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Abstract. Aiming at deepening in our understanding of the fundamental (Socratic) question “how should one live?”, in this paper I present and discuss a distinction among Morality, Happiness and Meaning as the three fundamental dimensions of a Good Life. I specify the notion of meaningfulness here at stake and comment on Susan Wolf’s (2010, 2016) account of this threefold distinction, discussing the central role she gives to reasons of love in the differentiation of meaning. Next, I present what I call the Argument from Kinds of Satisfaction, and raise some important – and open – questions about the articulation of these three dimensions. The last part of the paper is devoted to consider how socio-political conditions affect the prospects of a good life; particularly, how the threat of authoritarianism and totalitarianism specifically affect the three dimensions of a good life.

Keywords: Morality, Happiness, Meaning in Life, Passions, Ground Projects, Authoritarianism

Let us begin our inquiry with Socrates’ question: *how should one live?* This is a fundamental –or *the* fundamental– question in philosophy. Indeed, Bernard Williams argued in his seminal work *Ethics and the Limits of Philosophy* (1985) that this question is the best starting-point for moral philosophy because of how little it presupposes – although, of course, it is not presuppositionless –, stressing how this is is not a question *specifically* about *the moral*. Williams was sceptical that philosophy could answer it –as Plato did believe–, but if philosophy cannot answer it, at least it can help us to understand it better. And having a good understanding of a philosophical question or problem is half of its solution. In this enterprise, we have to bear in mind that “any realistic answer to Socrates’ question must reflect the multi-textured complexity of life itself”, as A. W. Moore (2011, 228) claims commenting on Williams’ view.

As is known, ancient answers to this question were elaborated in terms of the notion of *eudaimonia*, as involving virtue in one way or another. For Aristotle, *eudaimonia* is the human good; every one aims at it for its own sake and for its own sake alone (*Nicomachean Ethics* 1.7). This is a broader notion than our modern notion of happiness. In modern philosophy we saw a split between happiness and morality as two distinct, and independent, dimensions of a good life. But, we may wonder whether these two dimensions exhaust what ancients meant by *eudaimonia*, or whether there is something important missing. Particularly, one thing we may wonder is how the idea of meaningfulness relates to these two dimensions.

It is important to have in mind that there is here a relevant distinction between the notions of *the* meaning of life and meaning in life. The former is about whether human life, in general, is meaningful, or what makes it meaningful, i.e. whether human life matters from a cosmic perspective; whereas the latter is about what makes individual

(human) lives meaningful, what things are sources of meaning *within* human life, from an internal perspective. No doubt, both issues can be connected in different ways, or depending of the answers to each question. In any case, this distinction allows us to focus on meaning as a kind of value within our lives, putting aside the bolder issue of the meaning of human life from an external or cosmic perspective.

Susan Wolf is the philosopher who has contributed more to put this notion in the agenda. She argues that current models of motivation and practical reason leave out important motives and reasons that shape our life, i.e. “the reasons and motives that engage us in the activities that make our lives worth living”, that “give meaning to our lives” (2010, 2; 2016, 254). Her main argument in this respect is to produce instances of activities which we do neither for self-interested or happiness-related reasons nor for impartial or moral reasons. In addition, she claims that these other reasons are the *reasons of love*, that is, “reasons that move us to pursue nonpersonal interests about which we are especially passionate” (Wolf 2010, 4).

I am not so convinced that there is such a strong –conceptual or constitutive– link between meaningfulness and reasons of love. I prefer to account for the distinction between these three dimensions –morality, happiness and meaning– by sketching what I will call the Argument from Kinds of Satisfaction. This argument claims that there is a characteristic kind of satisfaction –or dissatisfaction– for each of these three dimensions, and in particular there is one that is different from both happiness and the satisfaction of acting rightly. Consider a first example: some parents devote all their time to take care of their seriously ill child. In a fundamental sense, it cannot be said that their life is happy. They are deeply unfortunate, but at the same time they can find a kind of satisfaction out of their project of taking care of their child and the activities derived from it. They feel that this gives meaning to their lives. It may be objected that, although it is true that this kind of satisfaction is not the one proper of the experience of happiness, it may have to do with a sense of meeting a moral obligation. However, this is not necessarily so, nor even the most reasonable account of it. It seems their motivation comes more naturally from their loving relationship than from morality. Theirs are reasons of love rather than moral reasons.

It may seem that this result confirms Wolf’s view that meaning is about reasons of love. However, although sometimes it can be like that, I do not think it is always better understood in these terms. Let us see a second example. Think of a frustrated artist whose vocation gives a sense of value to her life even though she is not able to achieve the expected results. Even if her life is not happy, this vocation is felt by her as what gives meaning to her life. In this case, it seems clear to me that this is a valuable facet of a life, different from both happiness and morality, and it is doubtful that this should be described in terms of reasons of love. Of course, her vocation is her passion, but this passion is also central to her (un)happiness. Reasons of love cannot do the work of distinguishing meaning from happiness, since they are central to happiness as well. Reasons of love and self-interested reasons do not seem to be two mutually exclusive kinds of reasons.

