ZORBA, SOCRATES, AND THE GOOD LIFE

Abstract: How should one live in order to live well? What are the defining characteristics of the good life? These questions – the perennial concern of classical scholars – have in the last 25 years become the subject of debates in contemporary social and political theory as well. Foucault (1986), Taylor (1989), Kekes (1995), Cottingham (1998) and Nehamas (1998) have all stressed the importance of the “art of living” or “caring for the self” in light of contemporary political and economic developments. This article, as my contribution to the debate, offers the analysis of two models of the “good life”: the one as presented by Plato and embodied in the literary character of Socrates, and the other as presented by Nikos Kazantzakis and embodied in the literary figure of Zorba. In general terms, Socrates advocates the rule of reason and the denigration and submission of the bodily Eros, while Zorba remains suspicious of the mind – “a careful little shopkeeper” – and stresses the significance of bodily experiences as ways of linking oneself with the rest of the universe. Hence in the article I formulate an ethic of sensual Eros by focusing on Zorba’s way of life and contrast it to the Socratic ethics. I conclude that the concern and respect for the body, for the house in which Eros dwells, is the necessary a priori for the living of the good life. This way of life is not one that rejects reason altogether, but what it does reject is the desire of reason to monopolize the individual’s life processes.

Key words: Socrates, Zorba, the good life, the art of living, Eros.

“You need a touch of folly to do that; folly, d’you see? You have to risk everything! But you’ve got such a strong head, it’ll always get the better of you. A man’s head is like a grocer; it keeps accounts: I’ve paid so much and earned so much and that means a profit of this much or a loss of that much! The head’s a careful little shopkeeper; it never risks all it has, always keeps something in reserve. It never breaks the string. Ah, no! It hangs tight to it, the bastard! If the spring slips out

---

1 A version of this essay was presented at the American Midwest Political Science Association conference in Chicago.
of its grasp, the head, poor devil, is lost, finished! But if a man doesn’t break the string, tell me, what flavor is left in life? The flavor of camomile, weak camomile tea! Nothing like rum – that makes you see life inside out!” (Kazantzakis 1952: 300)

“’How are you as far as sex goes, Sophocles? … ‘Quiet, man,’ the poet replied, ‘I am glad to have escaped from all that, like a slave who has escaped from a savage and tyrannical master’” (Plato 1992: 329b).

Let’s start this discursive meditation on the meaning and nature of the good life by looking at the passage chosen as a leitmotif of this essay, a leitmotif in a literal sense of the word, because one will hear its message (its voice) in various guises throughout these pages. The passage comes from a novel (translated into English as) *Zorba the Greek* written by one of the greatest modern Greek writers and philosophers, Nikos Kazantzakis (1883-1957). Kazantzakis was a seeker, thirsty for the oases of truth in the human desert, even to the point of obsession. His *idée fixe* concerned the interaction between the material and the spiritual or, in other words, the sensual and the intellectual. Consider, for example, a sentence from the Prologue to another of his major novels, *The Last Temptation*: “My principal anguish and the source of all my joys and sorrows from my youth onward has been the incessant, merciless battle between the spirit and the flesh” (Kazantzakis 1961: 7). One may be tempted to say that Kazantzakis’s fictional hero Zorba resolves this battle by proclaiming the victory of the flesh. On the other hand, Socrates, the second main protagonist whom we will encounter in the course of this essay (in the voice of Plato’s early *Dialogues*), declares precisely the opposite: the necessity of the ultimate submission of the flesh to the spirit. My principal thesis, however, goes beyond this

---

2 The literal translation of the Greek title is ‘The Life and Adventures of Alexis Zorba.’

3 According to Anapliotes 1978, Kazantzakis created the novel’s Zorba on the basis of his personal acquaintance and work with George Zorbas, a man whose philosophy of life mirrored that of Kazantzakis’s hero. See also Kazantzakis 1965: 430–443. This can be interpreted as showing that philosophy, such as Zorba’s, contains an immanent practical aspect. It is exactly such an interpretation that motivates this essay. The claim is that George Zorbas is buried in Skopje. On my next visit there, I hope to investigate this claim.
simple dichotomy: I argue in this essay that the victory desired by Socrates remains one-dimensional and essentially not worth attaining (it represents no more and no less than the self-destruction of the spirit), while the crowning envisioned by Zorba opens up genuine possibilities for the elevation of both the flesh and the spirit to a higher (and more substantial) level of understanding and meaningfulness in individual and social life. Ultimately, Zorba’s, and not Socrates’s, is the way to the good life.


