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VIRTUES – MORAL MIRRORS OF CONTEMPORARY SOCIETY

Abstract

The aspiration for the ideal of a harmonious life assumes the systematic work on one's own education of the soul and authenticity. Contemporary thoughts face us with a crisis of moral values. We ask the question if that crisis is reflected only on a social level, or must we observe and investigate the problem in the personal influence and responsibility towards society. This train of thought also forces the famous expression – quality of life – on us, which is considered a subjective indicator of satisfaction, i.e. dissatisfaction with the life of an individual in the evaluation of success when achieving personal needs and desires. Therefore, we will attempt to show what makes the ideal of a good life in this paper through the interpretation of the values in the work of Marcus Aurelius or, as the Stoics called it – the science of a virtuous life, and also the achievement of a positive subjective evaluation of the quality of life and satisfaction.

Keywords: virtues, authenticity, quality of life, Marcus Aurelius

Introduction

The study of virtues and thinking about them opens a series of topics that face the man of today. It is a crisis and suppression of values before the quality of life and the contemporary trends of the modern age where human life is reduced to the imperative of self-satisfaction of not only needs but also desires, and it is based on pleasures, material welfare, and social carelessness. This paper will attempt to show the basic stands on virtues and their inferiority and reduction in front of the trends of the contemporary world. We will speak on authenticity as an attempt to preserve humaneness in its original human essence. As an example of the virtue model, we will analyse the introductory text of Marcus Aurelius in the book "Thoughts".

Virtues and the contemporary world

According to the Croatian dictionary (hrv. Rječniku hrvatskog jezika, 1998), virtue is a characteristic gracing one, a good property, a desirable character trait, good side, and chastity. Historically speaking, the Greek word *arete*, which we translate as virtue, originally had an entirely different meaning.

Philosophically speaking, virtue, or chastity is a consistent and firm disposition of the permanent perfection of reason and will. Virtues command human passions and enable man to govern himself. Human attempts acquire them and take long-term effort and practice. According to Plato (Zelić, 2017), there are four main virtues: prudence, justice, courage, and temperance, while Aristotle claimed (Zelić, 2017) virtue to be the middle ground between two simple extremes.

Senković (2006) states: "The Greek term *arete* (virtue) is connected to the meaning of action, functioning. All is well while it performs its own function with quality. Then it has competence, excellence which is the fulfilment of its purpose. The original Greek term had the meaning of ability to act, fulfil a certain function. To say that something has been done well is to say that it has been done in accordance with the excellence of that very thing or activity."

Moral virtues are the competences of our character (*ethos, habitus*). According to Aristotle (Senković, 2006), they are created by habituation, which he etymologically derives. Those are the traits of one part, the *aretic*, carnal one, which can listen to the *logos* and decide between good and evil. It can be concluded that virtues are the sources from which we create the basis of our

own character, and thereby the personality which gives us peace and pleasure which, in social and interpersonal relations, is realized through successful communication and good relations. From what was said on virtues, their timeless value and unquestionable need is evident. With a lack of virtues, man can hardly fit into the already formed culture of society and, in that, experiences his own unacceptance and isolation. To develop virtues, build them and implement them into your own life is the process of the volition part of man. Every human being has a natural predisposition, and that is reason using which it differentiates, realizes, discerns, concludes, proves, etc. We find the confirmation of this thesis in Kant (Mijatović, 2017), who wrote that human cognition is essentially realized in the act of researching, concluding, comparing, differentiating, discerning, generalizing, and proving. This only points to the fact that human nature is realized in the intellect with personal choice. We find similar thoughts in the statement by Pieper (Mijatović, 2017), who wrote that every human being is, considering its nature, form or essence, in intellect before it is projected into existence with a volitional act.

