HAPPINESS, RATIONALITY, AUTONOMY AND THE GOOD LIFE

ABSTRACT. The paper starts with a general discussion of the concepts of happiness and the good life. I argue that there is a conceptual core of happiness which has to do with one’s life as a whole. I discuss affective and attitude or life satisfaction views of happiness and indicate problems faced by those views. I introduce my own view, the life plan view, which sees happiness as the ongoing realizing of global desires of the person. I argue that on such a view one’s life could be happy without a high level of rationality or a high level of autonomy; such rationality and autonomy are not built into the concept of happiness. So while happiness is a final value, and good for the person, it is not the only final value. Rationality and autonomy are also final values and, where they exist, are good as ends for the person, part of the good life.

KEY WORDS: autonomy, good life, happiness, life plan, rationality

INTRODUCTION

What is happiness? What is the good life? For much of the history of thought these two questions have been understood as asking the same thing. For some of the ancient Greeks a key question was whether happiness or the good life had to be a morally good life. For instance, Plato is concerned to show through a number of arguments in the Republic that the just (“dikaios”) or morally good person is also the happy person. And Aristotle, by defining happiness or “eudaimonia” as activity exercising or realizing excellence or virtue, seems to by his definition work in morality as part of the nature of happiness or the good life.

The topic for this collection of papers is the role of happiness in the good life. This leads to questions such as “Is happiness
sufficient for the good life?’’ and ‘‘Are there other final values which are constituent or part of the good life?’’

I will be arguing that happiness does not conceptually require significant levels of autonomy and rationality. When we think of the good life, happiness is certainly a significant, and perhaps central part of it, and something which is good for the person who is living that life. I believe that rationality and autonomy with regard to lives can also be seen as having final value, being good for the person living that life. Therefore the concepts of happiness and the good life do not seem to equivalent; while happiness is certainly a major constituent of the good life, it is not the only one. I have chosen to focus on rationality and autonomy because they might be believed by some to be necessary conditions for happiness. I do not mean to suggest that these are the only other possible additional final values. The introduction to this special issue mentions some other possibilities, such as friendship and self-knowledge. I shall suggest several other candidates at the end of this paper.

I will first discuss some general things about the concept of happiness and the concept of the good life. Then I will sketch out my view of happiness. Following that I will discuss rationality and autonomy and their role in the good life.

SOME REMARKS ON THE CONCEPT OF HAPPINESS

While the word ‘‘happiness’’ and its adjective ‘‘happy’’ are sometimes used to refer to feelings (‘‘I feel so happy’’), moods (‘‘She’s in a happy mood’’), and attitudes (‘‘I’m happy with my job’’) I believe its central use is to refer to a life (‘‘He lived a happy life’’). There are of course theories that attempt to analyze the happiness of a life in terms of feelings (e.g., hedonistic theories), or an attitude (e.g., life satisfaction views, which see happiness as liking, being satisfied with, or being pleased with one’s life), or attitude and mood (e.g., Headey and Wearing’s Dynamic Equilibrium Model: according to that theory happiness is a mix of life satisfaction and positive affect (largely general good moods) (Headey and Wearing, 1989, 1992).