Zorba’s Choice

Let’s take a closer look at the passage from Kazantzakis’s novel. What claims are being asserted? What consequences do these claims entail? The passage comes from a dialogue between Zorba and the narrator of the novel, the intellectual who, in many ways, resembles Kazantzakis himself. It presents Zorba’s argument against the sole reliance on “the mind” in one’s daily affairs which is, to be sure, a typical affliction of bookish intellectuals, including the book’s narrator. The mind (the rational part of the psyche in Plato’s parlance, or the ego in the language of psychoanalysis) is so bound by the logic of self-preservation that it would rather stunt the flow of living experience offering itself to it than loosen a bit its grip over the psychic processes. Zorba compares the mind to a stingy shopkeeper who constantly gets bogged down in petty and trivial calculations of advantages and disadvantages, while he misses to establish a connection with meaningful, exciting things. The mind is too cheap to pay for rum; it contents itself with tasteless camomile tea. But can camomile reveal to it any of life’s mysteries? Can it lead it to the immersion in experience, something Adorno thought philosophy, like music, was conceived to convey? Ultimately, has

---

4 The ego is “the mental illness of man” says Lacan in his first Seminar/Commentary on Freud’s works. In other words, it is the entanglements of the ego that lead to neurosis. See Lacan 1988: 16–17. On this point, one must not confuse the ego and the I. The I is the speaking I, the subject of the unconscious denied (or negated) by the ego; the ego is the imaginary object and, as such, it may interfere with satisfaction of the drives. See Lacan 1988b: 38, 43–44.

5 I disagree with Jean-Francois Lyotard that Adorno’s theory is diabolical; instead, I think he offered weekly sacrifices at the altar of Dionysus. On the question
a grocer (that is, somebody with the frame of mind of a grocer) ever become a philosopher?

Since the answer to all the questions above is a resounding ‘No,’ Zorba wants us to part ways with the cash-register thinking. Instead, he places an emphasis on “breaking the string.” But what does that mean? It means first of all nurturing the ways of expressing oneself that displace the socially condoned concentration on the mind only. For instance, communication among people has come to be dominated by the sole reliance on discourse. We use words to convey our ideas, feelings, and wants; other modes of communicating (the ones that Zorba offers as alternatives, such as dance, or playing an instrument) have been either forgotten or undergone such severe distortion that all that is left does not even represent the promise of any meaningful difference. In Zorba’s words: “People have let their bodies become mute and they speak only with their mouths” (Kazantzakis 1952: 73) The problem here is that the discursive element cannot avoid being captured by the particular (i.e. a particular language); it therefore fails to rise to the level of universality, the level beyond the particular that connects all humanity into one.\(^6\)

The anecdote Zorba tells to illustrate his point concerns the time he spent in Russia during the October Revolution. He hardly spoke any Russian at all, but was at the same time driven forth by an intense desire to describe his life experiences to the newly found comrades. The only option was to *dance them*, to convey them in a primordial language that cuts through the superstructural levels of culture and is able to bask in the light of that which genuinely binds human beings to one other. Therefore one night in a tavern Zorba danced the events of his life for one of his best Bolshevik friends. “I danced my misfortunes; my travels; how many times I’d been married; the trades I’d learned – quarrier, miner, peddler, potter, *comitadji*, *santuri*-player, *passa-tempo* hawker, blacksmith, smuggler… My feet and hands spoke, so did my hair and my clothes”(Kazantzakis 1952: 73).\(^7\) And his friend, intently seeing

---

\(^6\) See for instance Brown 1966.