Furthermore, in order for virtues to truly be created and lived, Mijatović claims (2017) that it can only be done by a person existing in themselves in full freedom and responsibility of critical thinking. Mijatović believes the most appropriate time for the complete realization of self to be the time intended for thinking, i.e. leisure time. The paradox of human existence is, states Mijatović (2017), manifested in the fact of constantly creating the necessary goods, cultural production, and useful scientific theories while, on the other hand, man as a creature is incapable of fulfilling the option of the deepest desire of the human spirit. Therefore, the truly human element is saved from everyday life with distancing. This distancing is being done into a meditative space and time of leisure. Delusions on leisure as a time in which one does nothing have become a synonym for laziness and, as such, went into the dictionary and mental circuit of people. It is undesirable to do nothing, but it is even more problematic if we do not bring the one task given to us, being ourselves, to its own intellectual and spiritual maximum. Therefore, in reason and free/leisure time there is an ongoing process of decision-making and establishing virtues, their acceptance, their cognition of values being the vector of moral existence. Therefore, to work on virtues, every man takes time in order to bring himself into a state of awareness and harmony with what is most important in himself.

The culture of the contemporary man is marked by material values, and human productivity is measured exclusively with efficiency. That way of living

suggests a high possibility of separating man from his real, authentic essence. He is being distanced from himself and becoming a typical consumer of everything visible and reachable around him. That mentality was implanted into people so vehemently and deeply that they only observe their value of existence through external success. However, the apparent undeniable fact is that the nature of man is made up of a combination of spirit and body and, if we do not nurture and feed our own spirit, there is a tremendous personal fall because nature in man generates, it bursts and reports that it needs its second dimension, the spiritual one. Man has the responsibility, according to the strength of his intuition, of how much he will recognize that cry and succumb to it. With this approach, we can look inside ourselves to better differentiate, better view the reality around ourselves and in ourselves. With time we take for ourselves, we can thoroughly work on honing our virtues and their multiplication, as well as personal growth. According to this, leisure is not laziness nor a waste of time. It is rebuilding, contemplating, learning, and personal growth. The value of the person themselves is unquestionable, and it arises from its very essence. Nevertheless, the task is not complete there. The value of a person is only an unalienable given.

Tomašević (2011) claims that a person is an individual possessing a spiritual nature and by spiritual nature he means the non-material one. It is how, in the western tradition (Tomašević, 2011), the term of person assumes man's duty to be his own task. The empirical-psychological or functionalist-actualist stand on a person (Tomašević, 2011) is the so-called scientific stand of biomedicine on a person because it reduces the personality on the acts with which human personality is expressed. We can look at that as rationality, self-awareness, feeling comfort or pain, and moral self-determination of a human being. With this, we see what man is and what is his nature and task. We will again return to the problem mentioned before, and that is the alienation from himself, and then the world. Alienation is reflected as callousness and indifference which took over with the help of individualism, narcissism, and a loss of authenticity. By pointing to the stated problems, they are at the same time detectors of the lack and smothering of virtues. American philosopher Charles Taylor dealt with the question of authenticity as an essential part of personality. By clarifying the problem, Taylor (2009) claims that people no longer have a sense of a higher purpose, the thing that is worth sacrificing your own life for. The only aspiration in the life of a contemporary man, as Nietzsche states, is the aspiration for "miserable comfort" (Taylor, 2009). Individualism, which is a given to man,

becomes a twisted version of itself because the focus on the self dominates, making our lives flat and narrow and impoverishing their meaning, making us less interested in others or the society (Taylor, 2009).

The second problem he states (Taylor, 2009) is the primacy of instrumental reason. By that, he means the type of rationality we run towards when we calculate the most economical application of a means to a particular end. Maximum efficiency, cost, and result relationship is its measure of success (Taylor, 2009). Taylor (2009) sees the danger of the instrumental mind in the domination and possessing of our lives. Individualism includes the focus on the self and the supporting exclusion or even not noticing larger matters and questions surpassing the individual, whether they be religious, political, or historical. As a consequence of that, life becomes narrow and flat.

