concept does not indicate “merely sensitivity to the presence of evil or suffering in the world;” it also comprehends the difference between “the sense of the pitiful and the sense of the tragic”; while the former includes “sickness, old age and even many forms of death,” and the latter is a moral phenomenon, “a very simple thing which is rooted in the very nature of the moral experience and the phenomenon of moral choice” (*ibid.*, 13). This phenomenon is not simply the existence of evil, but “a situation where good conflicts with good” or good with right, or even right with right. In such a situation some good is always sacrificed and we must all live with it; it is unavoidable, and thus necessarily tragic. The pragmatist method of dealing with this tragic situation (apart from the Hegelian method of historical reason or the Judeo-Christian method of love) is a Deweyan method of creative intelligence: “Its categorical imperative is to inquire, to reason together, to seek in every crisis the creative devices and inventions that will not only make life fuller and richer but tragedy bearable” (*ibid.*, 20). Hook concludes: “As I understand the pragmatic perspective on life, it is an attempt to make it possible for men to live in a world of inescapable tragedy, – a tragedy which flows from the conflict of moral ideals, – without lamentation, defiance or make-believe” (*ibid.*, 22).

But he also adds:

There is more in life than the sense of the tragic. There is laughter and joy and the sustaining discipline of work... There is art, science and religion. There are other uses of intelligence besides the resolution of human difficulties. There is intellectual play and adventure.... Pragmatism, as I interpret it, is the theory and practice of enlarging human freedom in a precarious and tragic world by the arts of intelligent social control (*ibid.*, 26).

John McDermott writes in a similar, albeit more explicit existentialist vein, starting from the “first, foremost, and permanent ontological fact of our human situation” that is “that we were born to live but sure to die” (1993, 274). He depicts our living as “constitutive of our person. Who we are at any moment is precisely our living.” Living for him is “a journey” which “involves risk.” But despite all the suffering, he chooses “to go on living,” and answers “the question ‘Is life worth living?’ affirmatively” in the style of James and Dewey. He comes close to the Stoic and Deweyan art of living when claiming “that it is not necessary to have certitude in order for a person to live a meaningful life” (*ibid.*, 275–283). Jacquelyn Kegley too, when giving comments on McDermott’s conception of life, stresses the concept of “creative living” as “an unrepressed life that can sing its own song” and “the only way one can live a distinctively human life” (2006, 61).

Summing up this section, it may be stated that: 1. the pragmatist conception of human life is naturalist, realist and activist; 2. it is neither naively optimistic, nor hopelessly pessimistic; 3. it stresses change and (self-) creation. Pragmatist humanism refuses “to treat the world, for good or bad, as a given and completed whole” (Murray 2001, 72). The human “has always an interest in improving his condition,” so “is it not futile to forbid him to re-make his world as best as he can?” (*ibid.*). We cannot know in advance what is or is not changeable, so “is it not our wisest course, then, to persist trying?” (*ibid.*). In the end we may agree with J. Lachs: “The most notable feature of pragmatists is their commitment to bring life under intelligent and effective human control” (Lachs 2012, 44).

Pragmatist Approach to the Good Life

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 (cf. 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 the pragmatist conception of the good life, 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 one way 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 (cf. Peirce 1931–1958; Dewey 1978).

The founders of pragmatism viewed the issue of a good life in the context of moral (Peirce, James) and social (Dewey) life. Peirce, when reflecting on the relation of science to morality in 1896, put down into his manuscript the following paragraph:

I regard morality as highly necessary; but it is a means to good life, not necessarily coextensive with good conduct. Morality consists in the folklore of right conduct. A man is brought up to think he ought to behave in certain ways. If he behaves otherwise, he is uncomfortable. His conscience pricks him. That system of morals is the traditional wisdom of ages of experience. If a man cuts loose from it, he will become the victim of passions. It is not safe for him even to reason about it, except in a purely speculative way. Hence, morality is essentially conservative. Good morals and good maners are identical....

PEIRCE, CP 1.50

Thus, he was coming closer to the view that even study of ethics as a kind of theoretical study “is more or less favourable to right living” (Peirce, CP 1.600).

James was one of those philosophers who took his philosophy not only theoretically as a matter of thought and teaching but to a large extent as a matter of practical life in the first place. To live a good (or moral) life and to live philosophically is one and the same process which includes, on the one hand, the living according to one's philosophy of (ethical) goodness, and, on the other hand, the articulation of this philosophy based on one's own life experience. James was from the beginning of his career as a thinker agonizing about the issue of the meaning of life; and the question which brought him to reading philosophy was actually the question of ‘how to live?’ He famously put down in his diary of April 30, 1870:

I think that yesterday was a crisis in my life. I finished the first part of Renouvier's second *Essais* and see no reason why his definition of free will – ‘the sustaining of a thought *because I choose to* when I might have other thoughts’ – need be the definition of an illusion. At any rate, I will assume for the present – until next year – that it is no illusion. My first act of free will shall be to believe in free will.

JAMES 1920, vol. I, 147

And he finished the entry, perhaps less famously, as follows:

I will posit life (the real, the good) in the self-governing resistance of the ego to the world. Life shall [be built in] doing and suffering and creating (*ibid.*, 148).

In this passage the germ of James' philosophy of the good life could be discerned. The good life cannot be expected to come to us effortlessly, passively, without our strenuous efforts and just in a contemplative way. Practical action is necessary to create the good life as well as to resist the sufferings of the bad life. This is by no means a thin solution to the problem 'how a good life is possible?' In an open universe where there is no ultimate *summum bonum*, but only plenty of options how to live and how to act, there is no one who should decide on behalf of each of us. The burden of acting lies on our shoulders and the question 'how to act?' in order to bring about the good life is the most crucial of all. But it is equally the matter of rationality and intellect as it is the matter of feeling and emotion. You cannot have a good life without feeling good in particular situation.

Dewey's social ethics is a part and parcel of his theory of a democratic way of life which is based, among others, on the concept of (democratic) habits as the focus where social and individual, biological and cultural factors intersect. A human being is a being of habits by its nature. A habit is a relatively stable stereotype to behave in a certain way. Primary habits are given to us biologically but secondary habits are formed by education in culture. The habits we have acquired lead us to a certain way of life but there is no fatal determination in this even though to change one's own habits may demand a lot of efforts. Habits are basically unconscious but to change them requires reflection. Only life in particular situations show us which habits function as 'good' and which as 'bad' ones. There are no universal habits that would guarantee us a good life forever; so to reflect and to strive at flexibility of habits is one of Deweyan hints at 'how to live.'

The philosophy of pragmatism provides flexible, imaginative, pluralistic, anti-dogmatic and non-hedonistic approach rather than ready-made instructions for solving problems of a good life.

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