\(^7\) Compare this to a statement by Nietzsche’s Zarathustra: “Only in the dance do I know how to tell the parable of the highest things” Nietzsche 1978: 112.
and hearing, truly listening, could understand it all. The speech of the body (the dancing, walking, smiling, crying, enjoying, suffering body) always carries in its flow the pieces of that fragmented truth out of which we fashion and refashion that which is most essential; it is the closest we come to a *metalanguage*, but it depends on one’s willingness to “break the string.”

The same is the case with playing an instrument. Zorba for instance plays the *santuri*, an instrument with strings resembling the cimbalom. But in order to create a melody that truthfully corresponds to that which he wants to express (so that the object produced reflects fully the intention of the producing forces), he has to let himself be guided by that which represents the source of his creativity. He has to explode the grip of the ego, and deliver himself over to the creative Eros, to the life force that seeks not only to assure “the preservation of living substance, [but also] to join it into ever larger units.”8 This binding tendency of Eros is precisely that which constitutes the link of understanding and meaning between the player and his audience, between Zorba and the people he encounters in his travels. The insight that comes to the fore here is that it is Eros, and not reason, that makes us understand and care about each other both on the individual and communal level. The community of Eros does not collapse each particular uniqueness into the one-dimensional component of the whole: it is precisely the existence of the particular in its own right that makes the multidimensional universal, such as Eros, possible.

The particular enjoys itself in the universal; the universal comes to life in the particular. This is why Zorba never tires of asserting his particularity as against the exigencies of the world while at the same time being one with it. For instance, on the question of death, he says: “I think of death every second. I look at it and I’m not frightened. But never, never, do I say I like it. No, I don’t like it at all! I don’t agree” (Kazantzakis 1952: 270). Here one notices the recognition of death as that which is present even in its absence, alongside with the passionate revolt against it. Zorba is no dreamy-eyed idealist who turns real life into the fantasy world of eternal

---

8 This is Freud’s definition of Eros. Freud 1961: 77. In Zorba’s words: “To play the *santuri* you have to give everything up to it, d’you understand?” Kazantzakis 1952: 13.
substances in order to ‘escape’ death. He knows that his position is marked by radical finitude, that transiency is both the starting and the ending point; but all this diminishes neither his full-fledged engagement with life’s possibilities nor his anger, his profound disagreement with the final outcome he dislikes.

His attitude is the same on the issue of injustice which he perceives as pervading the world of human beings. He asserts: “I tell you, boss, everything that happens in this world is unjust, unjust, unjust! I won’t be a party to it! I, Zorba, the worm, the slug!” (Kazantzakis 1952: 247). He takes a stand against the unjust order of things, the world which does not listen, the God that is unresponsive; fully aware of his smallness (and insignificance), he says the defiant ‘No’ to the forces that would control him. He will not go with the flow; he will be fair and compassionate.

It is exactly fairness and compassion that represent the pillars of Zorba’s ethics. I would argue that these two qualities (which, in many ways, complement each other) derive from Zorba’s identification with the uniting (combining) tendency of life forces, of Eros. In other words, Eros is not wild and frenzied; it is a calm builder of lasting relations. It speaks of resolving the tensions and compensating for the deficiencies. And the words that it articulates are so many sensual, bodily pleasures. This, for instance, can be seen in Zorba’s comment on how great (and how necessary) it would be to open a special sort of a marriage agency, “The Zeus Marriage Agency.” It would have ‘Zeus’ in the name, because the function it would fulfill is very much the same as that which mythology has ascribed to the god of gods, Zeus. In other words, the chief purpose in Zeus’s interactions with mortals (with mortal women, to be exact) was to alleviate their sexual frustration by transforming himself into a desired partner of those who did not have any. Therefore, Zorba, imitating Zeus, would set up this agency in order that “the poor women who haven’t

9 Note what Zorba says on this point: “Everything seems to have a soul – wood, stones, the wine we drink and the earth we tread on. Everything, boss, absolutely everything!” Kazantzakis 1952: 77.