Two competing terms are (Taylor, 2009) narcissism (a term by Lasch) and hedonism (in Bell's description), and they create a visible problem and arrive as a consequence of individualism. The thing is that there is no moral ideal at work, but rather self-indulgence. A good life in the form of authenticity is what each individual strives for, in their own way. The culture of narcissism (Vidanec, 2008) is characterized by a principle of action that can be described with the word "self-fulfillment". Self-fulfillment, Vidanec (2008) claims, has become the key motivation, aspiration, and purpose of the contemporary man (...) in regard to practice, a contemporary man lives in a way that he first and foremost satisfies his own desires and needs but, in doing so, chooses neither the means nor the ways in which he realizes such desires beyond which stands self-fulfillment understood as the ultimate goal.

Is authenticity possible?

Authenticity (Klaić, 2007.), with its meaning (true, truthful, original, guaranteed, trustworthy, derived truly from the one ascribed to, sincere), creates an ideal and doubt nowadays. Attempting to explain why an ideal and why doubt, we must start with doubt. Charles Taylor (2009) lists the following problems: a) individualism, b) primacy of the instrumental reason/mind, and c) loss of civil freedom. He sees a problem in it so much that he questions how can a man indeed be authentic in contemporary society. Individualism, as the tenet and accomplishment of Cartesian philosophy and Enlightenment, the goal of which was to access man as an individual and unique being, to separate him from the masses and give him the meaning of subject (the main actor), is distorted in

contemporary time, culminating in egocentricity and subjugation of everything to the individual. The problem of the instrumental reason/mind, which is a logical continuation, is to look at the purpose of life through a calculation and interest.

Given that man becomes the centre of himself and the world and everything revolves around him, this becomes a danger of inactive participation in social happenings. Everything is subjected to one creature, “me”, I strive only for comfort and security in my life and, therefore, am uninterested in what I “cannot” influence. This is where a certain lethargy, laziness, and indifference come to pass, and, as a conclusion, the consequence of the loss of civil freedom is derived. Authenticity, in its essence, attempts to portray a person with all its abilities and powers as an idea but to serve oneself and others. Therefore, Taylor (2009) believes and considers that authenticity is a valid ideal worth fighting for; that this ideal could be set on rational and logical grounds and that this can be discussed. We see the original and true essence of a man not distanced from his spiritual nature in the ideal of authenticity. In authenticity, we find a space to live virtues and realize ourselves as moral persons. In order to reach the interpretation of the ideal of authenticity, Taylor had to shrug and show all the opponents and dangers of suppressing man’s true authenticity. The term ideal that Taylor uses can have a two-fold meaning: at first glance, it can be something unattainable, and on second something more logical and closer to us, the ideal of authenticity can be what we strive for. We can also look at the problems as mentioned above Taylor lists with worry, but we must not take them for granted or generalize them because we cannot let out of our sight the fact that man has free will and uses his reason to differentiate, and free will to choose. We can only ask the question of whether today we frequently talk enough and strong and convincing enough about virtues in a way that makes them desirable for people, make them *conditio sine qua non*, and make people strive for them. Only virtues can reanimate and realize real authenticity.

Furthermore, for that, we need passion – strong positive emotions we tie along with things and terms we consider will make our life much better, fulfilled, high-quality. A life of virtues is a life in balance and harmony, which does not mean a hindrance to freedom for opportunists. As its name implies, it is true, imagined initially and set, but modified throughout history and has, therefore, lost its credibility. A life of virtues, life in moral harmony and peace is greatness of living and life fulfillment, and we can also call it a moral mirror. If virtues demand a particular discipline in thought and acquisition, a question can arise