The notion of meaning in life has to do with (engaging in activities arising from) passions and projects particularly important in one’s life. (This is in line of Wolf’s account, but avoiding a commitment to its details). But happiness is also about passions and life projects. It needs to be said that passions and projects need not be thought of

here as well-defined, clearly goal-oriented nor even transparent to the person. Our ground projects are not usually plans that we fully set up in advance and are progressively and systematically fulfilling, but they normally change throughout one's life and need to be specified on the way. A key element to tell apart meaning from happiness is that the latter seems more closely linked to achievements –things going well– whereas meaning is compatible with substantial failure –it only needs a minimum of success or progress that allows us to actually pursue our passions and projects.

Putting aside the issue regarding the specific role of reasons of love here, if the general argument is granted, we get a view in which the good or worthwhile life is to be composed of three dimensions: *morality*, i.e. acting rightly or virtuously; *happiness*, i.e. the dimension of pleasure, fulfilling one's desires or preferences, "getting what one wants", having some goods, enjoying wellbeing; and finally *meaningfulness*, i.e. the pursuit of passions and projects that matter to us. This makes a framework that helps us to understand better the different aspects of a good life. This does not mean that each dimension does not have its own internal plurality. As Nicholas White says, "A good account of happiness has to begin with an awareness of the fact of the plurality of aims and conflicts among them" (White 2006, 3), and this may also be said of the other dimensions.

There are different questions about the articulation of these three dimensions that I will just present and leave open. First of all, the very contrast among these dimensions depends, to a large extent, on the view one has of how each dimension should specifically be understood. Secondly, one may even question whether they are all the distinctive dimensions of a good life. Thirdly, we may wonder how they should relate: either hierarchically or in some sort of harmony. Most moral philosophers think that moral reasons always override other considerations, so giving pre-eminence to morality over happiness and meaningfulness. But this view can also be resisted, as Williams did with his notion of moral luck and the case of his Gauguin (see Williams 1981, and Wolf 1997a for a balanced discussion). On the other hand, independently of whether the three dimensions should be hierarchically structured or make up a harmonic whole, it seems natural to think that a good life needs to combine a sufficient scoring in each dimension. In this line, we may ask whether there is a perfect or ideal mix among virtue, happiness and meaning. Finally, we could also wonder whether these dimensions are fully independent or they intertwine. My take on this is that multiple combinations are possible: a life can be meaningful but unhappy, meaningful but immoral, and so on.

In this regard, some philosophers have objected that a deeply immoral life cannot be meaningful (Kaupinnen 2012, 361n31; Wolf's particular understanding of meaning in life has this result as well; see Kekes 2000, 30, for someone who claims that meaning doesn't require morality). Let me present what I will call The Admirability Objection: if a meaningful life is an admirable one, the life of someone like, say, Pol Pot cannot be meaningful, because it's not admirable at all. My reply to this is that a life that includes meaningful passions and ground projects is always better than one without them, *ceteris paribus*. Hence, Pol Pot had a reason to feel fulfilled with his life, as long as it included features like the cultivation of passions and ground projects, even the achievement of significant accomplishments, etc. However, this is not to say that Pol Pot's life is overall admirable or good, rather the opposite: extreme immorality makes a life fatally defective.

In the remaining part of this paper, I want to consider the question of how socio-political conditions affect the prospects of a good life; particularly, of how authoritarianism and totalitarianism threaten each of the three dimensions of a good life that we have distinguished. It is particularly important to examine this given their current rise of authoritarianism in the world (Applebaum 2020).

First of all, it needs to be said that it is not impossible to be happy, to find meaning in one's life or to be morally virtuous under an authoritarian or totalitarian regime. Living under one of these political regimes, one can pursue her passions and projects as long as they are not incompatible with the regime's policies. Moreover, fighting against the adverse situation can give meaning to one's life in a particularly strong way. And it can even set the conditions for moral heroism, otherwise not available. However, authoritarian and totalitarian regimes normally impact negatively in their citizens' prospects of a good life, in all its dimensions and in different ways. I will finish by briefly examining this impact.

On the one hand, this negative impact can be due to a *loss or lack of freedom*, because the kinds of projects that one can pursue are restricted by coercion. On the other hand, it can also be due to a *loss of knowledge*, since censure and misinformation impair our decisions, and the very prevention from acquiring knowledge is a harm in itself. Moreover, authoritarian and totalitarian regimes create and spread *moral degradation*, since they tend to put individuals in moral uneasy situations and, in any case, they do not incentive but discourage virtue. Finally, we need also to refer to the kind of *inauthenticity* that may affect to citizens of those political regimes even when one's life projects agree with the state's rule, insofar as one couldn't have opted for alternative life projects that clashed with the state's rule. This may be described as a sort of *counterfactually unfreedom*, in which both coercion and disinformation can play a role. In sum, authoritarian and totalitarian regimes are doubtless strong impediments to living a worthwhile life, in its different aspects.

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