10 “When shall we open our arms to embrace everything – stones, rain, flowers, and people?” Kazantzakis 1952: 94.

11 It is important to keep in mind that for Zorba marriage is not linked to procreation, but instead to a concrete possibility of experiencing sensual pleasure with another human being.
managed to pick up a husband have another chance: old maids, plain women, the knock-kneed, the cross-eyed, the hump-backed [and] the lame” (Kazantzakis 1952: 218). He would try to fulfill their choices the best he could, so that they, too, could experience love and desire and care. And if nobody was to be found to do that, then, Zorba says: “I’d cross myself, and I, director of the marriage bureau, would do it in person” (Kazantzakis 1952: 219).

It is true that some may read these statements as revealing Zorba’s paternalistic attitude toward women, but I would say that what one has here is not so much paternalism – putting oneself in a superior situation and establishing the standards for others – as the manifestation of a caring attitude toward the fulfillment of the demands of Eros. ‘I do this so that thy will be done, o cherished Eros’ – one may imagine Zorba saying while on the way to some lonely, abandoned woman on the outskirts of the city.

This attitude of caring enables Zorba to transcend the narrow horizons of self-interest and do pleasing things to, and for, others. It is this intense concern for the well being of others that makes his philosophy of life ethical. He denies the existence of the entirely good transcendent being, the transcendent source of all human values. He does not accept the Dostoevskian argument that “if God doesn’t exist, everything is permitted.” He proclaims that God is entirely unconcerned with the conduct of the human beings; he may even be dead.

Accordingly, Zorba says to an elderly Cretan villager who has spent his whole life in a quiet devotion to God: “God may have all that’s needful, uncle Anagnosti… God may have, but not us. The old skinflint gives us nothing!” (Kazantzakis 1952: 59). This precisely is the meaning of human freedom. The decision as to the goodness or badness of our actions is left for us to determine; we are the creators of our own values. “I think of God as being exactly like me,” confesses Zorba (Kazantzakis 1952: 105). But his realization that he is like God does not mean that therefore he could think of the whole world of creation as a giant banquet where he could feast at the expense of other creatures. Not at all. Being like God means for Zorba that there is a part of him in everything which is out there in the world; that he is a tree, a waterfall, a butterfly, or another human being. The animate and the inanimate in his own self are the reflec-
tion of the animate and the inanimate in the external world: his soul mirrors the cycle of seasons. Living in accordance with the rhythm of the creative forces of nature is the source from which Zorba derives his sense of ethical responsibility.\(^\text{12}\) To be ethical is to be one with the universe. It means shaping oneself in such a way that there is no tension between what one is and what the world is, between what one wants and what the world gives in return.

So it is once again that we come upon the chief thesis of Zorba’s philosophy of life: only Eros, and not reason, can be our guide to the good life. This is so, because only Eros can (re)establish and affirm links between ourselves and nature that have been in the process of fragmentation since the setting up of the first human societies. Reason as the principle of the organization of societies has exiled Eros, has expelled that which gave it birth, and installed itself as the ultimate ruler, as the \textit{only} arrow hastening toward the target of happiness. But reason (no matter how alienated from its own origin it wants to appear) still remains a child of Eros. This is the heart of the message that Zorba wants to communicate to us. Or, in the words of the narrator of \textit{Zorba the Greek}, “… the soul is flesh…, perhaps more volatile, more diaphanous, perhaps freer, but flesh all the same. And the flesh is soul, somewhat turgid perhaps, somewhat exhausted by its long journeys, and bowed under the burden it has inherited” (Kazantzakis 1952: 237).