whether authenticity is possible if we modify it in a way by educating ourselves. According to this, Taylor (2009) will call upon three things: 1) common sense, i.e. the possibility of discerning; 2) plural or inclusive access to reality; 3) guaranteed freedom of thought and action. The reason/mind which controls our will enables us to live and act in a way it exclusively dictates. Descartes, as is stated in (Vidanec, 2008) also sees the cogito as the basic and primary source of morality. By taking cogito to be the source of man's (moral) action, i.e., morality. Senković claims (Senković, 2006) that moral virtues are the excellence of our character. According to everything mentioned, virtues are learned, and they are practiced. They are not given, they are a choice which we make with our reason, and we choose them. However, virtues are also absolute values that are hard to annul and oppose. The problem we are facing is the lack and unpopularity of virtues in human characters of the contemporary age. The contemporary time is a good indicator of how the development of technology and society, which primarily had a noble cause, mediated by the lack of virtues and contemporary values are misused at the harm of an individual and the society. This brings us to the term which the man of today strives for - quality of life.

Quality of life – the ultimate goal and meaning of the contemporary man

Under the excuse of his own comfort, an individual suppresses the virtues by giving way to hedonism. That way, he deadens any feeling and compassion for another. An individual becomes the centre of his own world. In the mid-1960s, the expression “quality of life” made its grand entrance. In the beginning, it signified economic growth and development in modern and industrial societies, and then in other pores of society (Karaić, 1992).

Karaić (1992) writes: “Quality of life can be (...) determined as a developmental goal, i.e., as a state/process with which an individual/society creates permanent conditions for his survival on Earth. In that sense, an expression of such a state/process is basically represented as a complex experience of satisfaction affected by various elements, from natural causes to social order.”

One should know that the term “quality of life” is not assumed to be the same in all areas of life. From a medical aspect, quality of life is achieved by the absence of illness and the preservation of the vitality of functional organs. In the economic sense, it is a standard; in the psychological one it is satisfaction with life. Krizmanić and Kolesarić, as was stated in Pastuović (1999) determine quality of life to be a complex, synthetic experience of (dis)satisfaction with

the life of an individual, created by constant evaluation and re-evaluation of his successfulness in satisfying various needs. According to that, quality of life does not presume an absolute stage; it is changeable and is most frequently proportionate to the art of living.

What we are trying to point out is that the quality of life, which is the subject of sciences such as economy, psychology, medicine, and sociology, talks mostly about needs, health, standard and satisfaction, while the spiritual and intellectual dimension is rarely talked about, instead it is not talked about enough and the importance of morals and ethics are not adequately pointed out, being the virtues and living of virtues and a genuine and unique condition of the real quality of life. It would be incorrect and unjust to refute the previously stated categories, but it is essential to say that the sciences we already mentioned talk about the quality of life in a way that, if we are blessed with the absence of illness, addiction, poverty, it is the only way to achieve quality of life and those elements are consequences which have to be reached by living with virtues and the quality of life would then be an everyday choice, not the ideal to which we strive. Therefore, it is apparent that the quality of life is seen as something external, something outside of us we must strive for and is not set in a way that it is within us and that it is our everyday choice.

Thoughts – Marcus Aurelius

Marcus Aurelius, or Marcus Annius Verus (Jončić, according to: Aurelius, 2004), was born in 121 in Rome, during the reign of emperor Hadrian, He was a descendant of a respected noble family and when his parents die during his youth, at age 17, he was adopted by his grandfather and given the name Marcus Aurelius Antoninus and pronounced his heir. As a descendant of a respected family, he was assumed to undergo quality education. Marcus Aurelius showed an interested in Stoic philosophy from an early age. When he became a Roman emperor, this not-at-all easy duty represented something to responsibly and stoically be achieved in life for Marcus Aurelius. Even though the Roman Empire was then faced with many wars and conquests, it is considered to be the most exceptional time of the empire. While in the beginning he was given strength and knowledge by the Stoic philosophy in being the best statesman and ruler he can be, at the end of his life, Aurelius turned to speculation and wrote a journal he dedicated to himself, in a way that the Marcus Aurelius the philosopher taught Marcus Aurelius the emperor. Western philosophy considers Marcus Aurelius

to be one of the most important Roman Stoics, with the sole fact that the Stoic philosophy dealt with virtues. For them, virtue meant living in harmony with reason and thus ensuring spiritual peace. They considered virtue to be the fruit of wise men.