But the argument for Eros is not won yet; we have yet to encounter its main opponent, the one who dared compare what Zorba considered the emancipatory playfulness of Eros to the banishment of torture chambers. “The body [the flesh] is the prison house of the soul” said Socrates.\(^\text{13}\)

\(^{12}\) As Marcuse points out, here one sees emerging a positive dimension of narcissism, the recognition of one’s own image in all there is, and, as a result, respecting (and loving) that which is as one loves and respects one’s own self. I would call this a basic principle of ontological erotics, Marcuse 1955: 195. Or, in the words of the narrator of \textit{Zorba the Greek}, “…all things – women, bread, water, meat, sleep – blended happily with his flesh and became Zorba. I had never see such a friendly accord between a man and the universe,” Kazantzakis 1952: 132.

\(^{13}\) Plato 1956: 67d. See also Socrates’s claim that “the lovers of learning understand that philosophy found their soul imprisoned in the body and welded to it, and compelled to survey through this as if through \textit{prison bars} the things that are…,” Plato 1956: 82e, emphasis added.
Socrates’s Choice

Why? How can it be so? To begin outlining an answer to these questions, it is helpful to re-visit a set of claims Plato puts forward in the *Phaedo*, the dialogue describing the last moments in the life of Socrates. The chief theme on which variations are composed throughout the dialogue is the fact that Socrates does not fear death. He does not fear it because he believes that what he loses by it is less than what he gains. Socrates contends that, in dying, the individual separates from that which made him or her unable to focus, in a sustained way, on the matters of the intellect, that is, on the pursuit of wisdom. And, if one considers the contemplative track as the only one sure path to lead to the station called Truth, this is a clear gain. In the words that Plato has Socrates say: “… in our searches, [the body] is everywhere interfering, it causes confusion and disturbance, and dazzles us so that it will not let us see the truth; so in fact we see that if we are ever to know anything purely we must get rid of it…” (Plato 1956: 66d). The body with its needs and its desires, its openness to living experience and surprises, its sensitivity and fragility, is to be forever denied any significance by the one who practices philosophy. The philosopher, dealing solely with the realm of ideas, finds the body tainted, infected, impure. Small is the step from a bodily pleasure to some sort of pain; short is the distance between the bodily entanglement in the world and the world’s capture of the intellect and the resulting forgetfulness of the beyond. The beyond is the place where the good soul of a philosopher communes with other souls of similar nature, and also with heroes and gods. But here the body cannot follow; the body is of this world; the after-life is life that it does not live.

But if the after-life is the goal and the ultimate good, then the soul surely must experience this life as a succession of tortures and temptations. Desire and pleasure, oh how they bind the soul (which yearns to deliver itself over to the infinite and the unchanging) to everything that is fluid, contingent, fragmentary, and minute. And not only that. Any attempt to derive a lasting meaning from the pleasures of the body is an epistemologically damned path. Pleasures

14 “But into the family of gods, unless one is a philosopher and departs wholly pure, it is not permitted for any to enter,” Plato 1956: 82c.
make the soul mistake that which is ephemeral and superficial for
the eternal and profound. In Socrates’s words: “[the soul] is com-
pelled to believe that the thing for which it specially feels [pleasure]
is most clearly real and true, when it is not” (Plato 1956: 83c). And
it is not, because only reason can be the final arbiter of truth and
reality and goodness. The bodily pleasures are for reason beneath
contempt.

But does this not show that reason itself is frenzied and
greedy and stingy? It wants to remain in control at any price. It is a
master that admits of no lack. It rejects difference and denies its
importance. But is this refusal of difference not a sophisticated de-
fense mechanism rather than a venerable epistemological principle?
Can one say that reason itself realizes that there is truth contained in
pleasures but cannot bring itself to accept it, because it fears what it
considers to be its competitor?