Aurelius, in the very introduction, gives a basic meaning to his *Thoughts*. In that section, Marcus Aurelius mentions all the key people in his life, which left a trace in his life as role-models and in building his character. By describing and speaking about the important people in his life, he talks about the virtues adorning them and ways of behaving, which were ideal.

We will present the virtues mentioned in the introductory part of the book in a table. They are expressed either in a single word or phrases (Aurelije, 2004).

VIRTUES MENTIONED WITH A SINGLE WORD	VIRTUES MENTIONED WITH A PHRASE
Decency	Affinity to good deeds
Virility	Not to deal with insignificant things
Piousness	Not to allow yourself hasty conclusions
Nobility	Truly live in harmony with nature
Graciousness	Intuitive care for the well-being of a friend
Industriousness	A benevolent patience with strangers and dreamers
Amiability	Forgetting the expression, "I'm busy."
Selflessness	Non-existence of confusion or fearfulness
Dignity	Not to be late nor in a hurry
Kindness	Not to allow dejection nor forced joy
Unobtrusiveness	Avoid rage and jealousy
Generosity	Never hold anyone less valuable
Optimism	Indifference towards empty and fake honours
Directness	An unwavering attempt to make each reward dependent on merit
Self-control	Not to adulate
Tenacity	Permanent friendships, without fads or excess
Vivacity	To stand up for anyone to be given the opportunity to do what they are good at
Appropriateness	To stand up for anyone to be given the opportunity to do what they are good at
Impartialness	To do what they are good at
Compassion	To respect institutions

Honesty	A pleasant sense of humour
Justice	Readiness to listen to everything leading to the common good
Clemency	
Persistence	Efforts to reduce pederasty
Industriousness	To be mindful in keeping treasure
Mindfulness	To withstand critique
Patience	A perfect ability to govern oneself and others
Moderation	To weigh each event calmly
Amenity	
Moderation	
Decisiveness	
Consistency	

The Antiquity was known for its attitude towards philosophers and philosophy. Philosophers were not theoreticians of philosophy with a degree in the subject. A philosopher was a person living philosophy and philosophical life. It was enough that a philosopher formulate the basic principles of his chosen school. "(...) Marcus Aurelius sensed what could be the ideal of a philosophical life. He ascribes the longing towards sternness to Diogenes." (Hadot, 2016)

Aurelius (Hadot, 2016) states: "What can, therefore, follow you by serving you as protection in this life? Only one thing: philosophy. It consists in that you maintain the inner deity free of filth and harm. 'Be careful not to start acting as a Cesar....remain simple, good, pure, serious, natural, love justice, worship the gods, be benevolent, amicable, decisive in performing your duties. Fight to remain as philosophy wanted to make you.'"

If we stop to look at these words, we notice that Marcus Aurelius, in fact, calls us upon authenticity and moral life. These two aspects can provide peace, pleasure, and in the end, the syntagma of the 20th century – a quality life. However, these words point to an even deeper and more basic meaning. To be and to live your authenticity. They relate to the teaching talking about the true essence of man and the conditions making him a man. Apart from that, being a man is a task, and that is the task Aurelius is referring to. Life should be mindful, working, careful. It should be an art and, in the end, wisdom. Aurelius calls upon sternness and mindfulness, not the superficial nature of things we are surrounded with. He points to a true quality of studying life as a legality and our humility before those legalities. To live a moral life and to live virtues gives

autonomy and security to life, makes man an authoritative one. A man builds his personality that way and reaches meaning and a correct relationship towards life. The thoughts of Aurelius are written down simply and plainly, but the paradox is that these matters are easily written and talked about and are difficult to achieve.

Aurelius says the following on happiness (Hadot, 2016):

“What does happiness consist of? – In that, we do what man’s nature wants us to do. – How do we succeed in doing so? By governing the dogmas, which are the principle of impetus and action. – Which dogmas? – The ones relating to the differentiation of right from wrong: the only right for man is what makes him just, moderate, brave, and free, and the only wrong for man is what causes the opposite in him. There are three virtues, according to Aurelius: truth, justice, and moderation.”

Discipline, idea, or judgment, desire, and action are called the triple rule of life by Aurelius. In another logical order: 1) Idea or judgment (statement and differentiation); 2) desire and action (drive and labour), 3) discipline (persistence and humility).

Hadot states (2016) the following thoughts by Aurelius:

“There are three things you consist of: body, breath of life, and the mind.”

“We must completely and with all our hearts focus on what we are doing at this moment, not worrying about the past or the future.”

The heart, in this sense, is a positive emotion of love and, at the same time, strength and fervour. From this statement, there is an obvious need for maximum labour with positive emotions.

Hadot (2016) states a thought by Aurelius on obedience and self-criticism:

“Remember that changing your mind and following the one returning you to a correct path is also a sign of inner freedom. This action, namely, is yours again because it is done according to your will and judgment and, in the end, intellect.”

On the path of growth, we meet many people who sometimes indirectly, with their presence, point to our wrong actions and steps. Aurelius, in his *Thoughts* calls upon the human duty of helping those who strayed from the path in returning them to the right one. He sees this as man’s noble duty. Aurelius interprets the notion of clemency as a fervour of the soul governed by reason. The aspiration is to achieve harmony among people. The point of the three disciplines of Aurelius is to reach moderation. This thought points to people

who learn and teach and those who this is meant for and how they should accept good advice with humility and thankfulness, but always with a presence of reason, thought, judgment, and free will.

Furthermore, Hadot (2016) states a thought by Aurelius on reality:

“When thus we saw the value of things, we must act accordingly (...): I see all things the way they are and take from each one what its worth.”

This is where the essence of living, in reality, lies in judging actions and not letting good opportunities go by. We complete the thought mentioned above by Aurelius by another one. (Hadot, 2016)

“The discipline of acting demands, however, that we know how to recognize the value of things and, proportionate to said value, determine the strength of our action. Joy is, therefore, a sign of perfect action.”

Conclusion

If *joy is the sign of perfect action*, perfect action points to perfectly considered and made decisions based on moral legalities and virtues. If we do not live virtues, there is a small chance that we will live to see true joy. Perhaps we will live to see it, but the question is, will we be able to say that we acted justly. The virtues laid before us by Stoics and described by Marcus Aurelius, gain the characteristic of a moral mirror. By genuinely living virtues, we can build our own authenticity, and thereby realize the quality of life. However much the contemporary world sometimes seems chaotic, it still has enough opportunity and place and knowledge we need to build our own perfect soul.

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VRLINE – MORALNA OGLEDALA SUVREMENOG DRUŠTVA

Sažetak

U težnji za idealom skladnog života razumijeva se sustavni rad na vlastitom odgoju duše i autentičnosti. Suvremena razmišljanja suočavaju nas s krizom moralnih vrijednosti. Postavljamo pitanje ogleđa li se ta kriza samo na društvenoj razini ili problem trebamo promatrati i istraživati u osobnom utjecaju i odgovornosti prema društvu. Slijedom razmišljanja nameće nam se i suvremena sintagma - kvaliteta života, koja se smatra subjektivnim pokazateljem zadovoljstva, odnosno, nezadovoljstva životom pojedinca u vrednovanju uspješnosti u ostvarivanju vlastitih potreba i želja. Stoga ćemo u radu pokušati prikazati što čini ideal dobrog života kroz tumačenje vrlina u djelu Marka Aurelija ili - kako su ga stoici nazivali – znanost o čestitom životu, a time i postizanje pozitivnog subjektivnog vrednovanja kvalitete života i zadovoljstva.

Ključne riječi: vrline, autentičnost, kvaliteta života, Marko Aurelije