Perhaps one can say that reason seems to be afraid. The ob-
ject of its fear is the bodily pleasures; it is afraid that there is more to
them than what it wants to admit. For if it were certain that pleasures
are worthless temptations, the trick of fate to make us stray from the
correct path, why would its pronouncements be so venomous? Why
would it designate pleasures as the “mad masters” as Socrates does
would reason and intellect – that Plato makes speak with a human
voice in the Philebus – proclaim that “there is no end to the trouble
[sensual pleasures] make for us: with their frenzied irrationality they
disturb the soul we inhabit; they prevent the conception of our kind,
and, if a child of ours is born, they invariably spoil him utterly by
making him lazy and hence forgetful?” (Plato 1982: 60d)

No, the case must be that this vehement denunciation of
pleasures and of the body that shelters them can only point to one
thing: the reason’s feeling of inferiority. This fear born of weak-

---

15 In Lacanian terminology, such a conceptualization of reason would be very
far from any legitimate truth about the being of a human being. Human beings are
split subject constituted by the interaction of four structural points (the ego, the ideal
ego, the other, and the Other). Only a discourse that accommodates this non-hierar-
chical view of the psyche can hope to get closer to that which Freud called der Kern

16 See also Plato 1992: 589–590a where Plato calls the part of the psyche
devoted to the experience of bodily pleasures “the most godless and polluted one.”
ness, conceived due to the inability to concede importance to a more powerful force, is nothing else than *ressentiment*, an entirely awful feeling that is unworthy of any genuinely philosophical approach to the meaning of the human condition. Reason wants revenge because it realizes its inadequacy. It realizes that it is only a part that wants to be the whole; a particular that strives to cover itself over with the mantle of the universal. But this is impossible; it only increases the reason’s fury and results in the more stringent suppression of pleasures.

Here Zorba’s and Zarathustra’s voices merge into one: this voice indicts Socrates for being a “despiser of the body,” the once creative individual who has exhausted his truly creative and life-giving powers, and now glorifies death as the ultimate good (Nietzsche 1978: 34–35). Because he is dying, he wants everything to sing the praises of death and die as well. It is true that Plato does make Socrates say in the *Phaedo* that “those who tackle philosophy aright are simply and solely practicing dying, practicing death, all the time” (Plato 1956: 64a). It is clear by now what “tackling philosophy aright” means. It is nothing else but the sole reliance on reason and intellect to the exclusion of all sensual meaning: it is death.

Therefore Zarathustra is right in his ironic comment that “[he] would not have [the despisers of the body] learn and teach differently, but merely say farewell to their own bodies – and become silent” (Nietzsche 1978: 34). Without the body, who can philosophize? No recourse to the eternal realm is possible – God is dead. Both Zarathustra and Zorba demand from Socrates to understand that “there is more reason in your body than in your best wisdom” (Nietzsche 1978: 34–35). Hence the only path to the good life is the acceptance of the fact that “body I am, and nothing else: and soul is only a word for something about the body” (Nietzsche 1978: 34). Or in Zorba’s words: “If you are looking for any other paradise than that, my poor fellow, there is none!

Don’t listen to what the priests tell you, there’s no other!” (Kazantzakis 1952: 101) The good life is the good life of the body.

---

17 See also Nehamas 1998: 139–140.
18 And does not the tribute to the god of healing, Asclepios, that Socrates makes moments before he dies show that he considers death a welcome cure of the illness called life? Also, Nehamas 1998: 160–62, 246–248.
Conclusion

One can therefore conclude that the concern and respect for the body, for the house in which Eros dwells, seems to emerge as the necessary *a priori* condition for the living of a good life. This life of course is not one that rejects reason all together, but what it does reject is the desire of reason to monopolize the individual’s life process. Reason represents the particular that will always fail to reach the status of the universal. Only Eros with its tendency to combine and unite into one (and more than that, into one body) the disparate elements of various fragmentary living experiences can provide an assured path to happiness and freedom for the seekers of truth and the lovers of wisdom.

Primljeno: 4. mart 2011.

Bibliography


Filip Kovačević

ZORBA, SOKRAT I DOBAR ŽIVOT

Rezime


Ključne riječi: Sokrat, Zorba, dobar život, umjetnost življenja, Eros.